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“Ordnance Surveys for HMLR”

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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.

## ***Ordnance Surveys for HM Land Registry***

### ***John Cole***

The following is a brief description and some personal experiences rather than an account of the convoluted history regarding work done by OS for HM Land Registry (HLMR), some of the background for which can be found in the ‘Seymour’ history<sup>1</sup> and to a lesser degree elsewhere. Pages 70-79 of the *National Plans* (1934) gives a full account of the history from the inception of HMLR in 1862 up to the 1930s. Relations between OS and HMLR had not been altogether smooth during that time span but the writer of the *National Plans*, Director-General Brigadier H St J L Winterbotham was recognised by HMLR as a supporter of their cause more so than had hitherto been the case.

The desirability of a measure of state control has its roots in the conveyancing of land by deeds kept in private custody not always providing full protection for purchasers and/or lessees. And the OS role was to provide an accurate survey – probably in the majority of cases the existing map – to which a deed plan might be related. The first such survey took place in January 1929 and during the first year 49 such surveys were completed; the following year 295 and by the late 1950s in excess of 8000.

My first sighting of what was known as an ‘LR case’ determined me to have as little to do with such as I possibly could and it is a remarkable paradox that only a few years later I opted to transfer to an office which at the time was concentrating on such surveys! But before then I found it difficult to understand the enthusiasm and even competition amongst experienced surveyors to undertake such work. With hindsight the reasons were obvious: escape from the drudgery of 1:1250 survey in a bleak industrial landscape (The Black Country), certain financial incentives in the shape of allowances and a task which required more mental agility than the normal line of work apart from often being in pleasant villages or rural surroundings..

A couple of things in particular frightened me. Quite a percentage of the work was at 1:2500 scale even in 1:1250 areas which had yet to be tackled. But for LR purposes 1:2500 surveys needed to be enlarged to 1:1250 and any necessary (for LR reasons) measurements taken, to scale exactly. Given the uncertain linear accuracy standards of the County Series 1:2500 map this seemed to me to be asking a great deal.

The other drawback was the amount of complicated documentation, completion of which was of paramount importance for various purposes, not least costing.

I can never recall seeing a precise set of instructions prior to a section M being issued for the ‘Red Book’ in the late 1950s. But in later years I was able to secure a copy of a *Guide to Field Surveys for Land Registry* with a date of April 1950 running to forty pages including maps, diagrams and sample forms. These comprised the important LR requisition form MB16. A further LR form MB18 if

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<sup>1</sup> WA Seymour (ed), *A History of the Ordnance Survey*, 1980, 172.

terms of tenancy were requested. OS forms 131 devoted to times, journeys, dates and allowances claimed etc, 130 quoting the status of a case taking longer than expected and 101, a monthly time docket for each week's work. There were also example traces including a very useful 'floor survey' – three traces superimposed showing the differences of property limits.

Reverting to my final years in the West Midlands I recall one of my senior colleagues expressing a wish that the counties of Worcestershire, Staffordshire and Shropshire would all be made compulsory for Land Registration purposes. The significance of this remark didn't strike me until some time later. Meanwhile my colleague and others were far from pleased when a single surveyor (unpopular to begin with) was made responsible for all LR work in the south Staffs north Worcestershire area. This may or may not have had some connection with a 1:1250 map under continuous revision which had been pushed towards new edition criterion purely by a build up of scattered LR cases but without any additional chain survey or tachy to maintain the integrity of the framework. Almost certainly not an isolated case since there would always be a desire not to delay LR work (an aim which was frequently asserted), but neglecting the fact that a hectare or so of additional work needed a proper framework.

