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“Airfields on maps”

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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.

Airfields on maps – some responses

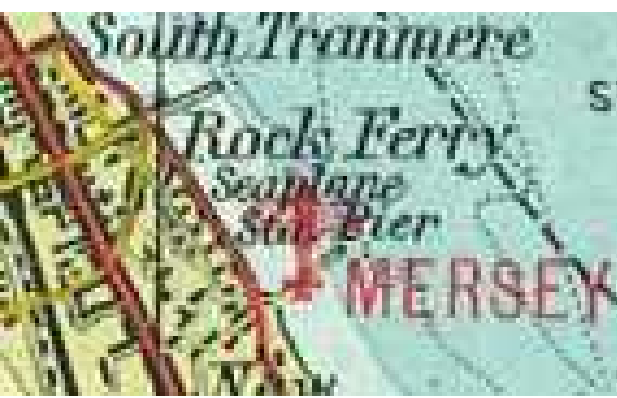
Further to Ronald Blake's study of the depiction of airfields on Ordnance Survey maps (*Sheetlines* 99, 19), it is interesting to note an instance appearing on Bartholomew's half-inch maps which never appeared on OS one-inch maps.

This is the 'seaplane station' at Bromborough, Cheshire, which appeared as 'water aerodrome' on OS quarter-inch aviation maps of 1934 and 1939 and on Bartholomew sheet 8 in 1933. It continued to be shown on subsequent editions of sheet 8 and its successor sheet 28 up to and including the 1964 edition.

An experimental flying boat service between here and Belfast operated briefly in 1928, which seems to have been the only commercial use of the station. Why it still appeared on Bartholomew maps for almost another forty years is not known. Even more surprising is that it appears on the 1974 Soviet 1:10,000 Liverpool city plan (labelled *гидроаэродром* - hydro-aerodrome).

The same Bartholomew sheets also showed the airfield at nearby Hooton Park, opened in 1917, which was also omitted by OS until one-inch Seventh Series sheet 100 in 1952 (on which the name is printed across a blank space).

John Davies



top: Bartholomew half-inch sheet 8 of 1933

*second and third :
Bartholomew half-inch sheet 28 of 1956*

left: extract from 1:10,000 Soviet military city plan of Liverpool, printed 1974

opposite: extract from Flight magazine of 4 October 1928

Thanks to Cambridge University Library for the Bartholomew extracts

Belfast-Liverpool Service

THE Short "Calcutta" flying-boat service between Belfast and Liverpool which was run last week is being continued until October 6. Mails will be despatched for either way every day.

Ron Blake comments:

Cartographic representation of 'marine' airfields is fascinating from both an air-historical and a topographical map-design perspective. Queries about seaplane activity on the Mersey highlight key differences between the approaches of the Ordnance Survey and various independent mapping agencies where aviation is concerned. In my article I purposely avoided discussion of rival agencies, expressing my hope that CCS colleagues with superior knowledge would steer the debate in that direction. Having since received several constructive responses, I'm pleased to offer the following acknowledgements and insights.

First, why was a seaplane station needed on Merseyside, and why on the Wirral peninsula? Provision of a Liverpool-Belfast air-mail and passenger service was consistent with a drive after the Great War to promote civil aviation, although government was initially reluctant to finance new airports and hoped instead that vacant Service aerodromes and seaplane piers would suffice. As there had been no wartime seaplane base on Liverpool's waterfront (just a landing ground at Waterloo Sands), Rock Ferry was a logical choice. Moreover, the nearest suitably-equipped aerodrome, Hooton Park, stood five miles up the estuary, was relatively distant from a railway station, and lacked a short ferry crossing to the City side. Eventually, when a purpose-built civic airport opened at Speke in 1930 (as recommended by consultant Sir Alan Cobham), the Rock Ferry air terminal became effectively redundant.

According to local air-historian Phil Butler¹ the so-named 'Liverpool Marine Airport' was an asset of the Mersey Docks & Harbour Board, operated from 1928 till 1940, and covered roughly four square miles (10 km²) of water between Tranmere and Garston Docks. Disappointingly, there are few (if any) details of it in the Air Ministry's *Air Pilot* or annual *Progress in Civil Aviation* reports, nor was a standard black symbol marked on the OS Quarter-Inch (Fourth Edition) sheet 4 *North Wales and Manchester* (2535, 1935). However, the 1935 edition of *Who's Who in British Aviation* (p.223) did include 'Liverpool (Seaplane Customs Port)' among (92) UK Civil Air Stations, suggesting official status.² Perhaps due to balloon barrages and dense shipping, there is no record of seaplane basing on Merseyside during the second world war.

¹ PH Butler, *Liverpool Airport: An Illustrated History*, Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2004, 10-12.

² Various editors, *Who's Who in British Aviation*, London: Airways Publications Ltd, annual. Nine other licensed civil seaplane stations were listed: Brough, Cowes, Dover, Hamble, Harwich, Rochester, St Helier (Jersey), St Peter Port (Guernsey) and Southampton. Inexplicably, another excellent directory, FJ Camm, *The Flying Reference Book*, London: C Arthur Pearson, 1939, omitted seaplane terminals altogether.

