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“The artwork of JCT Willis and associated OS
map covers”

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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.

The artwork of JCT Willis and associated OS map covers

John Millard

I have recently been given two original watercolours painted by JCT which are dated to 1935. One of them is illustrated as *figure 1* and shows a view from Loch Torridon towards Sgoor Ruadh in the Torridon Hills of Ross and Cromarty. Also, I have a set of four postcards produced by Salmon's which uses views of Brixham Harbour again painted by JCT. One of the views which shows a corner of the Harbour is *figure 2*.



Figure 1 : Watercolour, Sgoor Ruadh from Loch Torridon. JCT Willis 1935. (Author)

A selection of JCT's artwork featured on five Ordnance Survey map covers in the 1930s. These are the distinctive Tourist Maps of Ilkley District and the Norfolk Broads, and the sheets covering Guernsey, Jersey, and the Peak District and its Approaches.



Figure 2 : A corner of Brixham harbour. Salmon's Postcard No 4369. (Author)

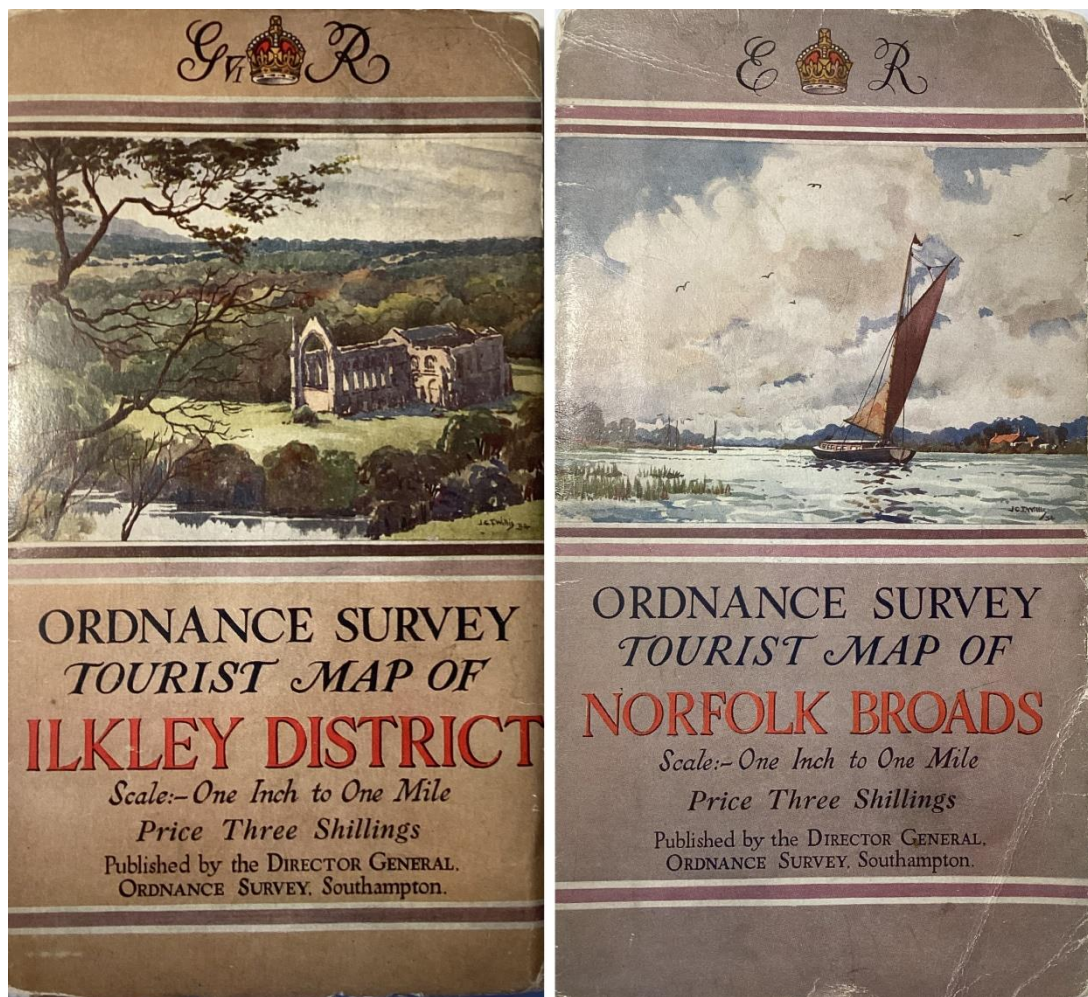


Figure 3 : JCT Willis map covers for the 1;63,360 Tourist Maps of Ilkley (1935) and Norfolk Broads (1932 pub 1936) (Author)

My interest in the artwork of JCT, apart from the fact that I feel it is pleasing to the eye, focuses on the observation that post 1918, the Ordnance Survey was employing professional map cover artists like Ellis Martin and Arthur Palmer, supported to a lesser extent by EJ Hoy and RA Jerrard, whose distinctive work extended into the 1930s when JCT's covers slipped in almost unannounced. How might the artwork from an officer of high rank in the Royal Engineers, whose painting was clearly a relaxing pursuit in a busy Army career, fit into the overall strategy adopted by the Ordnance Survey?

