



Sheetlines

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“reviews”

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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.

**Surrey Ordnance Survey Historical Maps, 25 inch to 1 Mile 5 CD-ROM set
Surrey History Centre, price £78.00 (incl VAT) + £2.40 p&p.**

Surrey County Libraries have produced this set of CD-ROMs which contains jpeg images of 2,267 individual County Series 25-inch maps for Surrey, from the initial 1861-71 survey to the incomplete fourth revision of 1940-44. Inevitably the collection is not complete – the Surrey website notes that they have acquired a number of maps since the CDs were compiled, in particular of the Spelthorne area. However from a brief check the omissions seem to be fairly few and far between. The coverage has not been limited to the present day county, so those sheets covering areas which subsequently became part of London are included.

It would appear that a few of the originals were not in pristine condition when scanned, although generally the quality is excellent. Some maps appear out of sequence, while a few have been scanned upside down. However if you copy these to your computer the image can then be rotated.

Each CD also contains a PDF file listing of all the maps in the set, which includes the main place names appearing on each sheet, thus allowing searching. This list is also available on the Surrey website (www.surreycc.gov.uk).

Surrey Libraries are to be commended for making their map collection available in this way (they also provide A0 sized copies of individual maps at £10.00 each plus £2.40 postage), and it is to be hoped that other libraries might follow their example. Although the price for the full set is not cheap, it is excellent value for money at around 3.5 pence per sheet. Individual CDs can also be purchased at £24.00 (incl VAT), plus £2.40 p&p. Available from Surrey History Centre, 130 Goldsworth Road, Woking, Surrey GU21 6ND. Cheques payable to Surrey County Council.

Andrew Robertson

**Chris Higley, Old Series to Explorer A field guide to the Ordnance map,
The Charles Close Society, 2011, ISBN 1-870-59830-9, £12 (£9 to members)**

One unexpected by-product of the digital revolution is the discovery of just how wide is the public enthusiasm for maps, and for OS maps in particular. Just as the age of the paper map seems to be drawing if not to a close, then to a distinct downgrading, all manner of people have emerged and declared their affection (and their collections). Cartophilia seems to have moved from the margins slap into the mainstream, and hooray for that.

Chris Higley's splendid new book will only hasten this very well-mapped advance. It is a one-stop shop for the new enthusiast and old hand alike; a gallop through two hundred years of Ordnance Survey history via the most important medium of all, their prodigious output. To that end, illustrations are copious and colourful, facts and figures plentiful and pointers to where further information can be gleaned (and not *quite* all of it authored by the inestimable Richard Oliver) included at every stage. Having the nod ('kind permission') of OS themselves helps immeasurably: a commercial book, which included extracts from so many

in-copyright maps, would cost a small fortune. Not that he's just been content to show them: there are some brilliantly creative uses (many 'before-and-afters' in particular) of many different maps, worth the cover price alone.

Such a bright, breezy *tour de force* allows the reader to gain a very strong idea of just how rooted OS is within British life. That sounds obvious, for what could be more centre stage in the national self-image than the agency officially created to visualise its territory? Yet all too often, the maps were there only as background, taken for granted by all except a devoted few. Chris Higley shows that the story of OS *is* the story of Great Britain, in all of its wonderment and weirdness.

He gives us many examples of the national story miniaturised to scale. OS embodies quiet British flair in its ongoing cartographic innovation or its often inspirational artwork, from the delights of Ellis Martin's pen-and-ink world to the latter-day chutzpah of the *Explorer* series ('which may come to be seen as the final, and outstandingly successful, stage in the development of the OS paper map' as he pertinently has it here). It demonstrates too our military derring-do, whether in the heart-breaking maps of the WW1 trenches in Belgium or the marvellous story about having to rush a replica set of maps to the ships waiting to launch the D-Day landings in the Channel, after someone (he's not named, fortunately) had forgotten to pack them! It details our worthy belief in scientific advancement for the improvement of man's lot (and how making money from that is only ever a secondary consideration), from teams of surveyors grimly hauling their equipment to the top of punishing mountains to endless quests for the optimum projections, scales and functionality, and latterly, the free maps to schoolchildren project (now sadly ended). Our maps even, dare I say, bolster our sense of place in the world, and we hold dear to the idea that nobody does it better than us, even when the evidence rather says otherwise.

