



Sheetlines

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

“Wynnstay Hall and the School of
Military Survey”

WN Saunders

Sheetlines, 106 (August 2016, pp. 21-23)

Stable URL:

<http://www.charlescloseociety.org/files/Issue106page21.pdf>

*This article is provided for personal, non-commercial use only.
Please contact the Society regarding any other use of this work.*

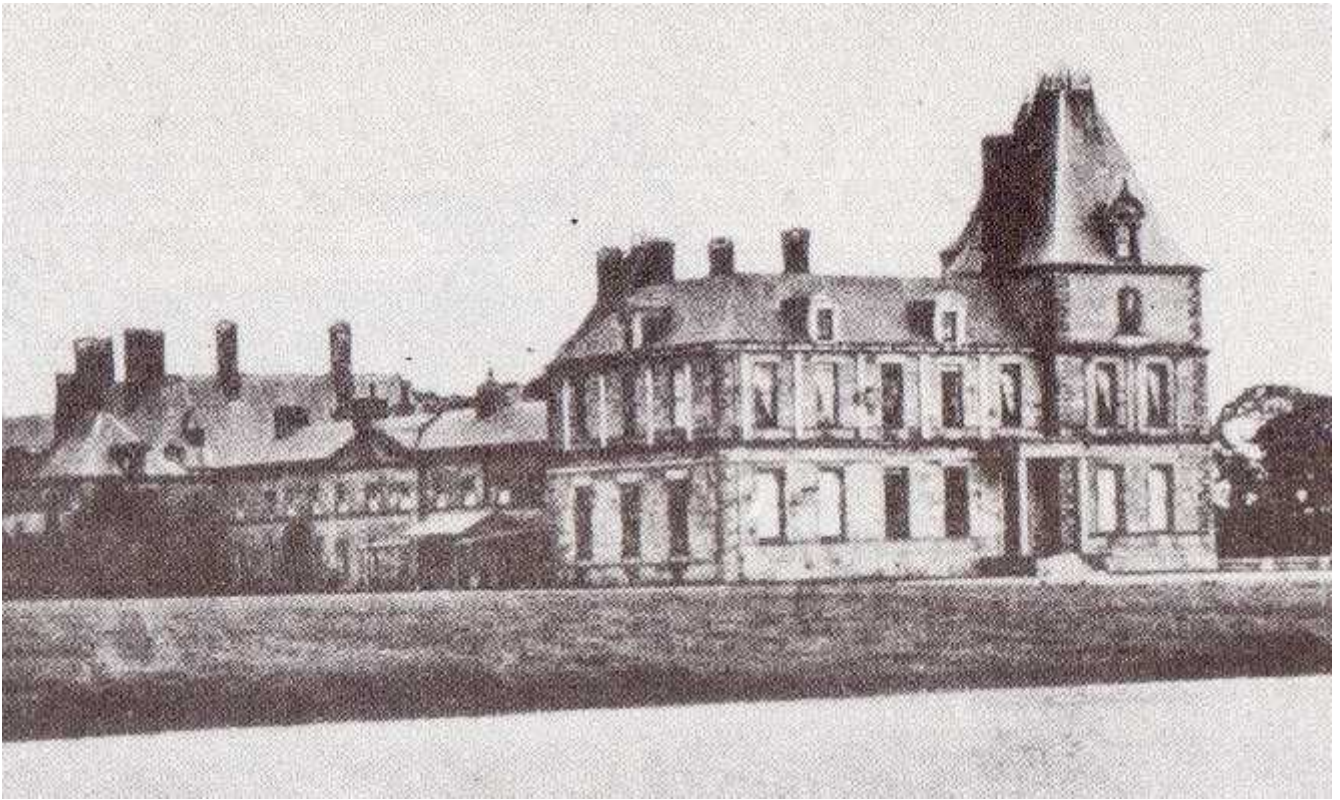
Published by
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps
www.CharlesCloseSociety.org

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.

Wynnstay Hall and the School of Military Survey

WN Saunders¹



Wynnstay Hall, Ruabon, home of Survey Training Centre from 1941 to 1945

When war was declared in 1939, soldier-surveyors of the Royal Engineers who had been working in a quasi-civilian capacity carrying out field surveys for the Ordnance Survey donned their uniforms and reported for duty at the 19th Field Survey Company in Fort Widley, one of the forts on Portsdown Hill overlooking Portsmouth.

They were joined by their fellow tradesmen in the reprographic and printing trades who had been working at the Ordnance Survey office in Southampton. The resultant unit formed the nucleus of further Field Survey Companies who were based at the neighbouring Fort Southwick whilst the remainder became the Survey Training Centre and trained new recruits in the trades involved in map-making. By the following year the demand for Survey services increased so rapidly that it was necessary to find more suitable premises with better training facilities and in March 1941 the move was made to Wynnstay Hall at Ruabon. The forts on Portsdown Hill were eagerly snapped up by the Royal Navy who are still there today.

At Ruabon the Hall itself housed the lecture rooms and the administration staff. The stable blocks and other outbuildings were converted to house cameras, plate-making, proofing presses and printing machines. The main accommodation

¹ Based on the talk given at the AGM with additional information supplied by Mike Nolan and Alan Gordon, to whom many thanks.

