



# *Sheetlines*

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THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY  
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

“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.

## ***Three responses to the recent Ordnance Survey consultation***

### ***1. Richard Oliver***

The consultation on the future of Ordnance Survey financing began on 23 December 2009 and was described in *Sheetlines* 87.<sup>1</sup> The closing date for responses was 17 March, and the Government's response was issued on 1 April 2010.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the newspapers on Good Friday were full of stories about 'free' Ordnance Survey maps. This was something of an exaggeration but so, in a different way, was that of the Ramblers Association, which thought that the public had been cheated of free maps for walking.<sup>3</sup> The consultation offered three options for future finance: 1, the *status quo*, of being fully self-supporting by licensing and sales; 2, of being effectively wholly funded by government; and 3, somewhere between the two. As I remarked before, there was something of unreality about this, as the then Prime Minister had announced back on 17 November that some OS data was to be made available 'for free'. The question really came down to 'how much?'

The consultation paper proposed a number of datasets, variously in vector and raster form, and those which were released on 1 April 2010 via OS Opendata were broadly those which had been proposed in the consultation document, selected to maximise best use of data to be released by other public departments.<sup>4</sup> OS Opendata is available for use and reuse under a Creative Commons Attribution licence: 'The irony here is that this makes OS Opendata more "open" than OpenStreetMap which, of course, has been one of the major disruptors in changing access to mapping data.'<sup>5</sup> The main differences are the addition of OS Locator and Land-Form Panorama, and the omitting of 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 raster data: these have been replaced by a new product, OS VectorMap District, which is described briefly in an appendix to this review.<sup>6</sup> Officially, this is both to avoid damage to paper map sales and to provide a mid-scale product, though, given the speed with which VectorMap District appeared and the raster ones vanished, the cynical might perhaps suspect a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Oliver, 'The consultation of the future of the Ordnance Survey', *Sheetlines* 87 (2010), 4-6. No-one, from the author upwards, seems to have noticed that 'of the future' should be 'on the future'.

<sup>2</sup> *Policy options for geographic information from Ordnance Survey – Consultation: Government response*, London: [Department for] Communities and Local Government, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Letter ['Star letter', forsooth!], 'Off the map', and news item 'OS scheme leaves walkers off the map', *Walk*, Summer 2010, 11, 16. As a member both of the Ramblers and of the Cyclists Touring Club, allow me to protest, admittedly anything but for the first time, that cyclists and more thoughtful and leisurely motorists have been 'cheated' of a proper national 1:100,000 or 1:125,000 for years.

<sup>4</sup> OS Opendata is available at [www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/opendata](http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/opendata).

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Field, 'Editorial: Communicating meaning: Greeks to Google Earth and parchment to pixel', *Cartographic Journal* 47 (2010), 107-16, p.107.

<sup>6</sup> OS Locator enables all places in GB to be located when overlaid on OS Streetview, with searches refined by locality, etc, and Land-Form Panorama is a 1:50,000-derived digital height product, which can be used to produce three-dimensional models.

‘put-up job’. Other questions have yet to be settled, at any rate in detail, but it is hoped to address the imbalance of charging between the private and public sectors by having a new Public Sector Mapping Agreement: by this, to come into effect on 1 April 2011, high-grade products, including OS MasterMap, would be free at point of use within the public sector. Associated with this, Ordnance Survey’s ‘public task’, that is, what of its services are needed by government, is to be defined. A service to allow free use of OS’s topographical identifiers – TOIDs – is to be developed.

There is not space here to summarise the official paper, and some quotation must suffice. There were 441 formal responses to the consultation, 218 of which were ‘personal’. ‘There was no clear consensus on which policy option of those set out is the favoured one. Of the 441 responses 3% indicated that they preferred Option 1 (current business strategy), 13% Option 2 (release of licensing constraints on large scale data), 8% Option 3 (staged transition), and 17% suggested or preferred an alternative option. 59% did not express a clear view on which option they preferred, instead expressing interesting and valuable views about the Ordnance Survey and the geographical information sector in general, rather than selecting a single option from the three presented.... A number of respondents mentioned the “collect once, use many times” principle and thought that the release of Ordnance Survey data from re-use restrictions could significantly contribute to this...’<sup>7</sup>

