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“Working at Ordnance Survey in  
the 1930s”

*Alfred Buckle*

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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.

## ***Working at Ordnance Survey in the Nineteen-thirties***

### ***Alfred Buckle***



*These are extracts from transcripts of tapes recorded by Alfred Hilson Buckle in 1977, which have now been uploaded to a blog maintained by his granddaughter Moira Grant.*

*Alfred Buckle was born in March 1911 in Scarborough and worked at Ordnance Survey from 1935 to 1938, when he left to join London County Council. He died in April 1989.*

The manager of the Labour Exchange sent for me again. "I remember sending you to Jones and Rickabys. Would you like me to put your name down for the entrance examination for the Ordnance Survey? If you get a job there you will have a job all your life". In due course I went to York and took an examination. There were about twenty people there. Quite admirably up on surveying before I went. I knew a lot about

surveying. I passed the examination and, oddly enough, I was the only person out of the twenty who were present for the examination who did pass.

I left Jones and Rickabys, the architects, and started work for the Ordnance Survey in the first few months of 1935. This was quite a big change in luck as far as work was concerned. I wouldn't earn a lot of money with the OS but I would have a job for life. If I kept my nose clean I would have a pension when I finished working. So I went to London to work in the Ordnance Survey Office. This, I wasn't to realise it at the time, was to change my life completely because I was to learn about this new job, this surveying, which I was to carry on all of my life and which I am still doing at the age of 66. And this year, this particular year, 1935, I was to get married so my life was completely changed. At this time very few people from Scarborough went to work in London. When I went my friends said goodbye and it was as if they were sending me off to the frozen wastes of Antarctica or something like this.

I remember soon after I started with the OS a friend who was in the office came from Oxford. The pair of us tried to walk out into the country from where we lived in Fulham. We never did manage it. Quite depressing. Anyway, there I was at the OS. The first thing they did was to teach us all to draw. I thought I knew something about draughtsmanship beforehand but I knew nothing. The men, the young men who were in this intake, we were from all parts of the country. Young men who had been to these competitive examinations that had been held in towns and cities. I suppose I was very lucky to be selected because there were not so many. There were possibly about forty in all. There were fine young men. A lot, I should imagine, now dead. A lot were killed in the war, but there were

some fine young men. Very few you didn't like. We all had to start again and learn to draw again. All of us had experience as draughtsmen but we all had to learn to draw again. They first gave us all a lesson on the use and maintenance of the ruling pen. How to sharpen it, how to look after it. How to mix ink, what types of ink to use for winter and the summer. Then they started us drawing lines. They just gave us a chart to copy and I can't remember how many different thicknesses of lines but they appeared to be from about a sixteenth of an inch thick down to what you could almost see. You could hardly see a line was there. I remember at the time I thought, Oh my goodness I can never draw all these lines. But it was all a bit crafty. The object was not to teach you to be able to draw all these lines, which would never be used in any case, but to try to make you draw a good line of quite fine thickness and, in some cases, moderate thickness. The whole idea was to make sure you could use the ruling pen. So this went on. After about a fortnight we were put on copying odd bits of plans, large-scale plans. Bit by bit it was revealed to use why we were being employed at this particular place. It was carry out the enlargement of the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 scale maps to a scale of 1:1250, so that these maps could be used in connection with the compulsory land registration of Middlesex. What it meant was if anyone bought property inside the county of Middlesex the sale had to be registered with the Government land registration office. We had to enlarge the map of Middlesex up to this scale and the whole county was divided up into tiny little sections, and each section was one sheet of approximate foolscap size or memorial size which was intended to fit to a legal plan.

We also did quite a lot of work in connection with tithe redemption. This was all training and I enjoyed it. It was hard work but I enjoyed it. You had to stick at your drawing desk. There was no leaving it to talk to anybody. If you did this too often the principal in the drawing office would come along and ask you what you were doing. You had to ask permission to go to the toilet and if you were up there more than five minutes he would be up there to see where you were. We did a lot of overtime to get this job done. We earned some money and it was very useful because, in the first place, we were all there on probation, in spite of the fact we were hand-picked from throughout the country, and if we didn't reach the standard then they could finish us. I think this probation went on for about three months. The wage we got on probation was two pounds a week. Now, even in those days you couldn't live on two pounds a week in London. We all paid to lodge. We paid thirty shillings [ $\pounds 1.50$ ] a week each. This was about the average cost of lodgings and this included breakfast and an evening meal. Nothing else. Baths were extra. Washing was extra. By the time you had paid your thirty shillings for this and you'd paid the odd coppers for travelling and the odd half pint of beer, you had nothing left. You couldn't save money to go home or anything like that. You had nothing left. It was hard and you were hungry. On Sundays instead of having an evening meal in the lodgings you had a meal at lunchtime. We had nothing more to eat. Nothing provided by the lodgings until the following morning when we had breakfast. We were so darned hungry we

used to go in the pubs at lunchtime before we had our meal and have half a pint of beer and fill our pockets with buckshee biscuits and cheese, which were always floating around in those days, so we could have something for tea. Anyway, after the end of the probation the wages were put up, but not by much. They were put up to possibly two pounds ten [£2.50].

