

Writing notes for the Godfrey Edition

Richard Oliver

The Godfrey Edition, local history and I

My first contact with Alan Godfrey was in January 1978, when he advertised in, I think, the *Railway Magazine*, along the lines of ‘Old Ordnance Survey maps bought – also sold’. Over the next few years I bought rather than sold, and when the Charles Close Society got going in 1981-2 I began to know Alan as rather more than a telephone voice. This was also the time that the Godfrey Edition was getting going, offering reduced-scale reissues of OS 1:2500 County Series maps. Whilst the basic formula of the Godfrey Edition was established from the start, of putting historical notes, and usually some street directory extracts, on the back, the early issues, up to about 1985, differed from that now familiar in that each map actually had two sets of historical notes on the area covered by the sheet, a general local-history one and another more carto-bibliographical one. In 1983-5 I wrote perhaps a dozen of these latter. These notes tended to be rather formulaic and probably often not of much help to those without ready access to the original maps, and after a while Alan decided, wisely, that it would be much better to concentrate on the local history. So what follows is one author’s experience of writing these general local-historical notes.

Since 1986 I have written notes for twenty of the 1:2500 maps and for 28 of the one-inch New Series of England and Wales that was issued between 1997 and 2011. To put this in perspective: Alan’s on-line newsletter for October 2011 credits 59 sets of one-inch notes to Barrie Trinder, 35 to Derrick Pratt, and 23 to Tony Painter, and those who subscribe to the whole of the Godfrey Edition will know that these authors, as well as Alan himself, have also contributed numerous notes to the 1:2500 series. Thus I can hardly claim to be prolific. What I can claim is that these notes have enabled me to return to a path from which I strayed over thirty years ago.

Let me briefly explain. When in 1977 I applied to go to university as a mature student to read history, it was a short-term tactic, to get away from working in a bank, rather than any thought-out grand strategy. One thing that I did feel that I wanted to contribute to was ‘local history’: it had been very much ‘in the air’ in the 1960s when I had been at school in Lincolnshire. In the event a further tactical improvisation led me away from ‘local’ towards ‘national’ history. The rot probably started with an undergraduate dissertation on the official handling of the cattle plague of 1865-7 in Lincolnshire, and continued with my doctoral work on the OS in the mid-nineteenth century. There are very few areas where the OS can support even a regional essay: I tried one on the early six-inch mapping of Lancashire, and was commissioned to do another on mapping of south-west England, but elsewhere there is often little more than episodes, such as the mapping of Lincolnshire in 1817-24.¹ For this reason it is certainly useful to be

¹ Richard Oliver, ‘The Ordnance Survey in Lancashire in the 1840s’, *Sheetlines* 8 (1983), 2-8; Richard Oliver, ‘The Ordnance Survey in South-West England’ in Katherine Barker and Roger

informed about OS conventions and practices when writing notes to accompany reissued maps, but it is difficult to write essays around the Ordnance Survey on less than a national basis, so the Godfrey Edition has enabled me to contribute a little to 'local history' after all.

Having been commissioned to write notes for a particular sheet, how does one set about it? First, the author is sent a photocopy of the map: this may seem an obvious step, but is important in shaping one's thoughts as to what might and cannot be written about. It also enables a 'desk assessment' using modern mapping of what an exploration of the ground might entail. All the Godfrey Edition notes belong to the genre of 'sheet memoir', that first appeared with the Geological Survey in the mid-nineteenth century. The sheet memoir is really very awkward, whether for geology or local history or anything else: the limits of the area of interest are determined by arbitrary calculation carried out for purely geodetic purposes, literally miles away in several senses, that have nothing to do with local convenience or administrative or historical or cultural logic. It is purely fortuitous if a sheet happens to cover conveniently the core of a town, as at Exeter or Torquay, though that can mean that the adjoining sheets may be such marginal commercial propositions that they are unlikely to be essayed. But the 1:2500s are, I think, far more tractable in this regard than are the one-inch sheets. With the 1:2500s the focus is usually on one or two centres or districts, but where are the limits with the one-inch? One can possibly say something about the geology, probably about the railways, possibly even about the parish churches if they are reasonably homogeneous or strongly contrasted – provided that these are not too complicated, or too numerous. Thus for the one-inch notes I had to devise a fresh formula for each sheet. In an ideal world, each 'sheet memoir' would 'find its own length', and provide consistent information for each place. In practice sheets vary, from not much more than a quarter of land, and sparsely populated at that, to half of London, yet all demand their four panels of notes, no less and no more – about 3300 words, including some mention of 'sources and further reading'.² One of my interests is railways – to judge from the timetable extracts that appear on the backs of some Godfreys, I am evidently not alone – and they can provide an important element, though on sheet 270, *South London*, the railways were a bit too much of a good thing. Indeed, by its very complexity this sheet was perhaps the most troublesome of the one-inches that I wrote for, so it was perhaps as well that it appeared in the final batch of the project.

