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"Kerry musings"

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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.

Kerry musings

David Archer

Only recently have I come to appreciate just how useful, yet underused the National Grid is. I have often used it to pinpoint a place, but had never considered how difficult life was before it existed. In an Ordnance Survey report of 1921, the location of a building was described as being shown on a particular 1:2500 sheet, 180 yards south west of a bridge. Not a great help to the map-owning public, who favoured the smaller scales. After 120 years of highly mathematical and scientifically advanced map making, Colonel C F Close resorted to a description similar to that used to find Long John Silver's treasure: X marks the spot. But then, it had always been thus. In the early days, OS staff were told that buried triangulation stations could be found by consulting Mr Bloggs who lives in the cottage nearby.

The beauty of the National Grid is that it is now so well established, even if little used, that it can be found in most households, whether in a road atlas or on a sheet map. And a lot of people know how to use it (after a fashion), without an expensive electronic gadget, but with sufficient accuracy for everyday purposes. Quoting grid reference SO 155891 allows anyone to look it up and see what is there. To some individuals, just the letters SO will indicate the general area. With decreasing precision, a six-figure grid reference can be used on ever-smaller-scale maps, and still show the location to be nearer Clun than Aberdeen. On the down side, the National Grid is perceived as being 'difficult'. Many people remember being instructed in its use whilst at school, and deep in their brain, they remember there to be a major catch somewhere. You need your wits about you or you make a tremendous blunder and mess up the whole reference. Better not to use it. So most people don't. Not that this sort of person is given much encouragement, or has an example set by those who should know better. Few large organisations, public or private, give a grid reference for an address. Postcodes are used at the end of an address. Why not a National Grid reference as well?

I learnt how to give a grid reference and, on leaving school, promptly forgot. When I renewed my interest in maps, I remembered that one quoted one way and then the next and estimated tenths. But which way first? Up and down or left and right? I always find it easiest to think of a capital L for the Location being described. Go down the L and across to the right, just as when writing it. Look on the map at either end of the vertical line and quote the digit and then either end of the lower horizontal line and give that digit. Get the two letters from the margin or cover. Alas, I still have to draw imaginary L's one above the other or side by side, in order to work out adjacent sheet numbers for 1:25,000 maps. That columns of these sheets run 21, 22, 23 upwards and rows run 21, 31, 41 across, is not second nature to me.

I no longer attempt to explain over the telephone how to give a six-figure grid reference, though I do sometimes tell how to quote a 1:25,000 First Series sheet. Find a good road atlas with an Introduction stating that it shows the National Grid (and is therefore a clear and detailed index to this series). Every small square on a page is a sheet of the First Series. Look for the big double letters somewhere in the body of the page and write them down. Follow the line that forms the left edge of the square under consideration to the edge of the page and note the digit shown. Repeat this for the bottom edge of the square. The two letters and two digits are the 1:25,000 sheet number, SO 18.

I am certain that reading the official explanation is what causes all the confusion and puts people off. And it is likely that this method is at least touched upon in schools (as it was, forty five years ago). The false origin of the National Grid is where one starts when giving a grid reference, we were told. This is marked by a big black X floating on the waves some miles to the south and west of the Isles of Scilly, behind your left shoulder when reading a map. Thus, the left hand vertical line, on the extreme west of any Ordnance Survey sheet, is referred to as an easting, being so much east of the false origin. Similarly, the bottom neat line, the south of the map, is known as a northing. In fact, any vertical line is an easting, giving rise to the instruction "Drive three miles west to easting SO 155". No wonder confusion reigns. Left and right, top and bottom for me every time.

Whenever somebody offers to give a grid reference, I always ask for the location as well. So often the two sets of figures are transposed. Even the Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 gazetteer has this sort of mistake. More intriguing, a friend has noted that the OS 2003 Xmas card, showing part of Holly Green has the note: National grid reference for Holly Green—3861 2409, which I leave you to ponder. However, easily the most common failing seen in print, is the substitution of a sheet number for the letters, e.g. *Landranger* sheet 196 387 148, or NG 387 148 on map 196. This is the sort of thing that I mean when I say people only half understand the National Grid. They do not appreciate that if the letters are given, one can look the reference up on a variety of map series and scales.

Currently, there appears to be no widespread use of the National Grid amongst the general public, only amongst scattered groups. Large map databases use it to bring up a County Series site when a National Grid reference is specified, and others move between the National and Cassini Grids using a computer program. Our local fire service recently gave every household a piece of paper showing their grid reference, and asked that it be kept by the telephone and quoted in emergencies, showing a belief in its usefulness. The outdoor fraternity still use it, as do many guidebooks. Carriers in rural areas could find it cheaper to provide maps rather than mobile phones and have grid references rather than telephone numbers on parcels.

The police use postcodes and are constantly urging us to etch them onto valuables. The Royal Mail uses postcodes, as do insurance companies and any electronic database that provides addresses. One is always being asked for a postcode, never for a National Grid reference. It has been suggested that the Royal Mail should have used the grid as a basis for postcodes, or even as a substitute. Maybe this could still occur, especially if the double letters were changed to reflect an area, as do the first two letters of a postcode. Instead of SW, we could have CW for Cornwall. I see no reason why the letters should be structured and follow on, one pair from another. How many people know the two letters to the north of SO?

Given that so many use or nearly use the National Grid, I suggest that the Ordnance Survey re-launch it. Free maps are being given to schoolchildren, so why not tie it in with a massive promotion of the grid? A lot of the groundwork has been done in preparing the public for it, so why not ram it home? As with the current campaign to eat more fruit and vegetables, many people are well on the way already. With the National Grid, most people have access to it at home, and many almost know how to use it. A clear explanation and encouragement are all that is needed.