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“The consultation of the future of Ordnance
Survey”

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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.

The consultation of the future of Ordnance Survey

Richard Oliver

By the time this appears in print, many readers will be aware that on 23 December 2009 the Department for Communities and Local Government, which has ministerial responsibility for OS, issued a consultation document, *Public options for geographic information from Ordnance Survey*.¹ Responses were to be submitted by 17 March 2010, and so the exercise has been badly timed from the point of view of the publishing schedule of *Sheetlines*. However, the CCS committee met on 6 February and discussed the matter, and a response on their behalf has been sent by the chairman of the Society.² This did not preclude members from submitting their own responses.

The document offers three basic options for the future of OS: Option 1 is to continue fundamentally as at present, *i.e.* funded wholly from selling or licensing maps and data, but with some simplification of licensing arrangements. Option 2 is to move towards the whole of the data collection being funded by Government ('DataCo'), but with product development by a separate organisation ('ProductCo'), which might well be privatised. Option 3 is to release some data, including the 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 raster data, OS StreetView (1:10,000 raster data, but greatly simplified from standard 1:10,000 LandPlan data, *e.g.* by omitting field boundaries) and Boundary-Line data, effectively for free, but to continue to charge for the 'higher specification' data, notably MasterMap.

Given that the whole thrust of OS operations since the mid 1960s has been to recover more and more of its costs, with Full Cost Recovery finally attained in 2006-7, it might be thought that Option 1 has the advantage. In fact, this policy is now shown to contain within it the seeds of its own destruction, for there has been both increasing clamour to 'free our data', and various rivals have come forward offering cheaper alternatives. Although at present coverage is limited, these rivals have ambitious plans: for example, the Geo-Information Group published a detailed database for London in October 2009, and hopes to cover all urban areas similarly within five years. Thus Option 1 is both politically and financially unsustainable.

Consulting on Option 3 seems of itself somewhat hollow, as on 17 November 2009 the Prime Minister announced that certain OS data would be made available for free. (It is rumoured that the managing of this announcement was not a good example of 'joined-up government'.) The consultation document suggests that it might have some effect on the sales of paper mapping, which thus might have to be subsidised by Government. The imminence of a general election suggests that the implementation of Option 3 might be somewhat interesting. Even if such considerations are discounted, it is difficult to see how Option 3 could be sustained in the long term: releasing *some* data, and at disproportionate cost to OS revenue in relation to its sophistication, is more likely to

¹ London: HMSO, 2009. The document was also made available on the web, although its relatively ephemeral nature suggests that no point would be served by citing the link here. Paper still has certain long-term advantages.

² This included the conclusion that 'Option 3' was the only sensible one, and included a plea for the retention of paper mapping. The views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Committee, but they are not necessarily diametrically opposed either.

stimulate than to still the clamour to ‘free our data’.³

Option 2 is in effect rather similar to the position that OS was up to the mid-1960s, when pricing was designed to cover only the dissemination of the information, *i.e.* the printing and distribution of paper mapping. Making data available for others to process and elaborate was in effect what was contemplated when the 1:2500 scale was adopted in the mid-1850s, though the point was perhaps obscured by the dissemination being in paper form: the argument was that the cost to the Exchequer would be more than offset by savings to individuals, who would no longer need to commission *ad hoc* surveys. That argument was known when the Davidson Committee reported on the OS in 1935-8, but it seems to have been overlooked since. The adoption of the 1:2500, which made the OS what it is today, was the outcome of essentially political proceedings: returning the OS to substantially its later nineteenth century basis would be a political solution. History would repeat itself: once in paper form, once as digital data.⁴