In 1962 or 63 Land Registration was made compulsory in the county of Berkshire and a glance at the progress map (*Annual Report 1962-3*) reveals that apart from Reading not another post-1942 surveyed or revised large scale map existed for the county. I plunged into this situation via a voluntary move to an office at Nettlebed, north of Reading, and for the next three months spent all my time on OS surveys for HMLR. A total of twenty-five cases were involved mainly in the Abingdon / Wantage area and surrounding villages (eight of them) but also a few Oxfordshire voluntary LR cases, starting in fact with Henley-on-Thames. In this instance the 1:2500 map had been revised and published whilst at Goring a trace of the recent revision document was available. But in the main, the medium was the pre-war 1:2500 revision trace, or worse a paper copy which could cause 'penning-up' difficulties.

The learning curves for me were the actual survey work and the documentation. My chief fear regarding the 1:2500 scale map, the scale for all twenty five cases I attended to, was that there was no 'friendly' revision point to work to or from. I had also been cushioned by the advent of equally accurate tachy points and machine-plotted air survey which had made 1:1250 mapwork far more straightforward. And there was a further complication in that the selling off of council housing built since the previous survey or revision had commenced making it necessary to add complete estates. Attempts to 'traverse in' to survey individual properties had led to subsequent disaster, experience of such causing my immediate superior to order proper surveys. This certainly improved matters but due to the nature of the 1:2500 did not entirely eradicate problems.

Floor surveys were not uncommon in the older parts of small towns and large villages and one had to be very alert in such cases. I initially missed an overlap in Abingdon and the case was returned to us for further check. There was little excuse for this because during my first week I had assisted a colleague who had

similarly overlooked a basement in a large house overlapped by the adjoining property.

The LR requisition form MB16 would usually give a clue and at this point a description of the form may be useful. It was divided in two: special requisitions on left; surveyor's replies on right. Each item would be numbered and the surveyor would always commence with 'Sir' and sign off with 'Ordnance Survey' not his own name. Typical might be: 1. Land to be surveyed is edged red on copy OS plan. 2. Where the boundaries are defined by features other than fences, walls or hedges eg by posts, pegs etc. state size and nature. 3. Please supply a dimensional sketch of the property. 4. Brace extent as in occupation. The answers to 2, 3 and 4 could be conveniently dealt with on the reverse of the form. The stock answer to most requisitions was simply 'Attended to' but often confirmation of the address of the property was asked for. Further relatively common requests were to state age and nature of a boundary feature, the former often difficult to state with accuracy other than brand new or erected, many years ago.

In my later years of service HMLR solved a lot of their problems by asking for photographs of various boundary features, so the OS surveyor would be armed with a disposable camera.

Turning back to personal experiences, I managed to cope with a single exceedingly simple case in the Birmingham: area before making the courageous decision to transfer to the Berkshire / Oxfordshire borders for a very stiff (but ultimately invaluable) dose of work for HMLR over a three month period.

The very first pair of cases actually fell on the border, in Bell Street Henley-on-Thames and just on the Berkshire side of Henley Bridge. I have a graphic reminder of both in the shape of Alan Godfrey's 1910 Henley-on-Thames (North) map but the OS working document available was a 1961 revision and I hoped that this indicated few problems. Indeed, I was cheerfully informed that an 'experienced' man would have both in the post by the end of the working day. Sadly, what happened next has already been mentioned in *Sheetlines* 82 – at least regarding difficulty on the Berkshire bank of the Thames. On paper, the Bell Street case was simpler. In effect the previous revision (quite possibly that of 1910) indicated a 'step' of about two metres in an internal property division, not altered in 1961, and which disagreed with the deed plan. One property had been demolished and was in the early stage of re-building but clearly revealing the said step. I managed to complete the job but was far from happy about measurements along Bell Street to properties either side of the case and similarly at the rear. In my innocence I believed that once overhaul had taken place, as in the case of the SU7682 1:2500 map, we all would live happily ever after. See previous articles of mine on the subject and also John Cruikshank's in *Sheetlines* 50.

