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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

Have you ever studied the label on a tin of cat food? Here are more facts, figures and statistics than are needed to send someone to the moon. The welfare of our moggies is not an isolated occurrence; these days everything offers information that one usually ignores, except the silly warnings about not eating the wrapper (which I always have to be reminded about). Consumers are thought to need a complete breakdown of a product in order to decide on a purchase. Does it suit their needs or not? Are the salt, sugar and fat content acceptable? Ah, you are now saying, if everything else has them, why not Ordnance Survey maps? After all, OS stationery is quick to display logos for awards received, so one would have thought that being seen to be consumer friendly would appeal. It is not as if giving a lot of information is of use to a competitor. At the back of a recent catalogue we are told that the ten-mile maps are the most frequently updated OS maps. But as with many such statements, this is probably known within the trade or is common sense.

In a way, the Ordnance Survey has always given some information about its maps but could go further, and thereby appear more ‘green’ or ‘eco-friendly’, strengthening their credentials amongst the vast number of outdoor types who buy OS maps. Even junk mail tells you what sort of paper is used and that it comes from sustainable forests, so does the absence of such a statement mean the opposite for OS products? Are the papers, glues and inks non-toxic and free from additives (in case you accidentally eat a map)? What is the fuel consumption expended on their manufacture? How many times can the map be folded and unfolded before splitting? The OS should have the details, as at the Manchester AGM, we were told they were testing papers, and this would be an obvious question. What does each map weigh, and how many calories are used in carrying it for an hour? How does this compare to carrying a GPS device? Surely walkers will want to know about carbon footprints and OS maps? We have all seen reams of blurb on such topics, so why don’t the OS join in? Some people need to know where maps have been, so an allergy warning is desirable, “This map might have been bought in a shop selling nuts”. I suppose that the ultimate in green credentials would be if the maps were of bio-degradable materials with a limited life, but we won’t suggest that. Nor will we dwell on the absence of any guidance on how to store and care for your map, or even how to use it. The Ordnance Survey give no indication of how accurate their maps are. Revision dates tell you when it was revised, and imply that at that date the map was spot on. But even if everything that should be, is shown, how accurate are the distances, the contours, the position of things such as buildings? On a 1:50,000 map, does it matter if a motorway service station is shown 5 mm beyond where it should be? Extremely inaccurate, but does it matter? Fit for purpose would mean that it matters more with a larger scale used outdoors in potentially dangerous terrain.

No, the Ordnance Survey gives virtually no consumer information along the lines of other products. But let us press on, and having decided that a certain map is safe to handle, made of the right stuff and appears to be fairly accurately drawn, the main unanswered questions are how up-to-date is it, and how long will it remain so?

If they were to tell the consumer exactly what they wanted to know, the OS would put a note on most maps saying that in some small way, it was probably out of date when published : ‘Published June 2008. This map might have been out of date since May 2008’ or more correctly and worryingly ‘Parts of this map might have been out of date since May

2008', with no indication of which parts the OS think will soon be out of date. But consumers would then demand a more explicit statement: 'It is anticipated that a new by-pass for Littleton will be open in July 2008, but is not shown'. As most of us would, the OS prefer to be positive: 'Revised June 2008', not negative: 'Probably out of date since June 2008'. Currently, the OS considers a revision date to be a sufficient guide to currency, the date implying that everything was spot on at the time. No indication is given of the extent nor what sort of revision is incorporated in the present offering. They will hardly have a note saying 'This map is virtually the same as the previous two editions'. But it must be, given the large area shown. For somewhere like mid-Wales, it is quite possible that seventy percent or more of the features mapped on the Old Series are the same on the current 1:50,000 map. Which is possibly why I once found an Old Series with a motorway neatly marked in blue; as a base map it was fine, and the annotated map showed clearly how the motorway skirted towns and hills.

The Seventh Series was better than most for indicating how different a new map was from the previous version. Small revisions were shown by bars and asterisks, whilst major changes triggered a new edition letter. True, this did give the user some indication of how much a new state had changed, and helped in deciding whether to replace a map, a sort of grading of the degree of updates. But only to those in the know, for as ever, nothing on the map spelled this out. In these days of increasing information, the OS appears to be giving less information on which consumers can base a decision, merely stating that a change has occurred. The OS have given more information in the past. At one time Populars gave M (Minor corrections) and R (Road revision) dates, the Seventh Series had a Revision Diagram showing various things, whilst Pathfinders often had quite extensive notes on revision. Aware that maps can quickly lose their currency, mapmakers can anticipate changes or correct maps once published, thereby foregoing the need for a new edition, and the OS has done both. Since the early nineteenth century the OS has frequently shown 'proposed certainties' on maps, with Old Series having pecked lines showing imminent railway construction, and an early 1:50,000 sheet 80 having a blue outline and blue text: 'Kielder reservoir (under construction)'. Once issued, it has been known for map stocks to be updated. I have copies of two early half-inch sheets, each with a red lettered label, one saying: 'The road from CHALE along the coast to FRESHWATER is not now in good repair and should not be coloured as 2nd class' and the other 'The 2nd Class road at E. Stourmouth is now continued to Gore Street, crossing the River Stour by a Bridge.'

So, if we buy a map, knowing that it is as current as it can be, and that this is the third state in four years, meaning states of this sheet usually have a short life, how long will the latest map remain in print? Will it have a use by date? Why not say 'This map will probably be replaced in 2011'? This would only state the obvious, that a five year old map will be out of date and need changing some time. I must admit that I have totally lost touch with such things, but in the past, something used to trigger revisions, and one assumes a new edition of a map. I have examples of Seventh Series sheets stamped '1" Traveller' on the front, and these are OS working documents, annotated to indicate features needing large-scale revision. What is the modern equivalent? Is there one? Surely? However it is done, I would be amazed if the OS could not say that a new state of 1:50,000 sheet 136 will appear within the next X years. And if they can say this, why not put it on the map?

One might think that if this were done, the nearer the date one gets, fewer maps will be sold. But this need not be so, after all, we buy a newspaper today knowing that tomorrow's

issue will be more up to date. And even then, we know that a newspaper has different editions and that things change overnight. In the morning we listen to the eight o'clock news, yet still go out and buy the news as it was at ten o'clock the previous evening. So why should we put off buying a map today if we know a new revised version will be available in a month or so? If the current offering shows what we need, we will buy it. But if we know what it shows, why bother to buy it? And if we know what will change, why put off buying it, and probably paying more, when we can buy it now and draw on the new information ourselves. Thus, there is a strong argument for buying cheaper used maps and updating them oneself, a very personalised map.

Sometimes the threat of change actually stimulates purchases of an existing item by stick-in-the-muds. An awful lot of computers with the soon to be replaced Windows XP operating system were sold to people who did not want Vista. Similarly, when the 1:50,000 maps were due, a lot of our members stocked up on the old red laminated one-inch. Or perhaps there should be a sliding scale of prices, getting lower as a map gets older, a discount for out-of-datedness, a proposal that is only relevant to current OS publications, not previously owned maps of course.