



# *Sheetlines*

The journal of  
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY  
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

“Some observations on collecting OS maps”

*Richard Oliver*

*Sheetlines*, 52 (August 1998), pp.25-29

Stable URL: <http://www.charlesclosesociety.org/files/Issue52page25.pdf>

*This article is provided for personal, non-commercial use only.  
Please contact the Society regarding any other use of this work.*

Published by  
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY  
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps  
[www.CharlesCloseSociety.org](http://www.CharlesCloseSociety.org)

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.

## Some observations on collecting Ordnance Survey maps

Richard Oliver

In *Sheetlines* 51 Hugh Brookes poses a number of questions, some of which can be answered readily, and some of which are nearly unanswerable, but raise interesting points, so I hope that readers will not object to my broadening the discussion a little. I will take them in order. Incidentally, a friend suggests that this may be a good place to put in a 'plug' for sales of back numbers of *Sheetlines*: a set of them makes a very good nucleus of an Ordnance Survey library!

First, 'print run numbers'. These have been discussed in the past in *Sheetlines*, notably in an article of mine published in 1988,<sup>1</sup> and more briefly and recently in 1997.<sup>2</sup> In the instance cited, '25000/6/46 Wa', it indicates 25,000 copies printed (or rather, intended to be printed), in June 1946, at the Britannia Printing Works, Waddon, Surrey, which had been requisitioned on behalf of the Ordnance Survey in 1940 or 1941. It is unusual for the month to be cited in this way on civil printings (though usual on post-1940 military printings); a common practice was to run quantity and year together, e.g. 10045 for 10,000 copies in 1945.

Second, the apparent lack of an explicit publication date on 1:25,000 maps published in the late 1940s: this is indeed the case, and it seems to apply to all new publications and reprintings of these maps between early in 1948 and some time in 1950. Thus the magnetic variation date is the nearest we have to an explicit date, though I understand that, even so, it may not be completely reliable. This is part of a wider phenomenon of not dating OS maps explicitly at this time: the early issues of the six-inch (1:10,560) Provisional Edition on both county and National Grid sheet lines (1943-50) and of the 1:2500 and 1:1250 on National Grid sheet lines (1948-50) also lack explicit publication dates and, unless one seeks out the monthly publication reports, the only way of dating them, once print codes incorporating dates were replaced by letter codes early in 1947, is by the latest date on the map, which is likely to be a survey, revision or boundary revision date. Just to complicate matters, explicit publication dates were retained on 1:2500 County Series maps right up to the last to be published late in 1947! I do not know the reason for this coyness as to the date of publication, which one would have thought to be desirable for copyright; I know of nothing in the list of OS records in the Public Record Office (PRO) which would shed light on the matter, and I suspect that we will never know.

Third, the issuing on 'cloth' of One-inch Seventh Series maps: a 'closed' file in the PRO indicates that the OS decided to abandon mounting in November 1967, as demand was falling rapidly, and it would save having to install the necessary equipment in the new building at Southampton. I have never seen any one-inch or quarter-inch sheet which was issued in 1968 or later mounted on cloth; as the 'red cover' was introduced for the Seventh Series (and

<sup>1</sup> Richard Oliver, 'Edition codes on Ordnance Survey maps', *Sheetlines* 22 (August 1988), 4-7.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Oliver, 'Print code suffixes', *Sheetlines* 49 (September 1997), 41-2.

the 'blue cover' for the Quarter-inch Fifth Series) in March 1969, I think it safe to say that one will not find a 'red cover Seventh' mounted on cloth by OS, though the work of amateurs cannot be ruled out! (OS 'old stock' mounted on cloth did continue on sale for a while after 1967, and Bartholomew were still offering their half-inch map on cloth in 1972.)

Mr Brookes's remaining questions are somewhat harder to answer satisfactorily. 'Are there any rarities amongst the Popular, New Popular and Seventh Series maps?' If the thrust of the question is 'Are some of these more valuable than others?', then the answer is 'No'. As an illustration of that, let me cite Seventh Series Sheet 167, edition B. This was issued in July 1971, but was withdrawn from sale almost immediately, as it showed public rights of way and 'yellow roads' in the live firing area around Imber, on Salisbury Plain (ST 9648); it had the shortest time on sale of any Seventh Series sheet, and a B/\* version, suitably amended, was issued in its stead three months later. The recalled stock of edition B which had been put into covers was presumably pulped, but the paper flat stock - reportedly some 21,000 copies of an original run of 27,500 - was overprinted for use by the military. The point of this is that the B edition of 167 is 'unusual', but the dealer who supplied me with my copy charged me the same price as he would have done had it been the 'common' B/\* edition, notwithstanding that he knew perfectly well that the B edition was 'unusual' and that I was anxious to secure a copy.