The psychological impact of the aesthetics of landscape has been a rather neglected aspect of academic study. It could be argued that Ellis and Palmer set out to create powerful images which appealed to the eye. It has long been accepted that art together with literature and music have been influential in creating striking images of landscape in the mind. It might be logical to assume that it would persuade the general public to purchase maps with attractive covers and so lead them to want to explore the locations illustrated, especially at a time when leisure time was increasing. The Ordnance Survey for its part could see that enhanced sales would create an improved balance sheet with a move away from mainly supplying the military needs. It would be interesting to do a little more research to establish the exact financial returns occurring from this strategy.

However, it is important to remember that with all creative art appreciation it comes down to personal taste; ‘beauty is to be seen or heard by the beholder.’ John Paddy Browne has undertaken much research into the Willis artwork.¹ He suggests JCT was not a map cover artist or designer and that his full size paintings were reduced to make map cover illustrations although he did produce some title lettering. Browne went as far as to suggest that there was ‘a chocolate box imagery’ about JCT’s work and that it would not be out of place in a local art exhibition.

I have tried to widen the perspective on JCT’s work by sharing thoughts with a range of trained artists and groups who I have been privileged to meet over a long period of time. Generally, the conclusion was that they felt JCT was a most competent artist whose work is characterised by a boldness both in colour and brush work, and has excellent perspective. Maybe, the covers for the maps of Guernsey and Jersey show this well and are illustrated as *figure 4, below.*