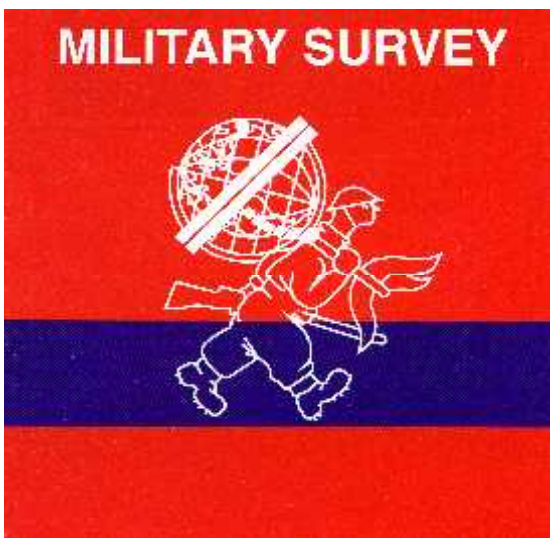
was in a hutted camp which was erected just to the east of the main grounds near School Lodge. This consisting of Nissen huts for sleeping quarters, ablution blocks, a kitchen and dining hall, NAAFI canteen and sick quarters.

For the next four years the Centre trained thousands of officers, officer cadets and servicemen (and women of the ATS) in the many trades required to satisfy the Army's requirements for millions of maps to cover all the theatres of war from Iceland to the Far East.

The main trades taught were:

- Field surveys to form the accurate framework required for reliable mapping and plane table surveys for rapid mapping of accessible areas. This training was carried out on the slopes of Ruabon Mountain and the area around Pentre Clawdd
- Air surveys - essential in wartime to map enemy held territory or to revise existing maps.
- The reprographic trades of photography, lithographic plate making and printing. When the occasion arose as in the run-up to D-Day the presses were used to print thousands of maps of the invasion beaches.

On completion of their course the other ranks would take a trade test and if successful were granted the tradesman's pay of 4/3d (22p) a day! They were then liable to be posted to a survey unit anywhere they were needed.



For the bulk of the students their time at Wynnstay came as a welcome respite in their rigorous training programme. As sappers in the Royal Engineers they had already attended an infantry training course to teach them the basics of soldiering. They had then been to the Training Battalion, RE, at Clitheroe in Lancashire where they had an intensive course in the Sapper skills of demolitions, mine laying and clearance and bridge building. At Wynnstay the discipline was more relaxed and many of the recruits were continuing in their peacetime professions. Many of the draughtsmen were recruited from cartographic companies or Fleet

Street. The illustration (*above*) is by an unknown hand, in the style of the cartoonist Fougasse (Cyril Kenneth Bird), who had served in World War One and whose skills were widely used by the Ministry of Information in WWII.

Although the camp had limited recreational facilities a walk down the long drive (which at that time had not been blocked by the bypass) led to Ruabon, which had a lively High Street with shops, a cinema and a canteen in a chapel staffed by kindly local ladies. A short bus ride away was Cefn Mawr with two cinemas and many pubs whilst in the opposite direction was Wrexham with all its facilities. At this time the railway station, at which most people would arrive and depart, had a refreshment room and bookstall. Trains ran frequently to

Paddington, Birkenhead and Barmouth via Llangollen. Crosville buses provided a cheap and reliable service to Cefn Mawr, Llangollen and Wrexham. Romance blossomed for some lucky ones and there are at least three couples still in the area whose marriages date from this period.

Bryn Howel

With unusual foresight the War Office had decided that a cadre of regular soldiers trained as surveyors and cartographers would be required to form the backbone of Survey units both during and after the war and elected to continue the programme of recruiting apprentice tradesmen on regular service. Such a scheme had been in operation pre-war at Southampton – one of these ‘Scheme A boys’ was awarded the George Medal for his heroism when the Ordnance Survey premises at Southampton were bombed.

Accordingly, at the end of 1941 about fifty sixteen-year-old boys were recruited from schools all over the country and housed initially at Barton-on-Sea near Christchurch in Hampshire. In 1943 they moved nearer to the Survey Training Centre at Bryn Howel, an empty country house. The Vale of Llangollen proved to be an ideal training ground for potential surveyors. The boys participated in many local activities, putting on ‘gym displays’ whilst their dance band played at the Llangollen Town Hall for Saturday evening dances.

When the war ended the Survey Training Centre, with its Boys' Wing moved initially to the grounds of another stately house, Longleat in Wiltshire, where it was housed in a former US Army hospital. It later moved to another hatted former World War Two hospital at Hermitage near Newbury where it was renamed the School of Military Survey. The camp was rebuilt and ceremonially opened by HM the Queen in 1980 and on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the first military surveys it received the accolade ‘Royal’ and was renamed the ‘Royal School of Military Survey’.



When the wartime surveyors and tradesmen moved into civilian life after the war many still followed their wartime trades and for years it was difficult to find any mapping organization at home or overseas which didn't have at least one person on their staff who remembered their time at Bryn Howel or Wynnstay with affection.

The author at the trig point on Ruabon Mountain (502m, SJ 235 453). The cast-in grenade shows that this is one of a series erected by trainee surveyors from Wynnstay in about 1944. There are probably about six in the surrounding area, including one on Selattyn Hill, near Oswestry (373m, SJ 236 342). These pillars were part of the re-triangulation of Great Britain organised by Major M. Hotine, R.E. which started in 1935.