



Sheetlines

The journal of
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

“Sheet 33 for me”

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Sheetlines, 97 (August 2013), pp.36-37

Stable URL:

<http://www.charlesclosesociety.org/files/Issue97page36.pdf>

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Published by
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps
www.CharlesCloseSociety.org

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.

Sheet 33 for me!

Graham Wilson¹

I have, on occasion, been asked to nominate my favourite map – if, from the array that line my shelves, I could keep only one, (my Desert Island luxury so to speak) which would it be? This would not be easy, but if forced to decide, I would first narrow down my choice. It would have to show part of Britain with an air of remoteness and a combination of hill and sea, but above all it would have to be inspirational. Captain Cook, on discovering the Aboriginal maps, judged them of little purpose as they seemed to have neither an understandable scale nor proper orientation. What the explorer had not realized was that they were maps of “Dreamtime” before the World was created and the landmarks depicted, though actual, were also symbolic in that they offered an understanding of life and the inspiration that governed their social and cultural behaviour. As with the Aboriginal maps, my choice of *Landranger* 33 Loch Alsh & Glen Shiel is because it is as important for what it doesn't show as for what it does.

Beyond each of its four margins lies an area that defines this map's existence. To the east, a line of forts, William, Augustus and Inverness that once defended the Lowlands from Highland invasion, now stand guard over the mountain treasures that lie beyond the Great Glen. To the north, at point 839274, the A890 leaves the road to the Isles to weave its tortuous way through the Torridon giants to Ullapool and the gateway to the hills of Sutherland where Suilven, Stac Pollaidh and Ben Mor Coigach trip across the imagination. To the west, the edges of Skye hint at rocky spines that plot their route over the Minch and Atlantic to the isles of St Kilda. To the south, lies the god-given railway from Fort William to Mallaig where passengers rubbing the London sleeper from their eyes realize they are no longer on the 7.45 commute from Dorking to Victoria.

Even within its bounds, my ultimate choice more than holds its own. Maps to the north might proclaim Liathach and An Teallach over Sgurr na Ciche and Ladhar Bheinn. The brooding cliffs that line Glencoe might be reasonably thought more impressive than the swoop from the Cluanie Inn to Shiel Bridge. The mass of the Cairngorm is more vast than the fractured yet hospitable glens and ridges of Kintail. Others may win the battles yet, in my view, sheet 33 wins the war. There is no stravaig more varied than leaving the train at Glenfinnan before slipping between Strep and Sgurr Thuilm into Glen Dessary and crossing the rough bounds of Knoydart to Barrisdale. As well as the sweep there is the detail. No sea loch rivals Loch Hourn. No coastal road is more revealing than the one from Shiel Bridge to Glenelg, boasting brochs and otters at every twist and turn. For those wishing garnish, blend in the genesis of the John Muir Trust with a drizzle of Jacobite nostalgia.

Not all will agree. Other Pelicans may cry, with some justification, from the wilderness of Cumbria and Snowdon. Even as my finger slides along each title of my maps, I know the choice is invidious. So many are old friends, dog-eared with creaking joints and fading notes jotted in the margins, a shadow of their former selves that once refolded to lie as neat and crisp as a new deck of cards. But if a cull had to be made, I would always hang on to sheet 33.

Opposite: ‘..remoteness ..a combination of hill and sea ..above all, inspirational’, detail of the head of Loch Hourn from sheet 33

¹ The author has recently joined the Society. This is an edited excerpt from *Over the Hill* (Millrace Books, 2011, £14.95, ISBN 978 1 902173 337)

