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“No more OS maps as we know them?”

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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.

## ***No more Ordnance Survey maps as we know them?***

***David Archer***

Referring to the Ordnance Survey in the last issue of *Sheetlines*,<sup>1</sup> D F Watt wrote: '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 wish'.<sup>2</sup>

The Ordnance Survey should not produce maps, and if it sells its trade names, other people can produce maps and call them Ordnance Survey maps. This is how I read the above. Of course, my initial reaction was that it would be unthinkable not to have the Ordnance Survey producing printed maps, quickly followed by a realisation that it would not surprise me if it happens; something like this had to happen. That is what all the build-up has been about. When libraries started copying old deteriorating newspapers and bulky runs of journals onto microfilm, they immediately said that the originals were no longer needed. So, when Landmark began scanning all that they could lay their hands on at the OS, I knew that the items scanned would be disposed of in the near future. And once you are in the mood for getting rid of things, there is no stopping.

How can you have the Ordnance Survey without it producing paper maps? This, to most of our members, is what the Ordnance Survey does; it publishes maps. Right from the OS year dot, it triangulated, surveyed, collected names, engraved copper plates, printed maps and sold them. Why should it even consider stopping? But D F Watt is a close observer of these things, and usually reports informed current thinking, so what he writes merits consideration.

If the OS were to stop producing maps, it would be the culmination of a process that I believe began in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Since 1923 there had usually been a separate military printing of the standard civil one-inch or 1:50,000 map, the main difference being that the military version had a coloured grid overprinted. Nothing secret about it, just the extravagance of two print runs. By 1982, it had been agreed that this would cease, and the military grid would appear in pale blue on the civil 1:50,000 map, an innovation which was hardly noticed. Money might have been saved but the significance as I see it, was that the dual function of the OS in providing maps for the military and the general public was greatly lessened. The key word in all of this, 'rational', had appeared. It was rational to have a single all purpose printing of the 1:50,000. Rationalisation has continued ever since, and the opening quotation would see the end of this process. Maybe.

At some point about 1998, after a 'what is our business?' discussion, the OS must have decided that they were map makers and decided to concentrate on that again. No longer were they to be publishers or joint publishers of a whole range of glossy books, and no longer would they print location postcards for clients. So

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<sup>1</sup> *Sheetlines* 88, 6.

<sup>2</sup> An internet search gives a trade name as 'the name a business uses to identify itself'. I will assume this to include trademarks and registered trademarks such as *Landranger* and *Explorer*.

<sup>3</sup> Or, it might be 1974, when the post of Director General was last filled by a military officer.

these activities ceased, just as the technological revolution of recent years really took off. In 1994, Landmark had negotiated to be allowed to scan most of the OS Record Map Library and to offer the scans for sale. In 2008, after a respectable period, the OS announced that its Historical Mapping Enquiry Service had closed. Then the Record Map Library was deemed un-necessary, and the maps were found new homes. The OS was only concerned with producing new maps. And if a map library was not needed, then the book library could go as well, and has been closed, with the service having effectively been 'run down' since about 1999 after the departure of the last full-time librarian. Storing and providing copies of old maps, and having a library were not considered core elements of what the OS does, especially as they brought in little revenue. All the while, staff numbers had been falling, and the smaller organisation did not need such a large building, so that could go as well. Once rationalisation grips an organisation, the words jettison and inevitable appear more frequently.