The perhaps less appealing features of our national character are also there on the map. Our pedantic absolutism to the point of absurdity, such as putting Rockall in its own little box on the side of a 1:250,000 road map. Our imperialism and sometimes haughty officiousness, seen in Ireland or the pretence that Cold War military bases, there for all the world to see, didn't exist. The flip side of haughtiness is often indecision, and so it is here. Occasional collapses in self-belief have given us the agonising stop-start of numerous new map series during the first half of the twentieth century, reflecting a time in which the country itself struggled to work out its modern role. Bringing the story right up to date, Higley talks of the 'ever increasing and perhaps confusing range of symbols' now appearing on some OS maps, which again seems to reflect something of a contemporary national malaise: the desperate urge to have it all, but which often ends up with lots of half-baked compromise, something far less than the sum of its parts.

Because the book is primarily about each and every edition brought out by Ordnance Survey, there are numerous pages illustrated with a map of our island and depicting the many and varied ways in which it has been carved up by the cartographers. We might like to have a bit of a snigger at the shape of countries

such as Italy or Chile, but look again, the island of Britain is a funny one too: thin and streaky here, plump and bulbous there, with bits sticking out of it and others dotted randomly around it. I found comparing the various index grids imposed on the landmass absolutely fascinating – from the no-overlap early one-inch sheets (even if this meant that your map was almost entirely sea) to the hugely familiar 1:50,000 (*Landranger*) grid, the one that I first fell in love with as a squirt of a lad in 1970s Kidderminster.

When I was recording the Radio 4 series *On the Map* last year, I went to interview Nick Millea at the Bodleian map library in Oxford. The series producer and I had been travelling all over a very snowy Britain together, and had forged a great working friendship. He was, like many people, very fond of maps but shuddered at the idea of being called a map collector, or worse. But he was thawing nicely, and as the days rolled by, confided some of his deepest, nerdiest map thoughts and passions to me. In Oxford, Nick looked something up, and it referred him to *Landranger* sheet number 131. ‘Boston and Spalding!’ we both chorused immediately, like a couple of Pavlov’s dogs. The producer convulsed in relieved laughter: ‘now I know I’m not a proper map addict! How on earth did you know *that*?’

How would you *not* know that, would be my question. A lifelong OS habit has left my mental image of the country’s layout hopelessly skewed by their grid, and being the age I am, that means the 1:50,000 series. I can easily picture what surrounds Manchester, Bristol or Worcester, as they all sit plumb in the middle of their *Landranger* sheets, but – even after years of Google Earth and the like – I still struggle to place Sheffield, Shaftesbury or Llangollen accurately in their topographic context, places that were condemned to hover in the corner of the map. It’s still a surprise to pick up a bog-standard one-inch sheet at a car boot sale and find that it’s called Montgomery & Llandrindod Wells, Oxford & Newbury, Gloucester & Malvern or Bala & Welshpool – ‘hmm, didn’t realise they were close enough to share the same sheet’, I think as I hand over my fifty pence piece.

Car boot sales, and all manner of other unlikely outlets, feature in the final chapter of Chris Higley’s book, ‘Collecting Ordnance Survey maps’. I loved his description of the dilemma in finding massively underpriced collectibles in charity shops (his advice, which sounds very well-practised, is to say nothing, pay what they ask and slip something extra into the tin on the counter). This was typical of the good humour and eye for detail throughout the book, which, together with its fluid writing style and well-judged cocktail of geekishness and populism, should make it appeal to as wide a constituency as possible. I hope so. This is an excellent calling card not just for map enthusiasm generally, but the Charles Close Society in particular, and will, I am quite sure, help it to go from strength to strength.

Mike Parker

Mike Parker’s *The Wild Rover: A Blistering Journey along Britain’s Footpaths* (Collins), the follow up to *Map Addict*, is out now.