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“Difficulties with Land-Line data”

R C Wheeler

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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.

Difficulties with Land-Line data

R C Wheeler

Since 1998, the OS has been depositing annual dumps of its Land-Line data in copyright libraries. The software to view it is moderately convenient¹ so it will undoubtedly provide a very useful source for future historical geographers. It will also provide copious employment for future cartographic historians in explaining to those geographers just what deductions can be made from the data.

¹ I would question the presenting of spot height points as screened crosses, with screening so coarse that they appear as a blotch.

The instances I shall describe relate to my own village of Harmston.² However, I am told by regular users that the problems to be described are encountered in many other places.

The biggest problem is that OS now relies on information from local authorities in order to know what changes it needs to go and survey. This system has been running for some time but if the last full revision predates its introduction (as at Harmston, last revised in August 1970) then developments made before notification was introduced may not have been caught, even though later developments are recorded perfectly.

These new developments at Harmston are almost entirely of housing. The houses appear with thick lines, their garages with thin ones, so the user might imagine there is some logic behind line-width. However, for the older part of the village, houses again have thick lines but farm buildings are treated erratically: open wagon sheds – thick; chaise house with granary over – thin; modern stable of wood – thick; old stable of stone – thin. Internal divisions of buildings have been updated erratically; in one case, where a terrace of houses was reconstructed without any changes to the footprints of the individual properties, the divisions have been re-drawn far less accurately than before. One of these properties is sometimes claimed to be the smallest house in Lincolnshire (or possibly in England); the new map amalgamates it with its neighbour.

Perhaps the biggest problem is with names. The map of 1970 was unduly verbose, allowing such monstrosities as *Harmston (C of E controlled) Primary School* where *Sch* would have sufficed and *Harmston Methodist Church* where *Methodist Chapel* should have served. These have been subjected to pruning by someone seemingly lacking understanding of the subtleties of rural English usage. Thus, *Harmston Methodist Church* has become *Church* and *Village Hall* has been shortened to *Hall*, notwithstanding the potential confusion with *Harmston Hall*, a rather grander establishment. Updating of names has been erratic, so the map still shows a *Vicarage* even though the last Vicar left in 1995 and the aforesaid school still appears long-windedly on the map even though the last pupil left in 1989.

To make matters worse, the writers of modern software do not understand what was drummed into every nineteenth century surveyor's clerk, that when reproducing a map it is essential to show names exactly where they were before. Instead, names have a tendency to drift off in a generally southwesterly direction. Thus my neighbour on one side finds that his house is labelled *Church* because my neighbour on the other side lives in the former Harmston Methodist Church, which was converted to a house in 1975-6. Our parish clerk's house (or rather its name) has drifted over to the pub, while the thirsty traveller armed with a Land-Line printout is liable to venture into a decaying barn in search of a beer.

It is too easy to poke fun. I understand that OS is doing what it can to address these problems and it is far, far better to have imperfect updates every year or so than to wait 64 years for a thorough one (that being the interval between our last previous revision and the revision of 1970). Most regular users of Land-Line data will be aware of the problems I have mentioned. But there is still a moral for archivists - cherish that Millennium Map produced by the Mothers' Union in felt and crochet work: it may be better in some respects than the Land-Line data dump! And for future geographers, working at a time when all these problems have been sorted out: use the early snapshots with extreme caution!

² Tile SK9762, amended to 22/01/2001.