J P Kain (eds), *Maps and history in South-West England*, University of Exeter Press, 1991, 119-43. The essays by J B Harley and others in *The Old Series Ordnance Survey* (8 vols, Lymington: Harry Margary, 1975-92) are better than they might be because of the chronology of the one-inch Old Series, but they still involve some compromises, either of region or chronology or both.

² In fitting essays to such a rigid length, the word-count facility of word-processing programs is enormously valuable, though long quotations involving indenting may eat into one's allowance very considerably: the penalty of being lazy, perhaps.

Fieldwork

It is inadvisable to write about either the one-inch or larger scales without having some knowledge of the ground. Here again the one-inch can be troublesome, particularly if one knows a strip through it by road or rail traverses, but is hazy about the rest. This has led to some strange zig-zag journeys, ably abetted by my wife, and usually combined with family visiting. They include a very flattened oval through sheets 309 and 310, with particular attention to church bell-openings; a strange meander across sheet 299 on New Year's day, with a stop in Stockbridge, giving one a sense of what towns dependent on the 'coaching trade' must have felt like after the coming of the railways; and a very strange route across sheets 322 and 336, including an encounter with Port Isaac. This is a place to be avoided, certainly at October half-term, unless you drive a particularly aggressive four-by-four. Our 798 cc tiddler hardly stood a chance, so we drove on to Wadebridge for lunch. I do now, however, have a suspicion of what the original of Tresoddit is, in the Posy Simmons cartoon strips.

Mention of Wadebridge enables a nearly seamless change to the 1:2500s that are the mainstay of the Godfrey Edition. (Incidentally, has anyone pointed out in print that, in these digital days of residual raster-scanned *Landrangers* and *Explorers*, Alan Godfrey now publishes about four times as many hard-copy 'OS maps' as does the august Ordnance Survey itself?) The problems of writing notes for the larger scale are quite different from those of the one-inch: the town or district of a town immediately suggests a theme and possibly a structure. But then there can be problem of sources. For a city such as Exeter or Lincoln there is a plethora of writings, and the problem is to pick out a few leading points and, in the 'sources and further reading', to risk offence by listing three books and omitting thirteen equally deserving others. For such as Wadebridge there is the opposite problem: not much seems to have been written, and when you visit there does not seem to be much to write about. Don't get me wrong: Wadebridge is a very pleasant place, even on a damp day in lateish October. The trouble is, like many small places, overall pleasantness is counterbalanced by a lack of the outstanding. One reason why Wadebridge seems to 'miss out on history' to some extent is that it is a 'secondary settlement', a relatively late development in an 'ancient' parish where the original church and village lie elsewhere, and can't be drawn on much for any story.³ Thus I was driven to write at disproportionate length about the Bodmin and Wadebridge Railway – a most interesting line, admittedly, but an 'urban' map really ought to concentrate on the town itself rather than on what was once the fastest way out of it.

The third dimension: photographs and Pevsners

But what when printed sources appear to be readily available? Words are one thing, pictures quite another.

³ 'Missing out on history' will no doubt revolt certain readers: and so perhaps it should, as it suggests that history is some sort of commodity, perhaps like blackstrap molasses (only not so sweet), supplied in large oil-drums. To a large extent history is 'in the mind'.