During my first spell in Cornwall from 1965 to 79, according to my records I averaged ten cases per year with the majority falling in the St Austell 1:1250 area. Three which stick in the mind were the very first, at Portmellon close to Mevagissey where I was a bit alarmed over the seaward extent of the property with rather a dangerous cliff involved; at Withiel near Bodmin where I had to indulge in 'detective' work before tracking down a tenant to complete HMLR's

form MB18 and at Boscastle where I was just in time to intercept second-home owners before they returned to Birmingham!

During my second stint, for which I have no records, it became more commonplace to make appointments and in one instance where I had to rendezvous with a solicitor and an interested party on the other side. I caused amusement to the latter by asking the solicitor to look along a fence between properties visible from end to end, and inform me if it was dead straight or bent in two places; the result of which brought the proceedings to an abrupt conclusion. Rather more embarrassing for me was a photography incident whereby I could not take the shot HMLR requested without including a scantily-attired lady in the adjoining property sun-bathing. She had already been glaring at me whilst I was doing some measuring.

The break between Cornish stints had been due in part to the resurvey of the Devonshire beauty spot of Brixham at the 1:1250 scale. Some thirty years before, it had been 'resurveyed' at 1:2500 using revision points (*Sheetlines* 52) and although the 1:1250 resurvey employed a different method many of the RPs were found and incorporated without any difficulty in the modern map. Several HMLR cases were attended to and some of the deficiencies of the original method came to light when the existing LR document which had been 1:2500 enlarged to 1:1250 was overlaid on the modern document. Predictably (I thought) the RPs fitted exactly as did some exteriors of housing blocks which had been chain surveyed from the RPs. Internally there were discrepancies usually caused by inadequate revision of 'county series' detail used to infill the blocks.

The following extract comes from an OS Field Bulletin dated 1950:

"Land Registry. 325 survey cases and 454 printing cases were received during the month. 57 survey cases were dealt with by Town Groups.

The month has been eventful for at least one of the mobile surveyors. A wet Monday morning ushered him into the LR briefing room (Kensington, London) in an anguished mood and uttering threats of resignation etc. Questioned, he produced the tattered and muddled remains of several forms and tracings with the statement 'That's some LR cases – the other pieces are making pork'. The story is this: the day was wet and the job a smallholding of sorts. With his trace and documents safely dry inside the sketching case, the surveyor decided to tape and book a few measurements. He put the case on an apparently unoccupied pigsty and got to work. To his surprise a few minutes later the case had disappeared and as he rushed towards the sty sounds of grunting were heard. Casting caution aside he leapt into the sty on to several large pigs who had pulled the case down, opened it, and having eaten his lunch, straight-edge, set square, most of LR form MB16 and parts of the LR tracings, were fighting over the rubber bands and remaining traces which so far remained safely in the case. Astride the back of the largest animal he wrenched the rapidly disappearing 25-inch scale from its jaws and then searched amidst the now frantic mess

of pigs for any remaining bits and pieces. Finally after much groping in the muck to no avail, he retired to count his losses and to wash. All ended well however and the documents were replaced without difficulty. The nature of LR work invites many little incidents apart from ‘social’ ones. In recent months LR men have fallen into: cesspits (various), a drum of oil (filthy); fallen off: roofs, ladders, walls.

It is not generally realised that (particularly in the City of London) the LR man’s work goes beyond the scope of the normal cartographic surveyor and. often requires great care in tracing boundaries, perhaps on several floors. And checking thickness of walls, concealed juts, etc. In much burgled districts he is far from popular and needs all his tact. Most of the LR mobile section can testify to the remarkable efficiency of our Police Flying Squad!”

Having had a pig attempt to consume part of a measuring tape and a policeman waiting for me outside a garden gate, I can testify to the accuracy of the above.

*Editions of Sheetlines referred to in John Cole’s article may be downloaded from [www.charlesclosesociety.org/SheetlinesArchive](http://www.charlesclosesociety.org/SheetlinesArchive)*

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### ***High tied?***



*Calum Mackay was browsing the OS online 1:25,000 map of the harbour at Burnham Overy Staithe, Norfolk (TF 840460) and was surprised to find two lines labelled Mean High Water.*