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C-roads on signposts and maps

Richard Oliver

Recent issues of *Sheetlines* have referred to ‘C roads’, and examples of them in Norfolk have been cited. The Norfolk system would appear to have been devised before 1939, and therefore well before the official institution of ‘Class III’ roads by the Ministry of Transport (MoT) with effect from 1 April 1946.¹

The object of the ‘Class III’ system was to identify those roads which although ‘not of sufficient traffic importance to be included in class I or class II roads, are agreed by the Minister to be of more than local value’; they qualified for MoT grants of 50 per cent towards their maintenance.² The relevant MoT file on the subject contains no indication that anyone in the Ministry was aware of any Class III or C-road system in operation in any county before 1946, and neither is there any indication of such awareness in the voluminous file on road numbering.³ In April 1946 the MoT decided that ‘there be no national system of C. Roads for the present’.⁴ However, it also noted that it would be necessary to number them for administrative purposes, ‘but there was no reason why any existing numbers used by a highway authority should not continue to be used’.⁵ Correspondence of 1947-9 indicates that ‘C-road’ numbers were definitely in internal use in Chesterfield (roads C.1 to C.15) and Montgomeryshire (C.86 is mentioned), but apparently not in Breconshire, Buckley & Holywell Urban District, Builth Wells, Cardiganshire, Cwmbran, Denbighshire, Kidwelly, Monmouthshire, Nantyglo and Blaina Urban District, Radnorshire, or Wrexham, where numbering in the style ‘road no. 192’ seems to have sufficed.⁶

It is apparent from this that the numbering of Class III roads was left to county, borough and urban district councils, and so any Class III road passing from one local authority to the next would change its number. It would also have been up to each individual council how it categorised its highways, and there is evidence that this has varied considerably both over the years and between local authorities. Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any ‘C-road’ maps deposited in the MoT records in the Public Record Office, and so a synoptic view is difficult for the merely curious.

A straightforward system is such a one as was described by Fergus Muir: A, B, and C roads and unclassified roads. A refinement on this is to add ‘D’ roads: from a Surrey County

¹ *Sheetlines* 53, 48; *Sheetlines* 54, 59-60; *Sheetlines* 58, 47-8.

² Memorandum GC4 in Public Record Office (PRO) MT 39/539.

³ PRO MT 39/539 [Class III roads, 1943-6]; MT 39/241, [road classification correspondence, 1921-49].

⁴ Notes of meeting held 4 April 1946, in PRO MT 39/249.

⁵ Record of meeting held 4 April 1946, in PRO MT 39/250.

⁶ Correspondence in PRO MT 39/249.

Council traffic regulation notice, it is evident that the main route through Woldingham is C72 (which probably applies to the whole route from Wapses Lodge, TQ346571, to Botley Hill, TQ398555); from Bug Hill crossroads, TQ355571 to Slines Oaks pond, TQ373579, is D1359, and from Woldingham green, TQ371556, to Slines Oaks, TQ373576, is D1360.⁷ (See 1:25,000 *Explorer* 146 or 1:50,000 sheet 187.) That these numbers appear in these public notices, yet no map or other list indicating which roads bear what numbers seems to be readily available, perhaps suggests that, whatever the legal niceties, there is no great expectation that these notices will be studied at all carefully by members of the public, who instead will be content with cursing and yellow diversion signs!

The most elaborate system that I have heard of was that in use by Lindsey County Council. In the late 1960s, as well as classes A, B and C, there were ‘unclassified roads’ of ‘grades’ D, E, F and G. The D-roads were numbered, in the same sequence as the C-roads (is this evidence of adapting a pre-1946 numbering scheme?), but the others were not. The E-roads all appear to have been tarred, and included most of the dead-end roads, the F-roads (not very many) were probably metalled but not tarred, and the G-roads appear to have been unmetalled ‘green lanes’. The F and G roads seem to correspond either to the ‘other routes with public access’ which appear on recent OS 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 maps (e.g. from TF433906 to TF446903), or to bridleways (e.g. from TF429942 to TF447940, see 1:25,000 *Explorer* 283 or 1:50,000 sheet 113). The Lindsey system was numbered in six zones, working roughly north-west to south-east.⁸ (See 1:25,000 *Explorer* 283 or 1:50,000 sheet 113).

