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“The hills are stuffed with OS lawyers”

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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 hills are stuffed with OS lawyers

Mike Parker

When Ordnance Survey's massive database was partially prised open earlier this year, I'm sure I cannot have been alone in idly wondering how this would affect their legal team. After all, it was the protection of OS copyright that had kept them busy for so long, and they'd not been shy about asserting it in the physical and digital realms alike. Now that so much of the data was available for free re-use, what would the future hold for such a crack squad of highly-trained professionals?

One answer erupted almost simultaneously. Young writer Richard Happer had just published a raunchy novel about three student mates carousing their way along the West Highland Way in Scotland. The cover of the novel, entitled *The hills are stuffed with Swedish girls*,¹ was loosely based on an OS *Landranger* map cover of the late 1980s: a familiar magenta colour formed the backdrop, a photo of a Swedish girl's denim hotpant-clad bottom filled the lower half, above which the 'scale' was marked as '1 beer to 1 mile'. In place of the tourist information symbols placed on the OS covers of the day, Happer's publishers, a tiny Edinburgh outfit called JonesCat, had used pictograms of a tent, a pint of beer, a bra, a cat and an unspecified pill. The OS compass logo had been reworked to include the author's initials. It was highly effective, very eye-catching – and unmistakably a spoof.

Enter OS lawyers. Demanding that the book be withdrawn, they stated: 'we have a brand which is more than 200 years old and it is our job to protect the reputation of our brand. People are very passionate about our maps. Families use them and we have to look at our core customers and if they would be offended.' They pursued the case with ruthless efficiency, demanding the excision of the offending cover from all publications, and even the internet. As usually happens with any controversy, the case hit the papers and the blogosphere, helping raise the profile of Happer's book and sell more copies than he could ever have hoped otherwise. In the meanwhile though, trying to take on OS meant that his tiny publishers were nearly bankrupted. Eventually, OS lawyers agreed that the book could be sold if the cover was reprinted to a new design. It still looks much like a map, but not quite so explicitly, and – most importantly, it seems – not with *Landranger* magenta as its base colour (it has been changed to a deep sky blue).

While the whole saga might have been good for Happer's publicity and sales, it's not been good for OS, who – yet again, it has to be said – have come out of this looking as fusty and archaic as the Edwardian gentleman on Ellis Martin's old map covers. And in this age of hyper-sensitivity to perceptions of wasted government spending, the case gave the tabloids every opportunity to

¹ Details of the book, the cover and the controversy are at www.the-hills-are-stuffed-with-swedish-girls.com/

bleat about the waste of ‘taxpayers’ money’ being used to strong-arm small Scottish publishers.

I had a small measure of self-interest in the case too. When my publishers, HarperCollins, were trying to come up with a cover for my book *Map Addict*, I was keen on the idea of a reworked 1970s *Landranger* cover, and even mocked one up to show them. They ran that, and two other possible covers, past a focus group (sadly, I’m not making this up), and my *Landranger*-inspired cover came bottom of the heap by some distance. The focus group hated it (‘reminded me of boring school geography lessons’ was one comment). But I sneakily felt sure that a parody *Landranger* cover would leap off the bookshop shelves and into the baskets of the many cartophiliacs I knew to be out there. Reaction to Richard Happer’s book has, I think, proved me right. Though I’m quite glad I didn’t have to suffer the attention of the OS legal department to confirm it.



The original (left) and revised (right) covers