‘Most of those who supported Option 3 thought that it seemed like a practical compromise, although some saw it as a pragmatic alternative to Option 2 which would otherwise have been their preferred option. In particular respondents who favoured this approach thought it would enable some products to be released for free while securing a large part of Ordnance Survey’s revenues and therefore ensuring its sustainability and the quality of its data in the future. Some respondents who opposed Option 3 thought that the hybrid model including both charged and free elements would be complex and, ultimately, unsustainable. Some thought the benefits would be limited as, in their view, the option did not go far enough.’<sup>8</sup>

‘Some felt atlases, street guides and topographic maps would continue to sell as niche items to a minority, whereas the demand for 3-D data (especially city models) would grow rapidly. The fusion of topographic, hydrographical, aeronautical, meteorological and imagery data to populate 4-D “real worlds” would become realised more widely – emphasising the move to digital technology. However, others felt that paper maps would always have their place with a considerable number of respondents specifically mentioning Ordnance Survey’s paper maps and the need for their continuation.’<sup>9</sup>

‘Several respondents, mostly individuals or representatives of community groups, commented that since taxpayers had funded the collection of Ordnance

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<sup>7</sup> *Policy options*, 22-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Policy options*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> *Policy options*, 26.

Survey data access to that data should be free.’<sup>10</sup>

‘Many respondents thought that a key step in response to this consultation would be for government to clearly set out Ordnance Survey’s public purpose, taking into account the requirements that government has for Ordnance Survey data. Several commented that the public task should include an element related to data being available to the public for free re-use, and an element related to the “public good” from Ordnance Survey providing definitive high-specification mapping data to enable... functions such as land registration and planning. Others thought that the task ... should include free provision of data such as boundary, addressing and postcode information, but should not include mapping which could be provided by the competitive market.’<sup>11</sup>

It hardly needs to be said that the new policy was adopted before the change of government following the election of May 2010, and it remains to be seen what the effect will be of the heavy cuts in public expenditure to be announced in the autumn. There are some of us who feel that the real ‘inefficiency’ in Ordnance Survey is in the considerable apparatus needed to ‘police’ the current data licensing and sales (including, reportedly, six ‘in-house’ lawyers), and that it would be much better to get rid of it, charge the cost of maintaining the data to the national exchequer, and only charge users for any subsequent processing and dissemination. The expected restraint on public spending over the next few years may delay such a change, but I see no reason to refrain from promoting it.

### ***Appendix: OS VectorMap District***

Rather confusingly, this is available in both vector and raster forms. The scope of the content is partly indicated by the legend for the raster version: four classes of ‘numbered’ road, ‘minor road’, ‘local street’, ‘pedestrianised street’, with a few principal streets named, road tunnels; railways (single and multiple track, and ‘narrow gauge railway or light rapid transit system’) and stations (ordinary, LRT, underground); ordinary buildings and glasshouses; national, county (English), unitary, etc and civil parish or community boundaries; ‘landforms’ (a rocky effect), wood, ‘water’ (streams and lakes), mean high and low water, spot heights, ‘heritage sites’; ‘functional sites’ (‘education’, hospital, police, ‘sports or leisure centre’: *not* places of worship). No bridges, ‘landmarks’ or tourist features *per se* are shown; nor are fields or public rights of way depicted. The building generalisation looks similar to that of the 1:50,000, but comparison shows that it is actually more refined, though it is far more generalised than even that of the 1:25,000 Provisional Edition/First Series: for example, it is impossible to distinguish areas of terrace-housing from those of semi-detached. It is possible that this data might be a *starting-point* for redesigned versions of both the 1:25,000 *Explorer* and 1:50,000 *Landranger*, but in its present form it has great limitations as topographic mapping for use on the ground: but then that was not its intention.

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<sup>10</sup> *Policy options*, 28. As I have pointed out elsewhere, only a diminishing part of Ordnance Survey data is ‘funded by the taxpayer’: see Richard Oliver, ‘Why the Ordnance Survey needs its history’, *Sheetlines* 80 (2007), 6-19, esp. p.18.

<sup>11</sup> *Policy options*, 30.

## **2. D F Watt**

Having read a number of reactions to the 2010 OS consultative exercise (*Sheetlines* 87), below is the summary of my submission. The full response from OS is still in train but I understand uses the ‘Government response’ merely as a starting point for a much more wide ranging review of systems and products. Nevertheless given this ‘shot-across-the-bows’ I do hope OS will look at the last few months as a wake-up call to conduct a root-and-branch review, creating fresh, innovative products.