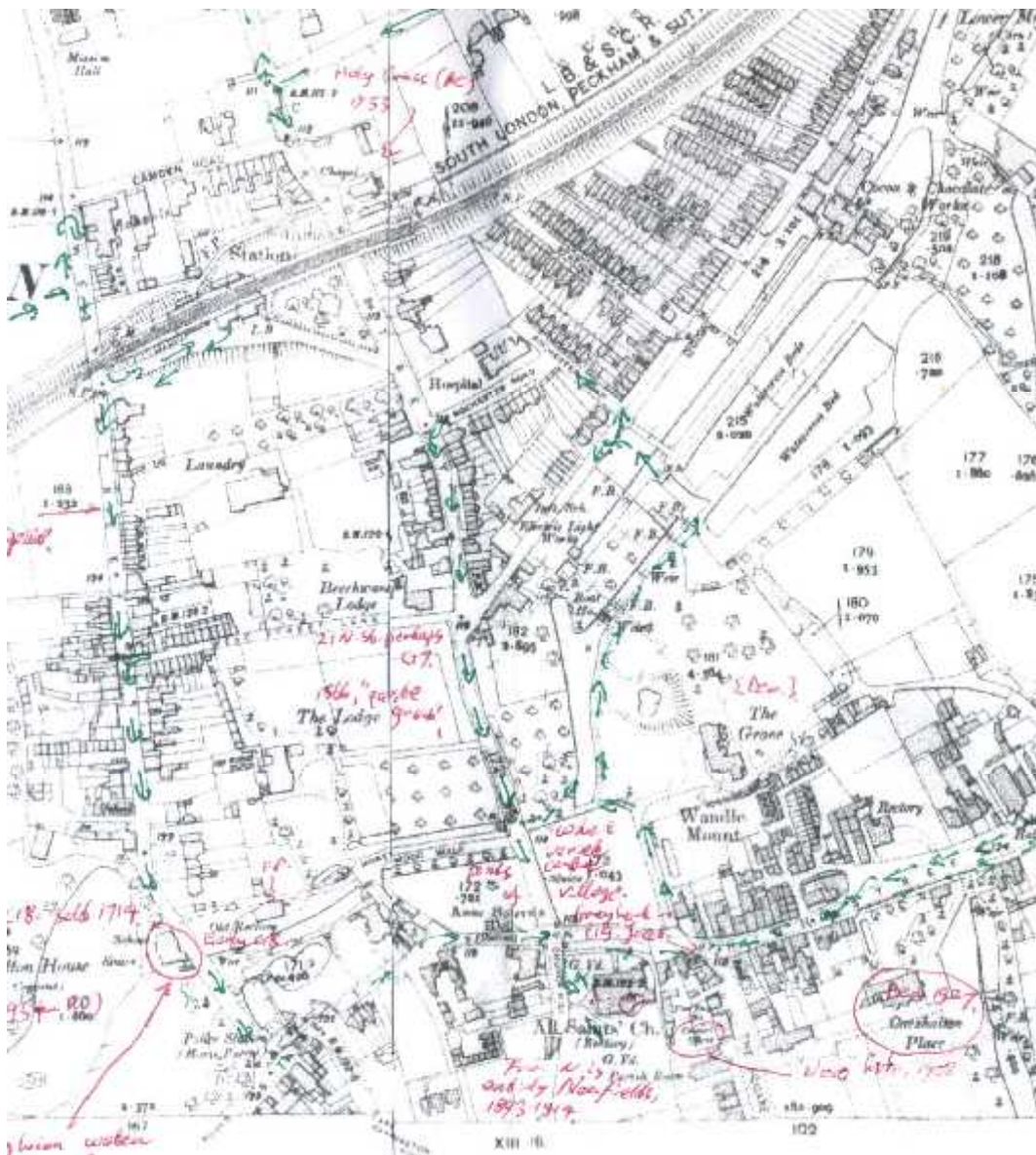


Figure 1. Extract from photocopy of Surrey sheet 13.12, annotated in red to show notable buildings and in green to show route actually followed.