While these citations may help explain the Rock Ferry *Seaplane Sta* placement on the Bartholomew half-inch sheet of 1933, the site's continuing appearance as late as the 1964 printing is problematic. At this juncture I have to declare almost complete ignorance concerning the provenance of Bartholomew topographic detail (not knowing whether it was procured from the OS or gathered by independent means).³ I must also confess that I omitted to inspect every state of OS Popular sheet 35 *Liverpool & Birkenhead* (or its Land Utilisation Survey overprint), thus failing to spot the word 'Seaplane Sta' which I am now expertly informed did appear on the 1935 and 1937 printings.⁴ It seems increasingly likely that OS Popular material was behind these Bartholomew exposures.

Bartholomew half-inch maps are distinctive in having bold circular aerodrome and seaplane symbols overprinted in red. On the 1933 sheet Rock Ferry terminal was labelled MERSEY (note the capitals), suggesting data-transfer from an official list. On the 1956 revision both the aeronautical symbol and the name had correctly been deleted, yet the original generic description *Seaplane Sta* survived as a misleading anachronism. To identify Hooton Park aerodrome, Bartholomew (1956) simply printed 'Hooton' alongside the symbol. Unlike its Bartholomew competitor, the OS popular map has never systematically employed symbols for airfields (except a few helipads) and is essentially reliant on 'ground-truth' graphics supported by technical wording.

Happily, the 1956 Bartholomew depiction of Hooton Park aerodrome was quite accurate, although flying was to cease a year later.⁵ In anticipation of part 2 (forthcoming) of my historical review, let me briefly flag one ubiquitous downside of sheet overlap. In this sub-regional example sheets 100 *Liverpool* and 109 *Chester* initially (1952) agreed on *Airfield*, but then diverged in their depiction of the site. Whereas sheet 100 progressively amended the label to *Hooton Park Airfield* and 'Wks', sheet 109 suppressed any reference to either aeronautical or industrial activity on every printing after the inaugural one.

As for depiction of the 'hydro-aerodrome' on the Soviet 1:10,000 military plan of Liverpool (1974), the blue-tinted aeronautical basin (SJ345853) contrasts with a white area shown on the OS one-inch Seventh Series sheet sequence. The latter (which has the appearance of a security excision), was in fact freshly reclaimed land (possibly from tunneling). It is my hunch that a substitute seaplane facility had been included in a statutory land-use plan (1947 Town and Country Planning Act), inadvertently handing free target information (albeit fictional) to a potential aggressor.

³ A definitive study on the compilation of Bartholomew maps (if such a work indeed exists) has proved elusive. See Yolande Hodson, *Popular Maps*, CCS 1999, *passim*, for suggestions of relations with OS.

⁴ Thanks are due to Bill Henwood for verifying these depictions, and discovering a survival on the War Revision of Popular Edition sheet 35.

⁵ DJ Smith, *Action Stations 3: Military Airfields of Wales and the North-West*, Cambridge: Patrick Stephens, 1981, 99-102. Hooton Park shut in 1957 when RAF Auxiliary squadrons were disbanded. In 1962 the site became a Vauxhall car plant.

To sum up, there are significant differences in the language and symbology applied to airfields on different scales of map, and numerous inconsistencies resulting from lack of synchronicity and coordination between agencies. While specialist charts are swiftly revised for operational safety reasons, general-purpose topographical maps are characteristically prone to anachronism, random suppression and conflicting terminology. In the particular case of marine airfields, the small footprint of jetties, slipways and moorings has contributed to their under-recording at one-inch scale, while ‘sector-blindness’ (absence of an explicit distinction between military and civil roles) has made it essential to adopt a multi-scale/multi-agency approach when investigating geo-historical themes in British aviation.

Bill Henwood writes:

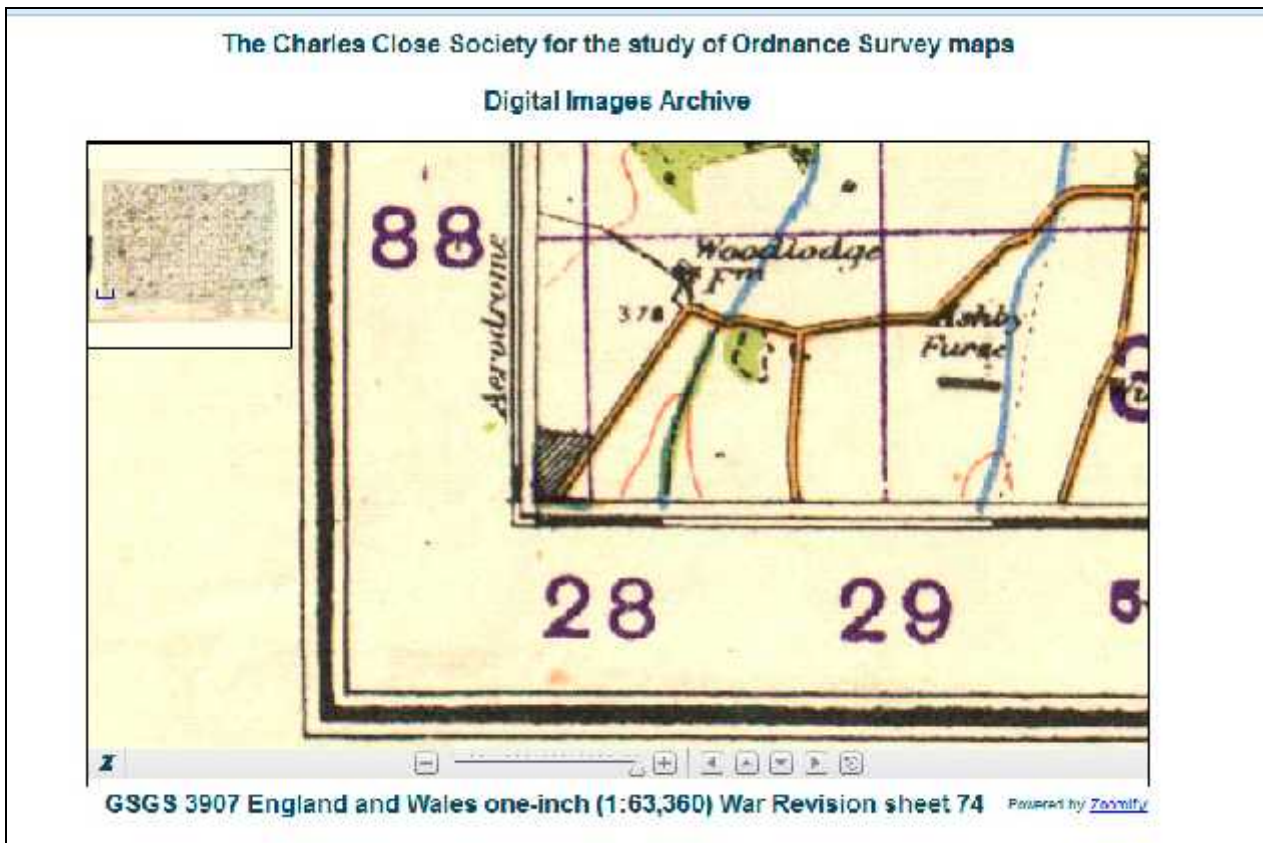


Ron Blake wrote (*Sheetlines* 99, 19) that ‘the obsolete [first world war] term *Landing Ground* was unexpectedly revived at Addington (sheet 115, 1934) and Penshurst (sheet 125, 1936), these being touch-down fields on the Croydon-Paris air route.’

But curiously on sheet 12 of the 1:31,680 London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) area map of 1935,⁶ the heading of which states ‘Reproduced, with minor modifications, from the drawings of the One-inch Fifth Edition’, the Penshurst site (*above*) is shown as *Aerodrome*. Fifth edition sheet 125 was revised between 1932 and 1934.⁷ The LPTB series was published during the first quarter of 1935. Fifth Edition sheet 125 was published in the first quarter of 1936. So for some reason the drawing was altered from *Aerodrome* to *Landing Ground*, probably during 1935. It would be interesting to know if the same happened at Addington.

⁶ This series is briefly described by Richard Oliver, *A Guide to the Ordnance Survey one-inch Fifth Edition*, CCS, third edition 2000, 47-48. My copy of sheet 12 is grey outline with blue water and has the print code 300/35.

⁷ These dates and those of publication are from Oliver 2000, p. 39.



Rob Wheeler writes: Ron Blake refers to the ‘seemingly random handful of airfields’ accidentally shown on War Revision and Second War Revision sheets. I spotted one such instance at Sywell, west of Wellingborough on War Revision sheet 74, in the Society’s digital images archive on the CCS website,⁸ where ‘Aerodrome’ appears in the bottom left margin. If this was copied from the parent Popular sheet it must have been added to the 1938 printing; it is not there on the 1936 printing. It is not shown on the Second War Revision, but that is derived from 5th edition material. Since only one copy of this War Revision sheet is known, it may count as the most fleeting appearance of an airfield on an OS series. Incidentally, there is a useful history of this airfield at www.sywellaerodrome.co.uk/history.php

Ron Blake responds: Rob Wheeler’s observation regarding Sywell is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the subtle effects of different topographic material being used respectively for the War Revision and Second War Revision series is an aspect I must confess I failed to appreciate and now realise merits more rigorous investigation. Secondly, marginal descriptions (especially those printed vertically) are easily missed and not necessarily partnered by a horizontal one on the adjoining sheet. (I recall a similar case at Gravesend when appraising the Fifth Edition). Sywell, incidentally, is a good example of those many ‘provincial’ civil aerodromes that were excised from the New Popular Edition. It is my intention to say a bit more about airfield depiction at sheet margins, and on sheet overlaps, in the forthcoming part two of this study.

⁸ www.charlesclosesociety.org/files/DigitalArchive/Item15.htm