‘Government must continue to recognise that it costs money to create and maintain the world-class large-scale vector data OS produce and that either it, or the data users, whether private individuals or public bodies, must continue in some way to remunerate OS for this work.

OS should become a pure data creator/maintainer/QA organisation for the Digital National Framework and create separate vector datasets at nominal scales of around 1:40 000 and 1:250 000 until technology allows generalisation of DNF data to up to 1:625 000. Once the technology is developed these other databases should be discontinued.

OS should continue to work with commercial utility and mobile phone companies to maintain its databases at minimal cost to the taxpayer. But its databases should only contain data which customers are willing to pay for (there is a template for this in The UKMap dataset).

OS should make these datasets available at a price which covers the full marginal cost (surveyors wages, cost of equipment, pensions etc). It should not be a producer/distributor of any ‘mapping’ either paper, raster or vector and it should be allowed to resell its trade names should it so wish. This will decrease OS costs and stop its dual government/commercial status whilst maintaining its position as the UK centre of excellence for large-scale vector data.

The GI market for paper and digital maps should be satisfied by commercial companies in UK or elsewhere who would use OS base data to derive whatever map ‘looks’/specifications they wish. The UK would become a centre for truly innovative, customer driven, design oriented mapping’.

## **3. Anthony Cartmell**

The OS have been clever with freeing up their data, managing to keep existing map re-sellers (like the digital mapping companies) happy while also appeasing most of the people wanting more free (as in not over-restricted by licence rules) access to map data. In effect they’ve kept most things unchanged, while also making it much easier for people to re-use the raw location data gathered and maintained by OS and other public bodies.

OS have kept their control over their raster maps: these contain a large amount of effort and experience in map-making from the OS, which should indeed be protected. This is good news, as it means that we won’t see the long-standing OS raster maps like *Landranger* disappearing any time soon: they will

remain solely supplied by OS, and remain some of the most information-efficient maps for general-purpose use. Digital mapping business models will also remain much the same, selling protected OS raster mapping and licences with a small mark-up based on mapped area while giving away the associated map-viewing software. Digital map users still have to pay for their maps, but the mapping software remains free and now there are opportunities to use free maps as well as the well-known OS maps.

But OS have also released large amounts of most-useful vector data, and basic point locations, for others to use in digital applications that don't compete with OS's business. This vector data includes such things as electoral boundaries, which people can now publish on the internet legally for the first time! The issues with 'derived data' have also disappeared to a large extent, meaning that using Google Maps for UK locations no longer causes licensing headaches. One major impact on the freeing of OS raw data is that OpenStreetMap can now display OS data as well as that gathered by volunteers with GPS units.<sup>1</sup> At the moment the OS data is merely being made available to check for missing roads and to check for possible errors, but even this is most useful for the community-driven map project.

Some digital mapping companies are already starting to build their own raster maps from the now-free OS data, and releasing free data that was previously restricted by OS licenses, such as the UK 1:50,000 Gazetteer and the digital terrain model (height data).<sup>2</sup> The freeing of OS data from restrictive licenses also opens up many opportunities for people to use location data in the UK in more innovative and powerful ways. Which was the whole point of relaxing the licensing of UK location data in the first place.

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### ***Important new listings now posted on CCS website***

In *Sheetlines* 80, 2007, Roger Hellyer proposed the creation of a union list of OS catalogues. In the early years the catalogues were printed in small quantities, in some cases as few as fifty copies only, if print codes are to be believed. The supplements were often no more than a single octavo sheet of paper. Such is the rarity of the surviving copies of either resource, it is clear that in many cases they were treated (much as are their present day equivalents) as ephemeral items, to be disposed of when the new updated issue became available. Thus, before about 1890 when a fairly regular pattern of annual publication of the catalogues emerged, it is safe to say that no-one now has any idea how many issues of the catalogues there were; further, that the evidence of the irregularity

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of the freed OS data, and how OpenStreetMap might use it:  
[http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Ordnance\\_Survey\\_Opendata](http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Ordnance_Survey_Opendata)

<sup>2</sup> For example <http://www.mapyxx.com/index.asp?tn=media&c=151&cid=779>