By itself the map only offers an abstraction of two dimensions: photography offers the illusion of the third.⁴ A quite large proportion of local history publishing since around 1970 has been of collections of 'old' photographs, of very mixed quality. Though there are honourable exceptions, usually for larger centres, what we tend to get is volumes that cover everything from 1860 to 1960 or later, which by themselves are unobjectionable, but in which a good deal of space is taken up with school, sports or other group photos of, I suggest, doubtful general interest.⁵

⁴ A point that does not seem to have been explored in the numerous map-philosophical and allied writings of the past half-century or so is the way in which the problem of relief depiction on maps, and the allied one of multi-level structures, is simply a question of the angle of view. A conventional ground photograph, with the axis of the camera level and looking in the x and y axes, can only show the z axis to the limit of the first obstruction. This is a subject that someone ought to explore further.

⁵ For an antidote to all this see Martin Honeysett, *The not another book of old photographs book*, London: Methuen, 1981. The sad thing is that, as with Monty Python and others guying of certain traits of broadcasting, such ridicule does not appear to have stemmed the flow.

The ideal would be a volume of photos which were taken at much the same time as the Ordnance surveyors were on the ground. Admittedly, given that the number of suitable photographs available tends to increase exponentially with time, for a town such as Exeter that was surveyed in 1875 and revised in 1888, 1904 and 1932, a 1930s volume would be much easier to compile than a 1870s one. In practice, the sharp definition of the OS's lines runs up against the sometimes very vague definition of half-tone or scanned images, and the woolly chronology – 'as it was', whenever, or if ever, that was – of published pictures. Having said all that, something that I enjoy with the published Godfreys is trying to deduce the location of the cover photo without reference to any caption, even though quite a number are heavily freighted with young males in knickerbockers.

Though useful supplements to the maps, and for 'further reading', old photographs are not usually what I first look for, or at, when researching notes. As has been hinted before, there are two elements: one is library work, ascertaining the basic 'invisible' history, and the other is actually seeing the place. Which comes first depends purely on convenience. As I have access to a set of *The Buildings of England* series ('Pevsners'), it is easy to extract from them notes of architecturally notable buildings, and to annotate the map in advance.⁶ (*fig. 1*) This may help to plan a perambulation of the sheet, though often other factors will decide that, such as buildings shown on the map but not mentioned in Pevsner, which may need a mention. Whilst 'Pevsner' is a magnificent achievement, there are limits to what can be covered in a single manageable volume, even in the series of special city ones that have appeared in recent years. A great many second- and third-rank buildings that are not 'Pevsner-worthy' nonetheless give character to a place; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. For example, there are several places in east Surrey where there are terraces of small houses of yellowish brick with red-brick trimmings of, I suppose, *circa* 1870: if you want to be flattering or high-flying, the ultimate in the essence of reference to post-Perpendicular. All that the OS will show you will be a terrace of houses: you have to go there to experience them. Sometimes the map helps expose an anachronistic style, for example streets and streets of houses in Grimsby and Cleethorpes whose porches and window surrounds look like a combination of Italianate and Early English, which might be expected to be *passé* by 1870, yet which date from between about 1906 and 1914.⁷ Mention of these in notes can capture the spirit of a place far more than dates of churches or railway openings. Some places have more to say about themselves than others: the part-demolished Bodmin gaol is an unforgettable visual drama, particularly on a dull late autumn day.

There is also the question of who the notes are written for. To be honest, one

⁶ Another aside: given that the work of demolition and new building continues, and that the volumes – not all written by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in the first place – are subject to revision, it would be interesting to calculate what of the diminishing proportion of the whole at any one time was actually written by Pevsner.

