



Sheetlines

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“Kerry Musings”

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The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

Kerry musings

David Archer

A lot of readers will know the very funny recording of Gerard Hoffnung at the Oxford Union in 1958.¹ Although the Bricklayer's Story is probably the most famous excerpt, he also recalled being employed during the Festival of Britain to give advice to visiting tourists : zebra parking places are everywhere, ignore all left and right signs, these are merely political slogans, have you tried the famous echo in the reading room of the British Museum, and so on. All very mischievous, and far funnier when listened to. But supposing he had been a cartographer at the Ordnance Survey, what might have resulted?

In an idle moment, might Hoffnung have reversed the contour figures on Brent Knoll so that it became a depression rather than a hill, he might have been very tempted to reverse the direction of the small black arrow heads showing gradient steepness, or to join two such symbols point to point, egg-timer fashion, and to place them on Romney Marsh. Long blue drainage channels in East Anglia just call for the addition of motorway service area symbols, or failing that, he might have shown ski lifts linking the summits of several Munros. The mind boggles at the possibilities of complex motorway junctions with many slip roads, or having a legend only in an obscure language. I am sure that changing the direction of a couple of arrows could turn many one-way systems shown on maps into something one could only ever drive in to, not out of. But transposing the signs for picnic areas and re-cycling centres would be more than cruel and anti-social. Readers can supply other, far better, examples themselves, but please keep them plausible, so no London to Edinburgh ferry via Manchester.

That few map users are ever on the alert for such things surely shows just how much we trust the accuracy of OS maps. Indeed, when a howler is spotted, it usually merits a note in *Sheetlines*, which is not over full with them. So, why do most map users never spot a mistake on a map, given that many must exist? I would suggest that part of the answer is because most people only ever use a few maps, despite many members owning hundreds, if not thousands of the things. And when using them, most of the time, the user only glances at the map, and seldom studies it. They wish to confirm something, not test the accuracy of the map. A route or walk is wanted, with the focus on a very limited area of any sheet, and as the detail shown gets smaller along with the scale, so one accepts less accuracy. Or rather, one does not really question the accuracy, indeed, how would one begin to check a 1:1,000,000 sheet?

Let me explain what I mean. When standing on the edge of a very large field, with the destination stile hidden in distant bushes, a 1:25,000 map will hopefully show whether one needs walk towards the corner of the field, or a short distance from it. Here, one wishes for accuracy. However, with a 1:250,000 map, if a motorway is shown 3mm off course in open countryside, it will not matter and most people will not notice. The important point here is that such poor cartography will not upset many of us, and if spotted will just be shrugged off and accepted, with no letter to *Sheetlines*. Why? Because it all depends on what we are using the map for.

¹And anyone who has not heard it, should do so : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOGfg1B3ZMw>

Surely the need for accuracy depends on who is using a map and for what purpose? As I suggest, a walker will be quite particular, whilst a motorist is pretty blasé, as might be the good old general public.

A proposition : the 1:50,000 First Series maps were riddled with poor cartography and few noticed, or if they did, no outcry ensued. In 1993, the society visited Taylor Data Graphics who were under contract to the Ordnance Survey to convert scanned one-inch Seventh Series maps to the temporary 1:50,000 First Series products. One of the problems they were finding, was that when two Seventh Series scans were butted together, features sometimes failed to meet. Their instructions were to ease the two together if the difference was small, my memory is less than 5mm, but that anything over this had to be referred to the Ordnance Survey. The visit report notes that not everything was corrected : 'Edge-matching includes principal communications, but not B- or lesser-class roads or contours, for example'.² As the First Series was temporary, it seems that such easing, and the resulting poor cartography were acceptable. I have never tried to replicate this by butting two Seventh Series maps together, and seeing whether all roads do meet, and if they do not, then take out the resulting 1:50,000 First Series for comparison, and if easing has occurred, then checking the First with the Second Series 1:50,000 sheet. Did the Ordnance Survey really publish maps where contours and minor roads are not continuous, or is my memory at fault?