In these circumstances, the wisest course to pursue would seem to be to treat Option 3 as a first stage on the way to implementing Option 2 within a timescale to be announced, say three to five years: that ought to give the various rivals time to reorientate their businesses. The report says that Option 2 would be ‘disruptive’ for such businesses, as well as for OS, but OS has been ‘disrupted’ for over forty years by the increasing push to Full Cost Recovery, and the change from analogue to digital production, and is difficult to see what defence of geographical functionality can be made for having more than one national mapping database. Though it would be a solution that many of us dislike, and have taken every opportunity to attack and ridicule, a monopoly financed wholly by customers would at least ensure a national standard and, given that part of the capital cost had been incurred when OS was still wholly or partly funded by Government, would ensure that a substantial national investment was put to best use. That, however, is not to be. It is perhaps telling that the report is silent on any gains from Corporation Tax from these rivals, to offset the national investment in OS not being put to fullest use. The financial case for competition in the *collection* of data, as opposed to its *exploitation*, would seem to be a weak one.

There remains the question of the continuing of paper mapping, on which the report has little to say, but which still presents the face of Ordnance Survey to the public at large, even though it is perhaps a misleading distraction from the real business of generating and selling large-scale data. It is difficult to assess quite how many sales might be lost from the availability of free 1:50,000 and 1:25,000 raster data, given that anything larger than an A4 size plotter is a rarity even in offices: on the one hand many outdoor uses of maps only call for a limited area, and an A4 printout does very well, but on the other the large-format sheet map – and the formats have gradually become larger over the

³ I have argued elsewhere (see the appendix in Richard Oliver, ‘Why the Ordnance Survey needs its history’, *Sheetlines* 80 (2007), 6-19, and Richard Oliver, ‘Accountancy and opacity: another Select Committee and the Ordnance Survey’, *Sheetlines* 81 (2008), 6-7) that it is more complicated than simply ‘our data’.

⁴ It might be useful to quote Marx correctly for once: ‘Hegel says somewhere that all great events and personalities in world history reappear in one fashion or another. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.’ This was written in 1852, *apropos* of Louis Napoleon: *The Oxford dictionary of quotations*, third edition (1979), 333.

past century – has the advantage of displaying a large tract in a single view. It is the difference between *table d'hôte* and *a la carte* approaches. Whilst the supply of data to mobile phones, GPS devices and the like would no doubt cause a fall in paper map sales both for OS and for commercial organisations, even were Option 2 not proceeded with, it seems more likely that this will eventually result in a lower but still steady demand. A whole generation of secondary school children have now received their free 1:25,000 *Explorers*, and that is several million arguments for continuing national large-format sheet mapping. Information on such matters as access land and public rights of way, which are essentially matters of government, need to be communicated in an authoritative manner. The real question is how this is to be met, and it may be that the days of the bulk-printed paper map, to a standard specification on fixed sheet lines, are numbered, and that some form of print-on-demand will replace it.⁵ Indeed, this seems implicit in OS's deciding to contract out its printing once it moves to its new headquarters. It is true that the OS Select service has been available for the 1:50,000 *Landranger* since the spring of 2002 and for the 1:25,000 *Explorer* since the autumn of 2004, but these are frankly amateurish: for about twice the price (or more, considering how many *Explorer* sheets are double-sided) the image-quality is inferior, there is no control by the buyer over content or colour, and there is a poor ratio of paper size to map area.⁶

The replacement of the present system of bulk-printing by a customised print-on-demand service, available in bookshops in every town, would revolutionise the market for paper topographic mapping in Britain. It is surely not too visionary to suggest that, in such a system, the basic large-scale database would automatically generate at intervals, say annually, subsidiary databases at 1:10,000, 1:25,000, 1:50,000, 1:100,000 and 1:250,000. The customer would specify the area to be printed, and could increase it by asking for the legend to be omitted, and would also be able to specify variations in colouring (no more pallid yellow roads) and content (no more obtrusive tourist symbols or cycle routes).⁷ It might be that cartographically such mapping might be rather stark, perhaps in a style reminiscent of the 'Preliminary Edition' of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland's 1:50,000 series: but what is important is that function should win over form, survey over cartography, data over presentation, facts over opinions.⁸ A difficulty in the way of this is that the necessary automatic generalisation is not yet ready: but the potential gain is too great for faint-heartedness now.⁹

Stop press: see Afterword on page 56

⁵ It is understood that *ad hoc* printing is already much used by the Army in Afghanistan, as an alternative to using bulk-printing of stock in the UK, and this is perhaps an additional reason pointing to a continuation of paper mapping.