⁷ For example see Alan Dowling, *Street names of Cleethorpes*, Chichester: Phillimore, 2010, 18 (conservative) and 63 (advanced).

answer is for oneself, what one would like to read on another map, though the diverse approaches of other Godfrey Edition authors suggests that different people like to read different things. One might add, ‘and answer the questions that one might ask’, but that is perhaps too much: often the published sources don’t answer it. Sometimes, rather than supplementing the map with extra-cartographic information, it can be worthwhile to draw attention to certain mapped features, for example the juxtaposition of agriculture and industry, or to explain ‘traps’ or ‘silences’, for example unnamed gasholders or – Bodmin again – completely ‘silent’ gaols. Usually authors have a free hand, but Alan particularly asked me to work in somewhere on *Exeter 1888*, one of the colour-printed sheets that are now appearing in some quantity, mention of the convention that carmine shows masonry buildings and grey denotes wood and iron ones. (For good measure, I added something on triangulation stations, having a little earlier had occasion to visit them in a futile quest for traces.) Sometimes an interesting feature appears on the map but is unnamed: such a one on *Exeter 1888* is the southern end of the Crediton canal, which was started and then abandoned *circa* 1810, and the remains of which were obliterated in the 1960s by a massive flood relief channel.

A walk round Mitcham

The practical side of this can be illustrated by the two latest sheets for which I have written notes: Surrey 13.04 *Mitcham* and 13.12 *Carshalton and Wallington North*, both using the revision of 1910. I perambulated them on successive days in late January. Starting out from Mitcham Junction station, having arrived on a modern tram on the route of what is claimed to be the oldest public railway in the world – can’t leave that out! – the first problem, already apparent from the 1:25,000 *Explorer*, is a rectangular mound with an uneven top that occupies a large part of Mitcham Common, rather suggestive of a reclaimed rubbish tip – and indeed subsequent library work shows that that is just what it is, and a particularly controversial tip at that.⁸ On I go, noting what semi-rural large Victorian houses were demolished to produce the illusion of seamless inter-war development. Places such as Mitcham often made the transition from village to urban in two phases, the first characterised by prosperous villas and residual villageyness, and the second by middle-class semis. Similarly, the centre of Mitcham has been redeveloped since 1910: there are limits to what can be set down in 3300 words, and a collection of old photographs may be extremely useful to shunt the curious reader on to. Anyway, I walk past a car park with a supermarket beneath, surmounted by a tall lift-tower that later turns out to be conspicuous from the Common – but, again, there are limits to the abuse that can be fitted into 3300 words and people can be asked to pay for. This isn’t Port Isaac, after all.

I am now at the Upper Green, which isn’t at all green these days, even though for the past twenty years it has been largely pedestrianised. It is here that sheet

⁸ A photograph of protesters in 1954 in Eric Montague, *Mitcham Common*, Chichester: Phillimore, 2001 is an example where a ‘group photograph’ is fully justified.

lines become important: the most striking secular building in Mitcham is Eagle House, just off the map to the north. From here I turn south-east, to check a memory of weatherboarded houses from when my family used to travel this way regularly: the *Victoria County History*, published in 1912, says ‘many of the old cottages are entirely of timber construction, the quartering being externally covered with weather-boarding’.⁹ There are still a few, but they hardly qualify for ‘many’. On south-eastwards, back to the Common to check a ‘monument’: it proves to be to George Parker Bidder, though later investigation shows him to be the son of the ‘calculating boy’ who served on the OS for a few months in 1824-5 and gave evidence against the 1:2500 to a Select Committee in 1861. Never mind, both were local residents. Then south-west, to investigate *Tramway Path*, which seems to be on the original course of the Surrey Iron Railway, the world’s oldest, etc, opened in 1803. This is one of the few sections of the tramway to escape either conversion to a conventional steam railway in 1855, and thus to part of the Croydon Tramlink in 1997-2000 – trams to trams in three conversions – or being built over. A railway enthusiast can hardly pass up the opportunity to place his Clark’s footwear where the very shoes of the horses must have trod but, on a January day when it’s just stopped raining and might restart, it’s not the most inspiring of industrial-archaeological walks. There are six-foot high fences on one side – reasonable enough – and fly-tipping on the other, including several fridges. You wonder how people manage to get such bulky things there in the first place.

