"Do you want to know a secret"

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Do you want to know a secret?

John Ambler

The topic of security deletions has been mentioned before in *Sheetlines* and also in Richard Oliver’s *Ordinance Survey Maps: A Concise Guide For Historians*, and I am both fascinated and sometimes bemused by the often strange logic which has been applied to “secret” locations leading to their deletion from OS mapping. Looking through an old copy of *Steam World* magazine (August 1982), I came across an interesting reference to a parliamentary exchange concerning Ordnance Survey security deletions. I quote a Letter to the Editor from a Mr Becket of Alton:

> “Without wishing to prejudice the speculation of a ‘strategic reserve’ of steam locomotives stored for use in some future national emergency, I’d like to pass on the following extract from *Hansard*, the official report of parliamentary proceedings of April 29 this year (1982):

**Mr Meacher** asked the Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr Michael Heseltine) on what authority Burghfield Royal Ordnance Factory was removed from the 1980 revised second edition 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey map, when it was previously shown in the 1973 first edition, and still exists; on whose authority it has been replaced on the 1980 map by two non-existent streams flowing down to the Thames; and whether any other Ministry of Defence establishments which still exist have been removed from Ordnance Survey maps in the last ten years.

**Mr Heseltine:** Where matters of national security are involved the Ordnance Survey complies with Government requirements. Where these require the removal of previously mapped detail it is the policy of OS to reinstate for cartographic reasons any relevant topographical information which appeared on earlier maps of the areas concerned. It would not be in the public interest for me to disclose the number of such cases that have arisen in the last ten years.”

The Burghfield site located in the Thames valley, four miles south-west of Reading was a product of WW2. Construction of Royal Ordnance Explosives Filling Factory No. 18 commenced in 1940 and production started in 1942. In 1953 the factory was reconstructed for the production of missiles and subsequently became Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Burghfield which explains its sensitivity. I happen to have copies of the maps mentioned (my copies were issued in 1974 and 1984) so can confirm that Mr Meacher was reporting a case of “now you see it, now you don’t”.

To better understand the evolution of the mapping of Royal Ordnance Factory (ROF) Burghfield I have examined maps of the area that I have in my collection. ROF Burghfield was not depicted on my one-inch mapping until the early 1970s. Post-war editions of the New Popular series published between 1940 and 1957 depict the site with no major deviations from the pre-war Popular series mapping. Perhaps this is not surprising as the main survey dated from 1930 with only roads revised in 1947, so this is possibly not a deliberate security deletion as no pre-
existing roads were affected by the construction of the site. The first edition of the 7th series mapping (I have print codes A/ and A/*/ subsequently published in 1959 (figure 1) based on the full revision of 1956 and intermediate revisions of 1961 and 1964, were essentially the same as pre-war maps with the addition of a few buildings adjoining the east side of the minor road which formed the western perimeter of the site.

![Map of Burghfield Brook](image)

*Figure 1: 7th series, 1959/64 (A/*/). Very similar to the New Popular map which preceded it, but with footpaths within the boundaries of the factory deleted and a range of buildings added along the western boundary. Saunderscourt Farm not shown.*

A short stub of waterway was shown joining the Burghfield Brook in the south west corner of the site, of which more later. The absence of the ROF at this point in time must surely be a security deletion as there was much there to survey in 1956. Interestingly a large “Hostel” is shown outside the factory boundary to the south. This was presumably housing for ROF workers, and though depicted as a single building at the one-inch scale, consultation of the two and a half-inch map of 1961 (figure 6), shows a multitude of smaller buildings, so possibly an encampment of wooden huts which were removed after the war and not depicted on later maps. My copy of the 1971 edition of the 7th series map (print code B), revised 1967-69 (figure 2) however shows the establishment in detail including the embankment of the railway siding which at one time served the site which is clearly labelled “Royal Ordnance Factory”, so the security deletion must have been rescinded. Figure 3 shows the map mentioned by Mr Meacher i.e. 1:50,000 First Series map (print code A/*/ of 1974 illustrated) which is very similar to the preceding 7th Series map but with metric spot heights and metric labels for the imperial contour lines. A decade later, the Landranger 1:50,000 (print code A/*//*/ of 1984 illustrated in Figure 4) shows that the security deletion has been reapplied
with the factory buildings being deleted and the depiction has not been returned exactly to its pre-deletion state as three water courses are shown within the boundaries of the site.

Figure 2: 7th series, 1971 (B). ROF Burghfield shown and named. Hostel no longer shown. A public right of way approaching the site from south of Amner’s Wood terminates abruptly at the site’s northern boundary (as it still does today even though there is no sign of a footpath on the Google Earth Street View image). Embankment of railway siding shown.

Figure 3: 1:50,000 First series, 1974 (A/9). Essentially the same as the preceding 7th series map but with metric spot heights and metric labels applied to old imperial contours.
The embankment of the railway siding which entered the north-eastern corner of the site which was shown when the factory was depicted was not deleted from the 1980 map along with the factory, though it did gain the label “dismtd rly”. Understandably, footpaths formerly passing through the site were not reinstated.

Figure 4: 1:50,000 Landranger 175, 1984 (A/*/*/*). All ROF buildings except those on the western perimeter deleted. Old and new courses of Burghfield Brook shown along with the third “fictitious” stream. Metric contours redrawn. Saunderscourt Farm shown but not named. Track of dismantled railway siding labelled.