Thus, we have a much reduced Ordnance Survey that is increasingly concerned only with acquiring, manipulating and selling data. Plus the niggling obligation to produce maps. An inconvenience of having to produce maps. If the enemy can be divided, perhaps it can be conquered and eliminated. Therefore let us say that the Ordnance Survey creates and prints maps, rather than produces them. Last autumn, it was announced that the OS would cease to print maps by the end of 2010, and interested parties were sought to take over the work and have been found. Early in 2010, they began to drop maps from their catalogue, leaving only the *Explorer*, *Landranger* and *Tour*. Fewer maps to be updated for someone else to print, leaving more time for acquiring, manipulating and selling data.<sup>4</sup>

If indeed the OS becomes solely a data provider (meaning seller), it might then be suggested that this does not include 'on the ground' data acquisition, nor data storage or manipulation. If everything were 'put out' to other concerns, we could end up with a few people in a room stuffed with modern communications, just organising. Acquiring data from various sources, paying someone to store and manage it, and then selling it to the final user, without ever having seen a theodolite or data capture gizmo. A sort of brokerage system, similar to the Stock Exchange where companies are bought and sold with those involved never having entered a factory.

If the OS is allowed to sell its trade names, how will this affect our society? What will be the response from The Charles Close Society for the study of Ordnance Survey maps? Maps being the key word. We study the Ordnance Survey as an organisation, to help us understand the maps, so if the OS were to stop producing maps it would not be within our remit to be interested in the Ordnance Survey any longer. Wrong. Our constitution says that we are interested in '...the maps, plans and other activities of the Ordnance Surveys...'. Therefore, an Ordnance Survey that just sells data will still be of interest to our society. To some members of our society.

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<sup>4</sup> They might of course, have been dropped because sales were insufficient. Conspiracy theory does not always hold true.

But will we be interested in the maps any longer? Of course we will keep an eye on them, if only to report what happens after the OS is no longer responsible for them, but they will not be within our remit under the constitution, no longer being an activity of the Ordnance Survey. I must admit that I am not sure what selling a trade name involves, but would assume from my argument above, that if the names *Landranger* and *Explorer* were sold, the OS would want to be rid of them and to have no involvement in the maps thereafter. Thus, I assume a purchaser could re-design the maps as they wished, otherwise they would become fossilised with the current specification. If this were to happen in 2011 (say), do we tag this date onto the end of the society name, in an unspoken manner? The Charles Close Society for the study of Ordnance Survey maps (published before 2011).

If HarperCollins (say) buy the OS trade names in 2011,<sup>5</sup> and our members were to greet with enthusiasm the *Landranger* maps they produced, what would the 'official, AGM agreed' CCS position be? If favourable, how would we react if the trade name were to be sold again, the maps re-designed and the result be considered ghastly? Would we become : The Charles Close Society for the study of Ordnance Survey maps (published before 2011, and between 2011-2021, but not those for the next five years.)? Perhaps the OS are softening us up, getting us used to the idea that maps come from other than themselves by currently having non-OS historical maps from different publishers on their website. Note the plural. An even bigger problem would arise if the name Ordnance Survey were to be sold. What would the residual concern selling data then be called, and would we be interested in it, as it would no longer be the Ordnance Survey, in name? I would suggest that Ordnance Survey maps produced by a commercial company, to their own specification<sup>6</sup> (like *Landranger* maps), would not be part of our remit under the constitution. But as Richard Oliver noted in the last issue of *Sheetlines*,<sup>7</sup> commercial maps, so obviously produced by adapting OS data, and bearing all the hallmarks of OS maps can be very attractive. So where would these fit in? Will it all end up being very subjective, with maps having to have 'the feel' of an Ordnance Survey map to be of interest to our society? Not that an editor of *Sheetlines* would be able to stop endless arguments about the merits or otherwise of particular offerings.

Surely, if the opening suggestion becomes fact, we will have come full circle since 1801, when Faden published the first OS map, using data supplied by the yet to be named Ordnance Survey.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Though there is no reason that all should be bought by the same concern. HarperCollins also own the Bartholomew trade name, giving the possibility of seeing Bartholomew's *Landranger* maps.

<sup>6</sup> Taking OS data and using new station symbols, new thicknesses for road casings, different lettering; changing everything except the position of features on a map.

<sup>7</sup> *Sheetlines* 88, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Oliver kindly read drafts of this piece and beefed up some dates and facts. I also 'borrowed selectively' from his comments, and am grateful to him for allowing this.