Anyway, then it’s on to Cricket Green and Lower Green. Cricket Green is where the game is still played, though not in January, and has the additional advantage of an information board – very useful for the hit-and-run topographer – so I spend ten minutes gratefully scribbling notes on damp paper with a succession of shy ballpoints. The information includes the explanation of the name of the adjoining pub, the *Burn Bullock*: it’s named after a Surrey cricketer who was later its landlord, rather than, as the flippant or blackly-humorous might assume, a version of a hog-roast that got out of control. In the event the 3300 words don’t accommodate this information. On through a devious route, mixing busy main roads with back paths that are recognisably descended from those of 1910. The gas works is too conspicuous to need a close approach, but its outline is unexpectedly relieved by a radio mast, that is worth commenting on, though not, it transpires, in any of the 3300 words. Then on to the church, which I expect to be a call of duty – gothic of 1819-21 suggests the very worst – but it proves to be a pleasant surprise, as the tower is at the south-east, and the building is an interesting shape from whatever angle you view it. On, across the railway at a new tram station, down what in 1910 was a footpath and delivers you to – weren’t you waiting for it – a car-dealership. A 3300-word limit has its uses. A deviation through a damp park provides an antidote, and something that does make the 3300: angling, ducks and rubbish on the River Wandle. I could never be an angler; apart from anything else, I couldn’t manage the huddled-up position

⁹ H E Malden (ed), *The Victoria History of the County of Surrey*, IV, London: Constable, 1912, 230.

for hour after hour.

The end – Mitcham station – is now coming into sight, but there are still a few buildings to check up on, not least the former station. The 1855 line was economical in its construction, and for its station at Mitcham it reused an older building, embodying a carriage-entrance. Proximity seems to have inspired the legend that the Surrey Iron Railway actually passed through the archway: perhaps someone got the idea from the Queen's House at Greenwich, which bridged the Dover road. About half a second suffices to dispose of the absurdity of this idea. Then it's home on the tram with a late lunch of sandwiches and flask-tea.

East of Sutton: Carshalton

The following day it's Carshalton, another sheet where I've known a road across it for over 40 years, but the rest is new to me, despite our family home being less than ten miles away. And I don't get there directly today. I start off with an exploration of what the map suggests is the north end of Wallington, but proves on further investigation to be the south side of the original settlement. This takes me past The Grange, a restaurant which was, I gather, the subject of frequent correspondence in the local papers around 1970. We would drive past and snigger about all those people enduring 'rotten dinners'. In those days it probably served, well, just food: under the present management it offers the 'best of two cuisines', continental and Indian. I'm afraid I can't tell you that the newspaper carpers have been seen off, as it's far too early for lunch and, anyway, I have my own sandwiches: cheese and Brinjal pickle. Cuisine?

There is nothing further to note for the next half-mile, till reaching Hackbridge station. The main building is being converted to a dental surgery: not quite as strange, perhaps, as the time that Walsingham station in Norfolk spent as a Russian Orthodox church, complete with onions, but still worth drawing attention to. The centre of Hackbridge is off the map, so sparing me either description or invention, and after that it's mostly inter-war housing estates, but there are a number of islands of earlier building to be checked up on. Passing an inter-war shopping parade prompts the reflection that whereas European and Asiatic cooking may have rescued British eating from blandness, bottom-of-the-range convenience stores shows that all is not gained even yet. Laburnum Villas produces a strange thing: what appears to be a sewer-vent with a weather-vane on top. (*fig 2, right*) There are two buildings to be checked up on now: the Sutton Model Laundry and a tramway depôt, both in what, I discover later, was at one time known as New Sutton (but in Carshalton parish), though this name was not recorded by the OS. Never mind, 'New Sutton' does as a heading when I come to write the notes. The model laundry has been rebuilt as offices, so no checking whether the trig point on it was an intersected point on a chimney, and the tramway depot is now one of those self-storage places. Back towards Carshalton village, and – another combined vent-'n'-vane! I must admit to



a certain fascination with sewer-vents: they have a haunting, elusive quality, and seem somehow so evocative of earlier twentieth-century streets on dull afternoons. Why, I wonder? Was it on one such that I first saw, and understood? And as they don't appear on OS 1:2500s, and most of them probably postdate the period of the 1:500s, there's all the excitement of an unexpected discovery. Did the Victorians and Edwardians seek to Morally Elevate the Odours by ornamenting their exit? A subsequent internet search ('sutton sewer vent vane') reveals that there are at least eight of them around Carshalton, and that the purpose of sewer-vents is not always understood. (I mean about venting the gases, not promoting morality.)

