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“Modern history on OS maps”

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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.

## ***Modern history on OS Maps***

***Rob Wheeler***

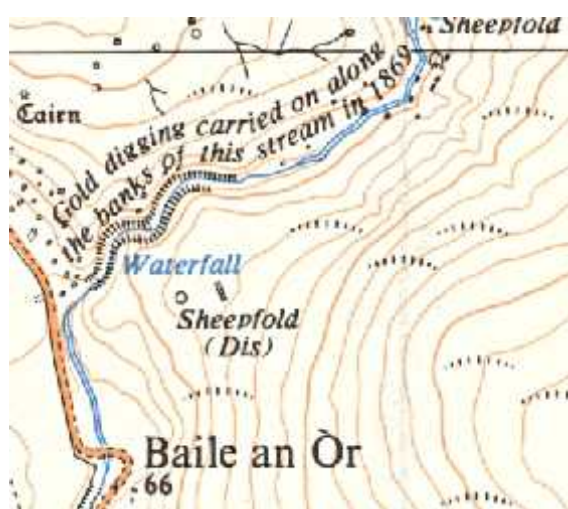


*Part of Bartholomew  
Historical Map - Four Air  
Battle symbols in East Kent*

For the purposes of this article let us take as the definition of 'history' a statement of the form 'such and such happened here in [date]'. The commonest example is provided by the well-known crossed-swords symbol, indicating a battlefield. The date on the one-inch (Seventh Series) key was 1066; most examples on the maps were medieval or from the English Civil War. John Bartholomew & Son produced a 'Historical Map of England and Wales', drawn and designed by LG Bullock, with a dozen 'Air Battle' symbols, with second world war dates, either '1940-1945' or a closer range, like '1942'. Even at the scale of 1:1M, it is doubtful that one can really represent the location of an air battle in this way: Bullock's enthusiasm for the (recent) achievements of the RAF seem to have triumphed over a more sober assessment of what a historical map can properly show. We do not

find any modern battles marked on OS maps.

What then is the most recent piece of 'history' on an OS map? To produce a definitive answer would require inspection of the Survey's entire output, so I can only suggest a candidate, and that appears on *Pathfinder* 86 (NC82/92) where three burns are annotated 'Gold digging carried on along the banks of this stream in 1869'. This is a reference to what is



*Pathfinder 86: Note on gold  
digging*

sometimes known as the 'Scottish Gold Rush'.<sup>1</sup> From late 1868, some 600 adventurers made their way up the road to Kildonan: at this date the railway terminated at Golspie. One of the temporary camps was at Baile an Òr (=town of gold) at NC 912213. That and Càrn nam Buth (=hill of the tents) at 899249 may perhaps be the most modern Gallic names shown by the OS. Experienced men could make useful but not spectacular incomes from alluvial gold. However, as from 31 December 1869 the Duke of Sutherland terminated licences and extraction came to an end, though there were subsequent unsuccessful attempts to find the vein from which the gold

<sup>1</sup> See eg <http://www.belmsdale.org/gold-rush.php>

had come.

The note found on the modern map can actually be traced back to the first edition of the County Series, to Sutherland sheet 67, published 1877-8 but surveyed as early as 1871. So when the surveyors actually wrote down the description, the events they were describing had come to an end only about 18 months before. One wonders whether the description should be regarded as ‘history’ so much as an explanation for a confused mess of channels and remains of temporary dams along the lines of the burns, a landscape which was deemed too temporary to be worth surveying but was felt to require a note of some sort.