Footpaths are also numbered, and though these numbers rarely, if ever, appear on signs on the ground, they do appear on public notices as to diversions, etc, and occasionally appear on published maps.⁹

Does all this have any relevance to Ordnance Survey maps? Well, yes: in 1950-51 the OS contemplated showing Class III roads on its new one-inch (1:63,360) Seventh Edition map, then in course of development. The first Seventh Edition ‘pilot sheet’ was 142 *Hereford*, printed in August 1949 for consultation purposes, which followed the well-established OS practice of dividing ‘good’ roads not classified by the MoT into those over and under 14 feet (4.3 metres) in width. The idea of adopting 16 feet instead of 14 feet was aired in February 1950, and dropping the width distinction was suggested two months later; by June it had been decided to show Class III roads in lieu of the over-or-under-14-feet distinction.¹⁰ In the second half of 1950 a second pilot sheet, 154 *Cardiff*, was drawn, to show Class III roads as well as numerous other design modifications, but difficulties became apparent: some Class III roads were minor or ‘bad’, one even became a footpath. ‘These anomalies seem to show that the ... decision to adopt the Class III roads was possibly not a very happy one. The Ordnance Survey must portray things as they exist on the ground and not as it is hoped they will be in some years time.’ If a Class III road was ‘very inferior’, then an OS classification would be better. The MoT’s response was that when the Class III system had come into operation in

⁷ Traffic regulation notice, dated 26 July 2000, noted at TQ372558 on 10 September 2000.

⁸ ‘Lindsey County Council Highways Department Road Map’, n.d., overprinted for Highways Committee tour, 22 September 1969: I am indebted to Ben Duncan for drawing this map to my attention. (It is the one with ‘Western Front’ squaring referred to in *Sheetlines* 43, 30.) I have been unable to trace a copy of any version of this map in the Lincolnshire Archives Office.

⁹ E.g. on *Exeter Street Plan*, 6th edition (Exeter City Council, 1999), produced by the Quail Map Company.

¹⁰ Items 86(1)A, 103 (ii)A, 114A in PRO OS 1/785.

1946 it had been hoped that some would fill gaps and funds would become available for their improvement, though some had been included because of a lack of time to inspect them thoroughly: it suggested that the OS exclude sub-standard roads. The OS felt it was not justified at present in showing Class III roads.¹¹ However, they duly appeared on four successive proofs of sheet 154, in dark yellow (as for unclassified roads) in the first proof of 3 November 1950, in brown (with Class II roads in screened red on dark yellow) on the second proof of 12 January 1951, and alternatively in yellow (with Class II roads in brown and ‘Unclassified, Good’ uncoloured) and dark brown (with both Class II and ‘Unclassified - Good’ roads in yellow) on the third and fourth proofs, both dated 27 February 1951.¹² Possibly the difficulties of showing the Class II, III and unclassified roads in suitably distinct colours, together with the condition of some of the Class III roads on the ground, may have contributed to retaining the OS width-related classification, which has continued ever since.



Fig 1: 'C156' on village sign, Burnham Market, Norfolk, TF838421, 10 October 1989.