The most unusual issues of One-inch New Popular Edition and One-inch Seventh Series material are possibly the two-inch manuscript drawing 131/5 for Sheet 131 of the New Popular, of 1939-40, and the reprint of Seventh Series Sheet 137 made in 1991. On a print-run basis they are unquestionably 'rare': 30 monochrome copies of 131/5 were produced for the Society by Ordnance Survey in 1991, and we took delivery of 100 copies of the printing of Sheet 137. The reprint of Sheet 137 was made in order to supply a deficiency in OS's stock when it was making up the sets of the Seventh Series which were offered as a 'collector's item' for the 1991 Bicentenary celebrations; the Charles Close Society still has a number in stock for sale to members. 131/5 has, I believe, the unique dubious distinction of being so out of date when it finally reached its public that it was provided with historical notes from the start. Notes also accompany the Society's issue of Sheet 137, and, though 'uncommon', the fact that we still have stocks six or seven years later suggests that the demand is more modest than we would like! It also demonstrates that what excites a few of us evidently fails to move the majority.

The opposite of this is the map which was certainly printed in quantity but of which copies are not seen very often. A particularly good example of this is the One-inch Fifth Edition London sheet published in the spring of 1937, which is both a replacement of the tourist map derived from Popular Edition material, and a disguised form of Fifth Edition large sheet series Sheet 114. According to the print-code, 10,000 copies were printed (a big run for a civil map at this period), and apparently 2309 copies were sold in the first nine months

following publication;<sup>3</sup> at that rate, one might have expected most of the 10,000 copies to have been sold by the time that the OS was bombed on 30 November and 1 December 1940. So where are they? I have seen very few, and a perusal of dealers' catalogues for the past twenty years will suggest that, for some reason, comparatively few come onto the market, particularly as compared with some roughly contemporary Popular and Fifth Edition sheets which were printed in much more modest quantities. (However, if you haven't got a Fifth London, don't be too disappointed: the printing quality is the worst of any pre-war Fifth!) But perhaps a correspondent, whose groans may be a feature of provincial bookfairs and bookshops every time he sees yet another beastly Fifth London, will write and tell us otherwise? It is quite possible.

There is also the question of how one defines 'rare': the maps of some geographical areas do tend to turn up less frequently than others, but I do not know any that I would call 'rare'. My own impression is that, for mapping current between about 1925 and 1975, it is harder to find sheets covering the Outer Hebrides, north-east Scotland, Galloway, the East Riding, Lincolnshire, parts of the south-east Midlands and southern Wales (except Pembrokeshire), i.e. areas which are not really 'touring areas', than it is for some other parts of Britain, but this is only partly borne out by the only publicised list of 'difficult' One-inch Seventh Series sheets that I know of: this was prepared by Alan Godfrey in December 1978 (in those days he dealt in old OS maps, instead of republishing them), and listed sheets 53, 95, 96, 97, 102, 114, 124 and 189!<sup>4</sup> I suspect that the distribution may have been distorted temporarily by the OS remaindering large stocks of many Seventh Series sheets during 1978, which would account for the only 'difficult' Scottish sheet being 53, which goes against my experience. (A recent OS list shows 189's successor, 1:50,000 Sheet 204, to be in the top two-dozen sellers.)<sup>5</sup> I regard north-east Lincolnshire as a difficult area (is that because I was born there?), but one of our dealer members tells me that the 1:50,000 sheet, 113, turns up in extraordinary quantities, and he has no difficulty at all in supplying copies of the final Seventh Series equivalent, edition B/ of Sheet 105. Again, I remember that in 1978-9 no copy of New Popular Edition Sheet 141, Brecon, appeared in any of Alan Godfrey's monthly catalogues, and that I discussed the point with Alan on the 'phone: we did wonder if it had ever been published! Perhaps needless to say, at the end of 1979 I found a nice copy, in a large hoard in a bookshop at whatever the 'going rate' was then, and a few months later obtained an even better copy in a jumble sale, just as Alan listed one in a catalogue... Since then I have lost interest in further sightings of this sheet!

And so one might go on. What it comes down to, is that whether a map is 'common' or 'uncommon' depends partly on whether one is looking for it (the best way is not to look for a desired sheet: it then seems much more likely to turn up), and partly on the accidents of what one encounters. Also, a particular

---

<sup>3</sup> Recorded in Public Record Office file OS 1/375. This contains some useful information on sales of pre-war tourist and district sheets.

<sup>4</sup> Supplement to Alan Godfrey's catalogue 25, 4 December 1978: copy in writer's collection.

<sup>5</sup> Ordnance Survey News Release 45/98.

sheet might be common enough if one is not too fussy about condition or presentation, but suddenly become 'difficult' if one needs it in a certain form. To give a concrete example, for my talk to the Society's AGM in 1995 I had some slides made. Some of them were to be of the New Forest tourist map of 1938. I believe this to be a very interesting map, and it is unique in several ways, but I had not hitherto regarded it as very hard to find (and that wasn't just because I'd owned a folded copy since 1968!). In order to furnish good slides, I wanted to supply my photographer with a paper flat copy. I asked map dealers, I asked flat-map collectors, but no paper-flat New Forest was forthcoming, and so a folded copy had to be used after all. So if any reader has a paper-flat New Forest of 1938 to dispose of...