A few years ago, we decided to have our house registered, rather than rely on a fat bundle of deeds to prove ownership. We have a portacabin tucked into a corner of the garden, on the very edge of one boundary, but leaving a small triangle of land beyond it along the adjoining shorter side. When the plan came back from the Land Registry, it showed the boundary going at right angles around the portacabin and the triangle as being part of the neighbouring property. The man from the Ordnance Survey duly came out, agreed at once that the triangle was ours and spent a couple of hours doing a full survey. When he showed me what he had produced, the triangle had been joined to the portacabin, giving a strange shaped building. I was told that the OS merged such small areas into a larger one in certain circumstances. Meaning, the map, newly drawn was inaccurate. Deliberately so. Thus, Ordnance Survey maps at all scales have quite a lot of inaccuracies in them, some sanctioned by the OS. If we are willing to accept such inaccuracies, the question is, what degree of inaccuracy is acceptable? Or is it acceptable if it goes without being noticed?

The early Stingemore London underground maps, had the various coloured lines wiggling across a standard street map, just as motorways wind all over the place on current OS topographical maps. But do they need to, when people only want to know which towns they connect, where the services and junctions are and distances? In which case, why go to all the bother of accurately surveying motorways? Why not have some features shown almost diagrammatically? Mr Beck's diagram replaced the Stingemore maps and London Transport never looked back. If the Beck diagram suits people who just want to know which stations are on which lines, surely this equates with which towns are on which motorways, and if we accept symbols for churches and Youth Hostels, why not have motorways shown as elongated symbols? Something along the lines of the 1:50,000s powerline overprints. If this means

²*Sheetlines* 35, 32. <https://www.charlesclosesociety.org/SheetlinesArchive>

showing a motorway and the relevant junction at a distance from a named town, rather than passing through it, so what? It should be perfectly clear what is happening.

Therefore, I suggest, the Ordnance Survey should consider a more diagrammatic approach to depicting certain features on their maps. There is nothing wrong with diagrams, or even maps so vague that they might almost be classed as diagrams. We are all familiar with them, even if they are only in our heads. Listen to the morning weather forecast on the radio, and you have to imagine the areas they mention; ‘the south-west, all of Wales and the north west’. When I hear that, I cannot help but imagine the outline of Cornwall and Devon sticking out to my left, Wales above and then a wiggly coastline heading northwards, with whatever weather is over it, and no thought of the Midlands, or the east coast. But later, if they mention East Anglia, I see a great curve sticking out into the German Ocean. I only see shapes defined by a single coastal outline, no relief, no towns rivers or roads. Sometimes, the M4 corridor comes into a weather forecast, and here my mind sees two parallel lines running east-west, with land rising either side of them, what is more, this high land is a grey-green colour with the texture of cotton wool. Must be something in the marmalade, or that it is usually mentioned along with fog.

For those of you still reading, might we pass the substantive motion and agree that there are lots of small inaccuracies in Ordnance Survey maps, known and unknown? Indeed, there always have been, witness the Replotted Counties, for example. And being in agreement, perhaps we should ponder whether this matters by asking ‘How accurate do we want our maps to be?’, which is a very different question from ‘How accurate do our maps need to be?’ Ignoring fractals. My reply would be that I do not necessarily want them one hundred per cent accurate, and have no need for them to be so. I would go further and suggest that most map users would agree with me. Inaccurate maps are fine by most people.

In his talk to the 1994 AGM,³ Brian Adams drew a very clear distinction between a map and a sea chart. A map is generally useable if some features are out of date or even wrong, because we can see what it shows, but a sea chart needs to be fully up to date for safety reasons, because it shows what *cannot* be seen below the surface. Looking for a church wrongly shown on a map as on the left of the road, rather than on the right, would present no problem, but the absence of a recent wreck from a sea chart could prove fatal.

Despite it being more up to date than the map they own, very few members rush out and buy the latest state of their local map when issued. They know what the old map shows, and are aware of most major and probably many minor changes not shown. They have no need for complete accuracy, and do not want it enough to fork out.

A superseded map might in other circumstances be termed a ‘second’, in the same way a map with known inaccuracies might be. Yet we continue to use them, showing that we do not mind the inaccuracies, so why should the OS worry unduly about them? After all, the Charles Close Society exists because our main interest is out of date maps. Maps which are now inaccurate, and have been superseded. Such maps are a different beast from those which were inaccurate when current.

³*Sheetlines* 40, 7. <https://www.charlesclosesociety.org/SheetlinesArchive>