⁶ They have the air of a gimmick for a well-lubricated leaving party.

⁷ The writer hopes to return to this theme in a future issue of *Sheetlines*.

⁸ Having been a research assistant for the late J. Brian Harley, the writer knows all about the 'mimetic illusion' and the rest of it. What is important is to recognise that limitation and to do one's best to overcome it.

⁹ For (fairly) recent developments see Patrick Revell, Nicolas Regnaud and Stuart Thom, 'Generalising and symbolising Ordnance Survey base scale data to create a prototype 1:50,000 scale vector map', *Cartographic Journal*, 44 (2007), 251-7. A section of 1:25,000 mapping reputedly generated entirely by automated methods was produced in 2002 and displayed – or, anyway, a version thereof – at the Outdoors Exhibition at the National Exhibition Centre in 2003. This included the inadequately-worked out idea of replaced churches by indications of buildings with towers and spires.

Collecting by the Biggles rules

As a postscript to Aidan de la Mare's article on page 37, here is what novelist Hilary Mantel wrote ¹ about her husband's Biggles collection: He has 85 of these titles, and rules about his collection. He has to happen upon the books, not hunt them down. He won't pay silly money, and he'll have nothing to do with catalogues, internet searches or specialist networks. A day which to others is merely a dull day in a strange town is to him a Biggles opportunity; but as the number of second-hand bookshops seems to dwindle, I don't know whether he'll be able to collect the stories he's missing unless he breaks his self-imposed rules

Puzzle corner

Test your mental map of the British Isles without referring to map, atlas or Google.

1. What's the Point?: North Devon coast nearest to Lundy, southernmost tip of Isle of Wight, northernmost tip of Isle of Man, northernmost tip of Norfolk.
2. Arrange north to south: Aire, Calder, Swale, Tees, Ure, Wharfe. One of these flows in a differently-named dale. Which river, which dale?
3. Largest to smallest isle: Anglesey, Arran, Dogs, Man, Mull, Wight.
4. Travel due north, south, east and west from Liverpool. Where do you hit the Scottish, English, Welsh and Irish coasts?
5. In which Province?: Athlone, Donegal, Dundalk, Limerick, Mullingar, Tipperary, Sligo.
6. Number the road: Leeds to Scarborough, Glasgow to Fort William, Oxford to Winchester, Warrington to Shrewsbury, Penzance to Exeter, Chester to Bangor.
7. Locate the intersection: 52N/0, 54N/2W, 56N/4W, 58N/5W, 60N/1W.
8. Length and breadth: Wales, mainland Scotland (at widest and narrowest), island of Ireland, St Helier(CI) to Muckle Flugga, diameter of M25.
9. Ford which river?: Bedford, Bideford, Grindleford, Lifford, Stamford, Stratford (not on Avon!), Waterford.
10. Where?: English Market, Scot's Gap, Welsh Harp, Ireland's Eye.

The answers to the cryptic gazetteer in Puzzle corner 86 are: Aberdeen, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Darlington, Dover, Folkestone, Gloucester, Manchester, Newcastle, Plymouth, Turnham Green. Congratulations to Dave Vaughan and Margaret Wilkes for best submissions.

OS Consultation (page 4) –Afterword: As *Sheetlines* goes to press, the latest issue of *The Cartographic Journal* arrives, with a somewhat different commentary on 'free OS data': see Kenneth Field, 'Politics and geography collide: mapping the changing landscape of Ordnance Survey', *Cartographic Journal*, 47(1), March 2010, 7-11. This includes a useful description of how the prime minister's announcement on 17 November was communicated to delegates at the International Cartographic Association conference in Santiago, Chile, the following day

¹ *The Guardian* 12 December 2009