Paper-flat maps do not usually attract as much attention, or as high prices, as their folded equivalents, which is a pity, as most of the really 'unusual maps' are most likely, or will only, be found in that form. If I am pressed to give advice on 'what to look out for', I would suggest anything with an official OS 'proof' stamp on it, (but don't pay more for it than if it were the equivalent sheet in its published form), as these may (I don't say they always do) differ in small respects from the published map. This may be no more than altering the dates of publication and magnetic variation, but it may be more interesting. As an instance, I have a proof copy of Seventh Series Sheet 105, edition A, which is '1st proof 6 Dec 1954'. That publication and magnetic dates are 1954 rather than 1955 is not very exciting, even to me, who had been born on the sheet a few months before, but what is interesting is that on the published version, printed and issued in May 1955, some altitudes have been amended and a number of triangulation stations have been removed, as have been a number of radio masts. The triangulation stations may have been deleted because they were the older sort, marked by a buried stone rather than by a concrete pillar, and the radio masts were presumably removed on 'security' grounds, which makes one wonder why the description 'WT Sta' was added by photo-writing at a late stage<sup>6</sup> to the naval wireless station site at Waltham (TA 289055), only to be removed from the published map! (Radio masts are always noticeable, and a wooden one at Waltham was particularly so on 31 January 1934, when it caught fire and blazed merrily for two days and nights.<sup>7</sup>)

The only straightforward answer which I can give to the fifth question, 'What is the likelihood of finding One-inch Third Edition maps in second-hand bookshops or other outlets?' is, 'Less now than it was fifteen or twenty years ago', but then seasoned collectors have given me to understand that fewer were to be found then than fifteen or twenty years before that! These and other pre-1918 maps do still turn up (I found a couple of Thirds in a bookshop in Matlock just before submitting this article), but it is quite impossible to say how often. One can strike lucky, as did one member who, on his way to visit me in Exeter in May 1997, stopped off in Crewkerne and secured about fifteen or twenty one-inch outline sheets of Ireland, printed around 1880, for

<sup>6</sup> That is, the addition was made to the outline negative at 1:63,360 which was the result of photographing the original (positive-reading) 1:40,000 drawing.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Chapman, *Images of North Lincolnshire*, Derby, Breedon Books, 1993, 113.

something like £45, or about £2.50 a sheet, which goes to prove that older material does still turn up, and at inexpensive prices.

And this leads to the final question, as to a price-guide for second-hand maps. I have to say that this is something which the Society has resisted hitherto, and I hope that it will continue to resist it. That said, I would suggest that it is unreasonable to pay for anything 'collectable' - maps, gramophone records, children's books, topographical books, postcards, what you will - anything like the same price to a general dealer as one would to a specialist. If one deals with the latter, then there is a 'convenience factor' which it is reasonable to pay for, whereas doing the rounds of the general sellers usually involves something in time and travel costs. As a very rough guide, I would suggest that I do not expect to pay for maps in a general bookshop more than half to two thirds what I would pay for similar items to a dealer or at the map market at the Society's AGM.<sup>8</sup> Translated into Figures, this suggests prices of around £3 to £3.50 for post-war one-inch maps, £4 to £6 for inter-war small-scale maps (perhaps a pound or two more for those in well-preserved decorative covers) and large-scale maps, and perhaps £5 to £7.50 for colour-printed pre-1918 maps, in each case for copies in reasonable condition. One should not expect to pay more than about £2 or so for 1:50,000 and 1:25,000 maps issued in the last 25 years, unless they are current editions in perfect condition, in which case £3 is reasonable, given that they would cost from £4.95 to £5.95 new. Again, though I think these are fair prices, willingness to pay them will depend on how much money one has at one's disposal, and how desirable a particular item is: each of us will have a different response to these. There is the further complication that, relative to the above, some of the stock in a particular shop may appear over-priced, and the rest under-priced... and so on.

I will close with what is probably the most extraordinary price ever asked for second-hand Ordnance Survey maps, which was spotted by the late Rod Monnington in the *Exchange and Mart* around 1990-91. It was for what was described as a complete set of inter-war one-inch maps of the British Isles, for £83,000. On the assumption that there would be 236 sheets for Britain and about 170 for Ireland, and that one might expect to pay an average of £8 to £10 per sheet in reasonable condition at dealer's prices, anyone wanting such a set might budget for spending £4000 or so then, and perhaps £5000 now. Unfortunately, the story has no proper ending: Rod rang the number, but it turned out to be a mobile phone which was switched off. So we don't know if the vendor really meant £83,000, but if he did, I rather doubt that he got it!

---

<sup>8</sup> These observations only apply to maps: I would suggest, for example, a much greater generalist:specialist ratio for gramophone records, for instance, not least because we who seek interesting classical bedrock in junk shops and charity shops often have to delve through huge drift deposits of the likes of Mrs Mills, Twenty Stone-cold Hits from Twenty-Five Years Ago, and the soundtrack recording of *The Sound of Music*. The map-seeker does not suffer such tribulations, as the offerings are usually all in one place.