*Sutherland sheet 67:  
one of the 1869 notes*

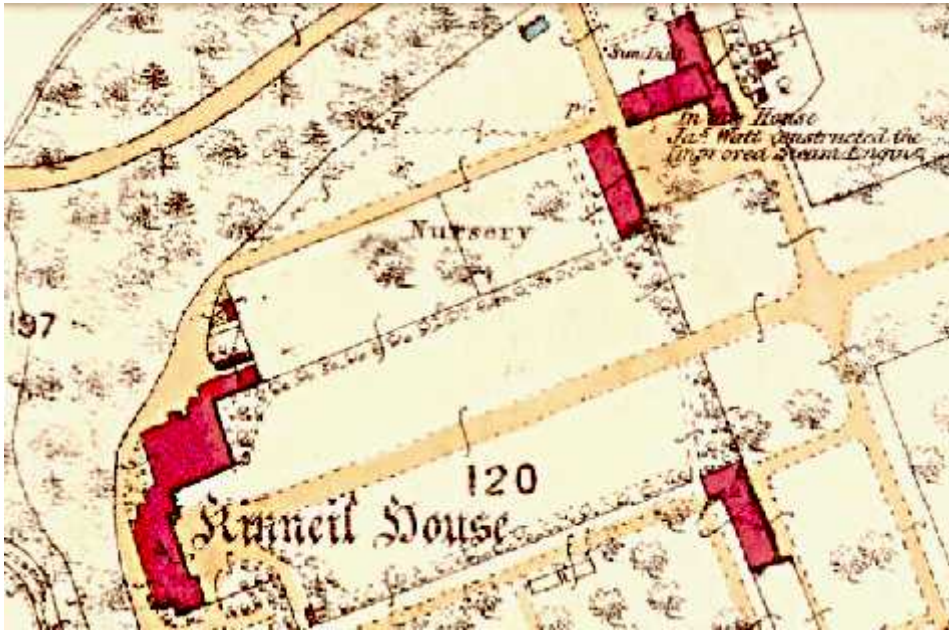
Perhaps in a busier area, when the time for revision came round, such a note might have been thought unworthy of the space it occupied. The Strath of Kildonan is not exactly a congested area; although it has quite a high density of archaeological sites – far more on the modern 1:25,000 than on the first edition of the six-inch. So there was hardly any pressure to remove the note to make way for modern detail. And these days, perhaps the OS sees it as another archaeological site, albeit one that happens to be precisely dated.

This raises questions about the definition with which I started. Does ‘Bronze axe found 1892’ with a ‘site of antiquity’ symbol count as ‘history’? It seems perverse to treat it so. Should the annotations at Kildonan be regarded as a geological equivalent: ‘alluvial gold found here 1869’? I think not: the note refers to the digging, not to what was found. So this probably should count as ‘history’, even though the events were less than two years old when recorded. That degree of recency will surely be hard to beat.

Recency is important, because the surveyors were not in a position to conduct historical research. Thus, what they recorded was local tradition, and local tradition can become confused over time. This is illustrated at Kinneil House, west of Bo’ness, where the surveyor recorded against one of the houses that flank the grand approach to the mansion ‘In this House James Watt constructed the Improved Steam Engine’. The reference is to the events of 1759 when Watt was completing his first full-sized engine for Dr Roebuck, who had taken a lease of Kinneil House and found the Newcomen atmospheric engine inadequate to pump water from his mines thereabouts.<sup>2</sup> It is indeed possible that Watt was *living* in this house at the time, but the construction appears to have been done in a small workshop immediately south of the mansion house.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Lives of the Engineers*, 2006, 89.





That at least is the view held by the local council, who maintain a small museum there and who quote in evidence a letter recommending a building close to the glen that runs immediately west of the mansion because of the greater privacy it offered. Ninety-five years is quite long enough for the story to have become confused.

*Linlithgow 1.10 (Borrowstouness) surveyed 1854, published 1856*

*James Watt's workshop at Kinneil, together with a cylinder thought to be from one of the Newcomen engines that Watt was responsible for at the time (moved to the site about 90 years ago) [photo by the author]*



*The extracts from Sutherland sheet 67 and Linlithgow 1.10 are taken from National Library of Scotland on-line mapping at <http://maps.nls.uk>, with thanks.*