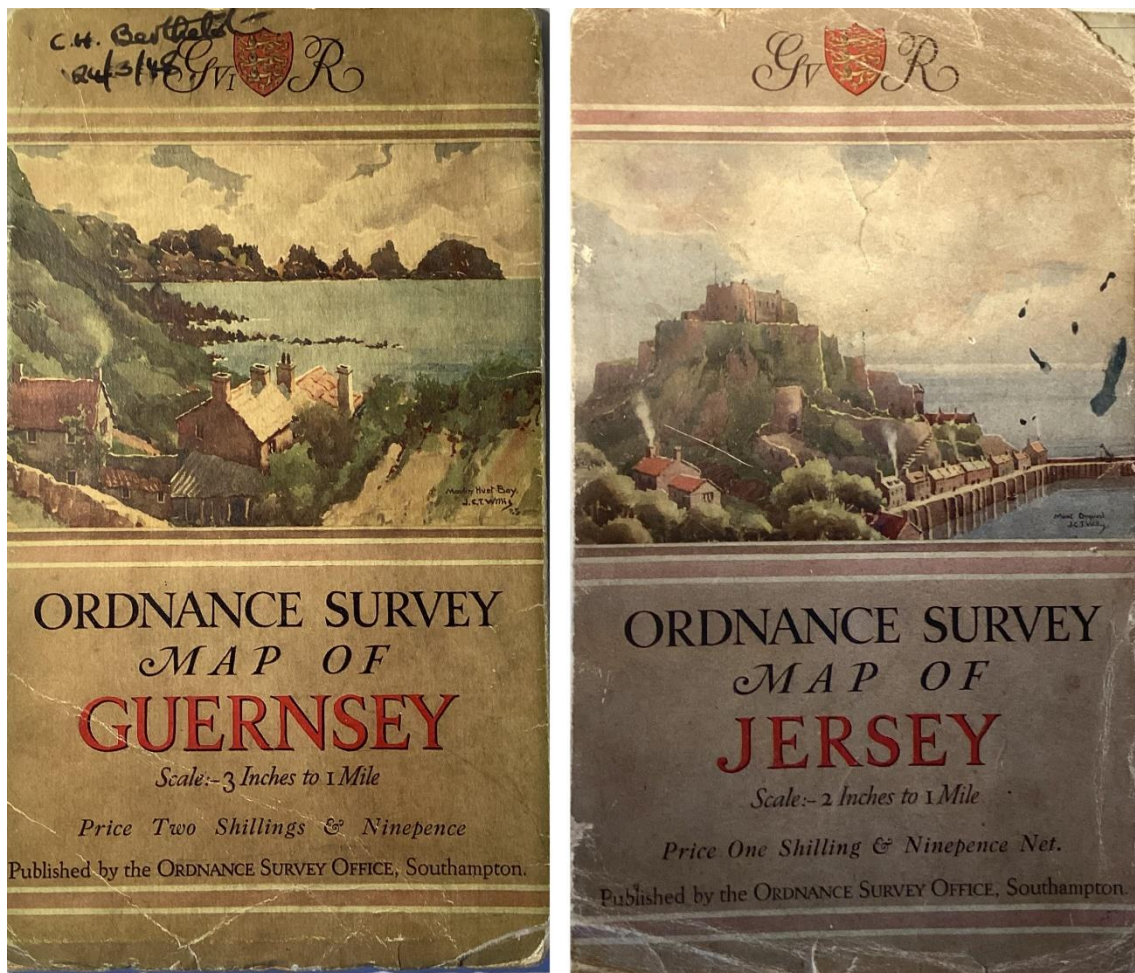


Figure 4 : JCT Willis covers for Guernsey Three- inch map 1934 and Jersey Two-inch map 1933. (Author)

Personally, I am attracted to the openness of his artwork with its emphasis on rolling clouds and wide horizons, as illustrated particularly on the map of the Norfolk Broads. Might you go one step further and link it in with the image created by Vaughan Williams in his compositions of the Norfolk Rhapsodies or The Fens? JCT was born on the Dorset

¹ John Paddy Browne, *Map Cover Art*, 1990, 47-49.

coast and the sea and coastal scenes featured in many of his paintings. Browne conceded that JCT's work did make a pleasing contrast to the 'murky browns and claustrophobic magenta' of Palmer. Most opinion veered towards the thought that JCT's work reflected an imagined idyllic age between the two World Wars which disguised many uncertainties, both economic and political. Some of those I shared thoughts with, felt that the least attractive cover was that for the Peak District and its Approaches (*figure 5*) especially in the chosen palette and an almost imaginary location unlike his other artwork which was specific to place. The tors shown could be anywhere in the Peak District. As a geomorphological feature it might be a view of the granite hills of Dartmoor or Bodmin Moor..

