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.

Towards a virtual museum of the geographic production process
Rob Wheeler

The story behind this initiative starts in the 1930s. The Italians were preparing for the invasion of Ethiopia and undertook a lot of air survey to improve their maps. They used an innovative camera by Santoni which exposed four images on a single plate (port oblique, port-near-vertical, starboard-near vertical, starboard oblique), successive plates having enough overlap to allow stereo techniques.

Fast-forward to the present century, and a geographer at Ghent University, Jan Nyssen, was working on climate change in Ethiopia and was searching for old photographs showing tree-lines, etc. He heard of a store of old air photographs at the Ethiopian survey establishment and there in the basement were all these plates from the 1930s – but unlabelled. So he contacted the Belgian national mapping agency, NGI, partly because he wanted to learn how to rectify them but also because he needed to learn how aerial survey worked in order to establish how these plates might fit together. This made people realise just how scanty was knowledge of the detailed techniques used before the digital era; documentation had often been destroyed, and many of the people who knew how things were done were retired or dead. Moreover it was clear that such matters were not just a matter of curiosity but were relevant to topics like climate change and overseas development.

This led to the European Spatial Data Research Network (EuroSDR), which links national mapping agencies and research bodies, sponsoring an exploratory workshop in Brussels in May 2013 to look at what was being done to preserve knowledge of these matters and what ought to be done. I represented CCS (and, effectively, the UK) at this meeting.

The meeting concluded that there was indeed a problem. There was a faint prospect that EU money might be available in sufficient amounts to enable a group to be set up which would pursue a programme to address this on a Europe-wide basis. A more likely outcome was that the group would evolve into a body which could coordinate the efforts of different national groups involved. Coordination does not mean telling groups what to do but sharing knowledge between them. It reflects a recognition that there was much commonality between the technical processes used in different countries – the OSI representative remarked to me in the middle of an NGI presentation that the description exactly matched how *they* had done things – and coordination could reduce the effort needed for recording.

The question for CCS is: Should we be involved and if so how? The committee has discussed the matter by email and takes the view that the aspirations expressed by the working group accord absolutely with the aims of our Society. Of course, if OSGB was about to get involved we would not want to duplicate their efforts, but it seems highly unlikely that OSGB would feel they could devote significant resources to such a project. Moreover, by getting involved under the aegis of this working group, we can avoid recording things that other countries have already recorded adequately and we are better placed to engage in

comparative studies into how processes in this country differed from those elsewhere in Europe, and why.

What we are not proposing is any grand coherent history. There already exist projects like the International Society for the History of the Map; we would be foolish to attempt to duplicate such efforts. What we propose rather is a digital archive, except that, to avoid confusion with the Society's archives at Cambridge, we propose to refer to it as a virtual museum. This will serve as a repository for accounts of the technical processes used in the pre-digital era. It can also include references to physical documents in our archive or in other repositories (including private collections). It can include photographs of equipment and indeed references to where surviving equipments may be found. We do not envisage it including maps: it is about the technical processes used, from geodesy through survey to the drawing and finally the printing of the maps. Although the focus is on OSGB, we would not exclude other UK mapping agencies, not least because their processes may tie in with those used in other European countries if not with OSGB's. As for Ireland, whilst OSI and OSNI come within our Terms of Reference, OSI itself seems likely to participate, and, in any case, the vast majority of our members are based on mainland Britain.

Initially at least our coverage will be very patchy. We will maintain the collection on a 'work-in-progress' basis on the Society website at *www.charlesclosesociety.org/virtualmuseum*. The pages will not be accessible via the normal navigation links on the website but the link will be provided to the other members of the European working group.

What we need are contributions from members. Most will take the form of electronic accounts. We don't expect them to be great literary works – if they were they would belong in *Sheetlines* – though we will exercise an editorial function, not least to ensure clarity. Some contributions may be scans of photographs, some may be references to where physical documents or specimens can be found. Contributors must be prepared to receive questions from 'museum visitors'. Of course, there is no obligation to answer questions but it is hoped that useful clarification will result from them, perhaps even drawing out distinctions between how apparently similar processes operated differently in different countries.

And there is a timescale associated with this: in April 2014 the exploratory group will want to establish what progress has been made. The more progress, the greater the likelihood of some form of standing working group being set up. Our own initiative is probably worthwhile even as a stand-alone effort, but it is potentially more useful if it is done as part of this wider European initiative. So please do not procrastinate.

As for public exhibitions and indeed permanent galleries, one advantage of a virtual museum is that there is no need to move objects around. If the best example of some equipment that OS once used is on a Lithuanian website, the viewer can be despatched to Lithuania via a link, without even noticing. We envisage these coming in due course – any budding exhibition designers out there? – but the first priority has to be building the collection.