To clarify Mr Meacher’s comments regarding the “two non-existent streams flowing down to the Thames”, we have to look to larger scale mapping for an explanation. Pre-war one-inch maps show only Burghfield Brook passing diagonally across the site from south-west to north-east and this is consistent on all maps at this scale until the factory is depicted. One inch maps which do depict the factory show that Burghfield Brook was re-routed around the southern and eastern perimeters of the site, and it is part of this new route which was noted earlier as being shown on the censored 7th series map (figure 1). Following the security deletion on the 1984 map, this new route is depicted in full in addition to the original course, but what of the other short length of waterway linking the old and new courses: is it fictitious as implied by Mr Meacher?

I have three two and a half inch maps in my collection dating from 1947, 1961 and 1981 (figures 5, 6 and 7), none of which show the factory, but all show a small water course arising adjacent to the “B” of Broad Street (figures 5 and 6) and joining the original course of Burghfield Brook near Saunderscourt Farm which is not always shown, and never named on the one inch maps. This closely matches the course of the stream linking the old and new courses of Burghfield Brook shown on the 1984 Landranger to which Mr Meacher refers. Two and a half inch Sheet SU 66 (Print code C of 1961, figure 6) shows the complex of huts labelled “Hostel” to the south of Broad Street, but of the ordnance factory, only
the buildings adjoining the road inside the western boundary are shown. Interestingly on Pathfinder SU 66/76 (print code A of 1981), these latter buildings are better defined and are depicted with boundaries which suggest that they may have been detached and semi-detached residential properties, which might explain why they were not deleted. The hostel to the south had been removed. Reference to Google Earth Street View confirms that these buildings have now been demolished and replaced by lawns, beds of shrubs and small trees inside the security fence which is typically well-labelled as MoD Property, so the suggestion that they were residential cannot now be confirmed. The 1981 Pathfinder (figure 7/7a) also shows a short stub of the new route of Burghfield Brook, suggesting that at some point it might have been shown (or intended to have been shown) on the 1:25,000 map and not completely deleted. It would be interesting to see edition C/* of SU 66 released in 1975 to see if the security deletion was still in place at that time. Footpaths shown crossing the site on the 1947 map were deleted on the later 1:25,000 maps.
Figure 6: 1:25,000 Sheet SU 66, 1961 (C). Possible residential buildings on western perimeter of factory site, and Hostel with numerous “H-blocks” to the south of Broad Street are shown.

Figure 7: Pathfinder Series Sheet SU 66/76, 1981 (A). Plot boundaries around buildings on western perimeter shown in greater detail and Hostel site empty. Water courses remain largely as they were pre-war with the exception of a short length of the new course of Burghfield Brook being shown in the south-west corner.
Looking back further still using the scanned images of 25-inch mapping on the National Library of Scotland web site, I note that the small water course didn’t appear to exist in full until the early 20th century. The 25-inch plan published in 1877 showed a field boundary marked with tree symbols stretching from Burghfield Brook just west of Saunderscourt Farm, south-westwards to the edge of the track known as Broad Street. The southern section between land parcels 2 and 4 was shown with a double line, suggesting a ditch, but the northern section separating land parcels 1 and 5 was a single line suggesting a hedge. On the plan published in 1899 parcels 4 and 5 were merged to form a single parcel numbered 62. On this plan Burghfield Brook lost many tree symbols and gained a direction of flow arrow eastwards in the general direction of the Thames. The field boundary to its east also lost most of its tree symbols and the southern portion bounding parcels 61 (formerly 2) and 62 (formerly 4) gained a direction of flow arrow, giving weight to the suggestion that this section was a ditch. Interestingly, the direction of flow at that time was south westwards ie away from the Thames and towards Broad Street. The field boundary between parcels 63 (formerly 1) and 62 (formerly 5) to its north remained a single line. On the next revision published in 1912, the direction of flow arrow on the ditch was reversed and the entire field boundary from Broad Street to Saunderscourt Farm was shown as a double line suggesting that the ditch had been extended and reconfigured to flow eastwards to Burghfield Brook and ultimately to the Thames after joining the Kennet on the western edge of Reading. My conclusion is that Mr Meacher was at least partially wrong in stating that the two streams were non-existent. They had both existed in the past, but one of them was not previously shown on one inch/1:50,000 mapping, and the three streams shown on the first Landranger map were probably never all in existence at the same time.

I don’t have a copy of a B edition of Landranger sheet 175, but the factory remained deleted from editions C and C1, though the depiction of the watercourses was slightly modified with most of the new course of Burghfield Brook being deleted and eastern stream being truncated before it joined the old course of Burghfield Brook, perhaps depicting the ditch shown on the 25-inch plans prior to 1912 (figure 8). This is closer to, but not identical to the pre-
deletion depiction which did not show the ditch. We had to wait until edition C2 of Landranger sheet 175 released in 2006, to see the factory anonymously reinstated for all to see (figure 9). This reinstatement post-dates the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the subsequent slight warming of the “Cold War” by almost two decades and has persisted to the present time. The logic of thinking that national security is improved or protected by the suppression of information which has been in the public domain and widely available to the public (and spies) for a decade or more escapes me, but then many political decisions mystify me.

Figure 8: Landranger 175, 1999 (C and C1). The new course of Burghfield Brook is largely deleted along with part of the drainage channel from Broad Street towards it. The dismantled railway label has also been deleted, though part of the embankment is shown.

Figure 9: Landranger 175, 2006(C2). AWE Burghfield is back on the map (but for how long?)