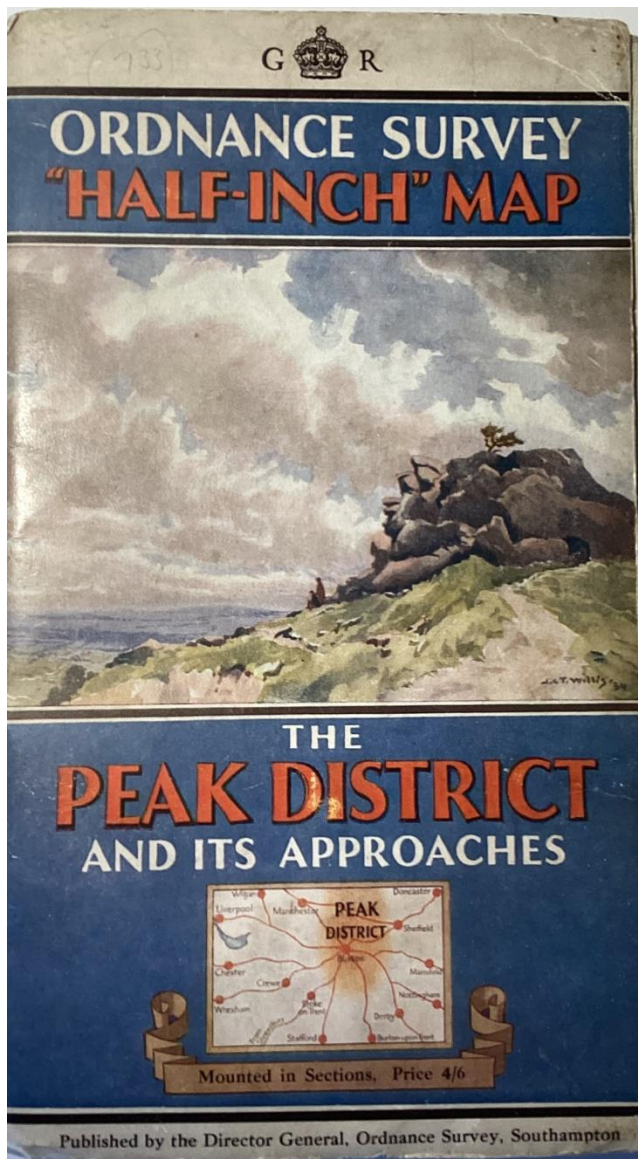


Figure 5 : The Peak District and its Approaches. Half Inch map 1936. (Author)

JCT's artwork is commanding good prices at current auctions with realisations usually above three figures. His works from the period when he was stationed in Malaya and Singapore are the most sought after and fetch in excess of £1000. Even though it would seem he painted for enjoyment, there is evidence that he had a degree of professional tutorship under renowned artists of the time, namely Talbot Kelly and Gerald Ackerman. That said, it would appear he was not against looking for some remuneration for his efforts. His artwork for Salmon's, apart from the Brixham postcards, appeared on the covers of the famous recipe books produced by the company, some of which are still available (*figure 6*).

JCT Willis' tenure as Director General of the Ordnance Survey between 1953-57 has divided opinion. He followed the long tradition of an officer of high rank in the Royal Engineers leading the organisation. Tim Owen and Elaine Pilbeam² observe that he was in office at a particularly difficult time with the need to deal with the Davidson Committee proposals, to cut costs and to

update technical elements of map making. His successor Major General Lawrence Francis Vic Carey is reported to have been complimentary of what JCT had achieved.

Throughout his life-time, JCT Willis clearly painted for relaxation even though he had demanding roles and responsibilities. However, opinion is that some of his best work was

² Owen & Pilbeam, *Ordnance Survey: Map Makers to Britain since 1791*, 1992, 128-30, and 141.

produced during his retirement. It remains a matter of conjecture as to why his five paintings were used for map covers at a time when the Ordnance Survey employed professionals to do the job. Might it just be that by the 1930s the OS was looking to see if a new direction was needed outside the work of Martin and Palmer, which may have become dated? Was the concept of graphical artists replacing pictorial artists already well advanced before 1939? However, this would not explain the appearance of the five covers in a style not dissimilar to that of Martin and Palmer. Perhaps, just perhaps, JCT was in a fortunate position to promote his own work because in the 1930s for a short time, he was leading the Edinburgh office of the Ordnance Survey. Surely the OS of all the state organisations would not be open to nepotism!



Figure 6 : Cover of *Favourite Biscuit Recipes* - Sutton Valence Windmill, Kent, by JCT Willis. (Author)