Fig 2: 'C42' finger-post, south of Fleet, Lincolnshire (Parts of Holland), TF371207, 9 October 1989

A consideration as to whether it was – or is – worth showing Class III roads on published maps for way-finding is whether their numbers appear on signposts. In most counties they appear to have been completely unpublicised, and that perhaps settles the matter. Norfolk was perhaps the most thorough in indicating them: in October 1989, I photographed what must have been one of the last survivors, at TF371207, albeit on a village sign rather than a finger-post (*Fig. 1*). In the adjoining county of Holland there was also some indication of C-roads; the previous day I photographed the specimen shown in *Fig. 2*, found another nearby (for C37, at TF388182), and have heard of a third formerly at Cuckoo Bridge (TF205205).¹³ I suspect that all of these were piecemeal replacements as necessary of the cast-iron signposts formerly more common in Holland, and indeed may have been the result of a short-lived policy of showing these numbers. Elsewhere, the occasional reference to C-roads puzzles: in 1981 I noticed a large modern sign east of Kingston-upon-Hull, at about TA 165288, which

¹¹ Metford to Leadbetter, 6 October 1950, reply 14 December 1950, reply 22 December 1950: items 147A, 159A, 161A in PRO OS 1/785.

¹² Specimens in 'job file' for sheet 154, now in the OSS-CCS deposit at Cambridge University library: copies of the second and third proofs are in PRO OS 1/785.

¹³ Information from Barry Barton: this example had gone by September 1998.

included 'C33' (probably the road running south-east towards Paull). This sign had been replaced by 1989 when I next passed that way. I think that this is the sum total which I have noted in over twenty years of keeping an eye open for such things across England and Wales, so perhaps the indicating of C-roads is another of those local quirks of signposting, like the design of finial, or the inclusion of the National Grid reference (as in Dorset, Radnorshire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire), which have been referred to in these pages in the past,¹⁴ or, indeed, how small a settlement is likely to be indicated, or whether mileages are shown.

Were C-roads, or indeed any lesser category, to appear on signposts, it would be necessary to adopt a national, or at any rate regional, numbering system, so that, first, numbers would not be duplicated easily (if there was a C 171 in Devon and another in Surrey it wouldn't matter for way-finding, but it might if there was also a C 171 in Cornwall or Sussex), and, second, so that numbers would not change at administrative boundaries. This last was a difficulty with the lesser roads in the French numbering system, which had been instituted in 1811, as André Michelin pointed out in proffering advice when the British system was being developed in 1921.¹⁵ This is illustrated very nicely by a map appended to the report of the Vale of Belvoir Coalfield Inquiry, which shows C-roads in the area of interest: the routes are transcribed below.¹⁶ (See 1:25,000 *Explorers* 246, 247 and 260, or 1:50,000 sheets 129 and 130.)

Nottinghamshire:

- C3 SK629332 - 725358 - 767388
- C28 SK702397 - 737325 [county boundary: becomes C101 in Leicestershire]
- C55 SK755385 - 776370 [county boundary: becomes C35 in Leicestershire]
- C73 SK726393 - 765345 [county boundary: not numbered in Leicestershire]
- C74 SK636376 - 707318 [county boundary: becomes C14 in Leicestershire]

Leicestershire:

- C14 [continuation of C74 in Nottinghamshire]: SK707318 (county boundary) - 744309 - 772282 - 802251
 - C15 SK664217 - 737325, then unclassified to 757259, then as C15 to 772282, then to 744309 possibly as C14 (*q.v.*), then as C15 to 804388
 - C33 SK756193 - 757259
 - C35 [continuation of C55 in Notts]: SK776370 (county boundary) - 837292
 - C56 SK739259 - 744307
 - C101 SK737325 - 743311 [continuation of C28 in Nottinghamshire]
- Numbers not stated:* SK725233 - 727242, and SK765345 - 777339.

Given these difficulties, one would have thought it unlikely that C-road numbers are likely to appear either on signposts or on maps in the foreseeable future. Cycle route numbers are now appearing, and further numbering might add undesirable 'clutter', even at 1:50,000 or 1:25,000, and certainly at smaller scales.

¹⁴ *Sheetlines* 31, 52; *Sheetlines* 32, 2; *Sheetlines* 33, 39.

¹⁵ Papers in pouch at front of PRO MT 39/241.

¹⁶ Map B (photo-reduced from OS 1:50,000 First Series to 1:100,000), in *The Vale of Belvoir Coalfield Inquiry*, London: HMSO, 1981. [This was lighted on when I ought to have been doing something else.]