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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

The first time I can remember seeing a real bench mark was whilst walking on Exmoor over thirty years ago, when we spotted one on an ancient wooden gate post that lay rotting in a damp hedge. I was surprised that it had been cut on something that could both rot and be easily moved. But early last August, when the weather people thought that Kerry might replace Cheltenham as the hottest recorded place in the UK, I renewed my association with these wonderful little symbols. Within a few days, I progressed from being aware of them to being curious, then quite interested, fascinated and finally obsessed. Addiction was pronounced within a fortnight; but only to cut bench marks on stone. Those on wood or brick surfaces, although pleasant, are not really my sort of thing, whilst metal flush brackets have yet to stir me. But given time, who knows?

I had been gathering information on what I call the archaeology of the Ordnance Survey, artefacts showing that the OS had visited an area: old cannons associated with base line measurements, triangulation pillars, projecting brackets, flush brackets, bench marks and other marks placed during field work; fundamental bench marks protected within a rectangle of iron railings, heavy metal man-hole type covers bearing the letters OS. This sort of thing. Very quickly, I seemed to home in on normal cut bench marks. Supposedly four inches square, they consist of two elements, the broad arrow that indicates government property (as in convicts' clothing) pointing upwards to the centre of a horizontal bar cut at a known height above a datum point. After a few evenings reading about them, I had got to the point where more reading was futile, I just had to go out and find some. Of course, I had seen bench marks before, and often pass one, cut on the cottage across the field, but now I wanted to see them in a totally new light. I knew a lot more about them and why they existed. My reading told me that they are frequently destroyed, but many very old ones still exist.

Thus, on a Monday evening, I got out a fairly recent large-scale map of Newtown and noted three marks to look for when we went shopping the following morning. And a brilliant sunny morning it was. The first mark was in aptly named Market Street, and from the map, appeared to be just beside the alley to the right of the electrical shop. Spot on. About hip high, a nice clean bench mark was cut into slightly weathered, softish cream stone. It was larger and more substantial than I remembered previously seen marks, but it was a bench mark, cut into the wall for anyone to see. I was probably the only person who had knowingly seen it for years. Goodness knows how long ago it must have been when someone had actually gone to look for it as I had done. I quickly made my way around two corners to the side of the Robert Owen museum, a fine red brick building in the art nouveau style with lovely smooth, brilliant white dressed stone details. There, basking in the sunshine, knee high, was a perfect example. Crisply cut, with the slight shadow from the sun emphasising the lines of the arrow and its bar across the top. If there had not been so many people around

I would have touched it. Beautiful. My new-found enthusiasm was certainly well founded. I was delighted, and knew that I was well and truly hooked on these things. But coming down to earth, the shopping had to be done, and on the way home I kept an eye open for the third mark on my list, which should have been somewhere in front of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist church on New Road. Passing in the car, we spotted it on a low stone wall, hiding six inches behind a lamp post. Probably trying to keep out of the sun.

All afternoon I kept thinking about the marks and wished that I had inspected the third one more closely. How did they fit into the general scheme of levelling? What age were they, given that the style appears to have been constant since they were introduced over 150 years ago? Were all three cut at the same time? How many old marks had been destroyed during Newtown's redevelopment? Lots of questions. In the evening I studied the Alan Godfrey reprint of Newtown, as revised in 1901, which showed another building on the museum site and no first mark. The third mark was shown and was therefore the oldest. But how old? Was it part of the initial levelling? When was New Road laid out or when was the Bethel built? Subsequent reading showed that the museum was built as a library in 1903, but the Market Street building did exist at the time of this revision (and the original survey), so why was a mark not cut then? My ignorance of the technical side of cartography and surveying was all too apparent.

One wonders what the reaction was of nineteenth century building owners whose permission was sought for marks to be cut? Were they pleased or annoyed to be singled out? "And why do you need to know how high this particular brick is above the sea at Liverpool?" Although under the Survey Act of 1841 the OS could legally cut marks without consent, they were liable to pay compensation for damage, though one assumes amicable co-operation to have been the norm. The actual symbol is a very attractive design and not at all unsightly. After 1840, triangulation stones had the broad arrow pointing to the centre hole, so for levelling it seems logical to have the arrow pointing to the height bar, showing it to be government property and making the whole more substantial and so much easier to find. A skilled job it must have been for the assistants who undertook the work, having to cut marks on a great variety of stones, bricks and wood. I wonder whether they ever made mistakes and cut a second one beside a botched attempt? What was the procedure when a mark was subsequently found to be wrong due to later subsidence? Would they deface or erase it? The rate of destruction it appears, has always been high. Wooden marks rot and garden walls are pulled down. Bricks receive a coat of render or pebbledash and whole areas of towns are demolished. Luckily, a lot of marks are on listed buildings, which gives some element of preservation. If they can be identified and have survived, the very first and last marks cut should surely be preserved and have a plaque beside them.

I do not know enough about levelling to be able to predict likely locations, and life is too short and dangerous to walk around looking at the base of walls all the time, so I prefer to rely on maps to find examples. Most members will know the nearest mark to where they live or work, but be warned, bench marks are rumoured to be the next craze amongst CCS members. So start now, get a modern Ordnance Survey or Alan Godfrey large-scale map of your area, an early 1:25,000 even, and go out and find some. Once found, you will always glance at them when passing, and will keep looking for them wherever you go, knowing that the Ordnance Survey will have been there before you. Next time you see a bench mark, say hello, introduce yourself, make it feel noticed, photograph it even. It must be very lonely, sitting on a wall in all weathers, forgotten and unloved.