According to 'Pevsner', not the least interesting building in Carshalton is the Water Tower serving Carshalton House – but is it on the map? There is no mention of it, so I am somewhat surprised when what seems to be a church tower appears ahead where no church should be, even allowing for occasional strange Pevsnerian *lacunae*. It's the water tower, which the OS in 1910 describes

as a school. Now perhaps we should expect this of Surrey: buildings that drive OS classifiers to distraction. Here we have a water tower looking a bit like a church turning into a school (*figure 3, left*); a few miles away on Reigate Heath we have what looks like, nay is, a windmill, the base of which has long been used as a chapel. Anyway, a definite instance here of 'mentioning the map'. Then on into Carshalton High Street, which is dominated by ponds, which may be artificial but make for an interesting villagescape. There are benches round them, which in principle could be useful to rest on whilst eating one's sandwiches, though all but two have been fouled comprehensively by the fowls of the air and water, and one of those is occupied by feeders of white sliced bread to said fowls.... As well as numerous water-fowl, there are also



squirrels running about, quite the tamest, most personable and shapely that I've ever seen. I must say, both the birds and squirrels know their places, and do not make the mistake of many of their brethren, as to the motivation for the manufacture of sandwiches. Or perhaps the cross-cultural combination of ingredients repels them...

I have been walking, both yesterday and today, for about three and a half hours before stopping to eat. This is about 'par for the course' for a full 1:2500 sheet; one with a small town in it, such as Axminster, can be dispatched more quickly. I discussed the point once with Alan, and he reckoned one could walk about eight or nine miles to 'do' a sheet properly, which at three miles an hour comes to much the same. However, it is still quite early, what little remains can

be seen very quickly in walking back to the station, and Carshalton has a library: will it have a local history section? – Yes – and there are useful books, and I scribble away frantically. If I look up, I can see through a high-level window to the best bit of the parish church.

The note-taking isn't complete until the notes have been typed up. This may seem pedantry, but as one is dependent on secondary sources rather than original research, and sometimes in using judgement or instinct in choosing between accounts not always quite in accord with each other (a question as to whether the trams stopped running in 1928 or 1936 cannot be fudged), it is advisable to have something to refer to should someone more knowledgeable query what one has written. This happened to me with Surrey sheet 20.11. The late Alan A. Jackson, the well-known writer on London railways (and later a contributor of Godfrey Edition notes) queried my statement that a certain local developer, William Gilford, was a railway director. I was quite certain that I had read it when researching 20.11, but I could not find my notes, and I had to admit defeat. Much more recently I have had to wonder about Gilford's relationship with the railway, in view of certain earthworks on his estate at Woldingham, a couple of sheets to the south. A historian's work is never done.

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What the papers say

Roger Carnt has been catching up on Ordnance Survey news in the press.

Ireland

The Director of the Ordnance Survey accompanied by an Officer of his corps, have recently arrived at Head-quarters (the Tower), from a tour of upwards of 1,200 miles in Ireland, where they have been taking points &c preparatory to the survey of that country in the ensuing spring. A detachment of Sappers and Miners, selected from the different companies in England, are now receiving instructions at Chatham, in surveying, drawing, &c, and will be attached to that service. They will amount to about a full company (sixty). In Ireland, the Director has established his Head-quarters at a house he has taken in the Phoenix Park, Dublin.

The Morning Post (London) Monday 1 November 1824.

Rifle Corps at Southampton

The civilians belonging to the Ordnance Survey establishment at Southampton, and who number between 200 and 300 persons, have resolved upon immediately forming themselves into a rifle corps. A meeting has been called by the town clerk of Southampton, of principal tradesmen in that town, for the purpose of forming also a rifle corps.

Daily News (London) Monday 9 February 1852.