Of course Janet and I had been living separately. She had been in Scarborough with her parents and I had been down there. I think she wanted to get away from home and I wanted her with me so we decided to get married. The outcome was that in June 1935 we got a special licence and we got married Whitsuntide weekend. Bit foolhardy. We hadn't a lot of money. Very low wage. The circumstance weren't good really but I was in love and there you are. I found an unfurnished flat and bought a few sticks of furniture on hire purchase and we had a few pounds which I spent on buying carpet and things like this and Janet came down to London. I suppose we were happy. We hadn't much. We lived on a very grubby street in a not very nice flat.

*Learning to be a surveyor.* The preliminary thing for this was to go down to Tunbridge Wells and find somewhere to live. What you used to do in those days, going to a new place with the OS, was you took the train and you also took a bicycle with you in the guards van. This was to give you mobility when you got there. I got the train to Tunbridge Wells [and eventually found a flat]. I went to the OS office, the training establishment in Tunbridge Wells. I made a bad start. I seem to always make bad starts and get the wrong side of people. I don't know why, I don't try to. I met the company sergeant major who was down there. They called him Rogers. I fell foul of him straight away and I told him what I thought. We had a few words and I remember when I went back to London I reported this to my seniors in the London Ordnance Survey office. I didn't know, but they had taken the matter up with the divisional officer, the officer in charge of the training school down in Tunbridge Wells and this Rogers, this company sergeant major, had a reprimand from his commanding officer. I didn't know this but when I got down there I very soon found it out because he really took it out on me. My first day there I understood he was looking for me. He said, "You were the bloke who complained about me, are you?" I said, "Yes". In no uncertain words he said, "Now watch out". The commanding officer was a bit of a lad. He was a bit of a disciplinarian, strict and rather underhand in his methods for inflicting his strictness. They called him Major Wills. He was one of the Wills tobacco people and there was no need for him to do this. There was no need for him to be in the army. There was no need for him to be a major, he had plenty of money but I suppose he needed to pass time.

One of the worst jobs I had all the time I was in the OS was just outside the borders of Buckinghamshire, almost in Northamptonshire. It was a brand new brickworks. An enormous place. London Brick Company Works. I would think it covered in all, with the clay pits, 150 to 200 acres. When we got there the section superintendent started doling out the work and he gave me some 1:2500 sheets to revise. "Here you are, Buck". Everyone used to call me Buck in those days. "Here

are some easy ones for you. Just for you". I was fine. I remember cycling out towards these fields. It is about seven miles from Buckingham and as I got closer I saw these huge chimneys begin to tower up into the sky. I thought, "These are nothing to do with me. Mine is just fields". As I got closer I began to feel uneasy. They were in the direction I was going and, my goodness, when I got there that was it. Brick kilns, huge quarries with miniature lakes in the bottom, overhead cableways, railway tracks, the lot. I'd really picked a 'beaut' and there was nothing to do but get tucked in and cope. The unfortunate thing about it was that by this time we had had an additional member to the section, a young man. His people had all been Ordnance Survey fellows. It had started with his grandfather, but this young man was different, he was interested in music. A very good pianist. Tall, slender, delicate young man. I got started on this business. It was clay pits and what-have-you. The section superintendent said, "I am sending so-and-so to help you. He can do some of the clay pits over the road away from the brickworks". It was possibly the worse clay pit of the lot. The one with the overhead cableways running right down into the bottom. The buckets picked up the clay and brought it up, over the road and into the brickworks proper. He said, "He will do those". I took this poor young fellow out with me and left him sitting by the side of the road looking down into this clay pit. I didn't see him do anything else. I went across once or twice to try to give him a hand but he wouldn't have it. He just couldn't cope, this young man. Sitting there. He very soon departed. A month and he had gone.

But before he left, we were in Maids Moreton in Buckinghamshire. There was a remarkable thing there. We were asked into a cottage. An old man at the door asked us what we were doing and said, "I remember when the soldier boys first surveyed this area. I've got a photograph of some of them on the wall. Some of them lodged with me". We went into this house and there was an old-fashioned, fading sepia photograph. A big photograph on the wall. There was a group of Royal Engineers in the old-fashioned uniforms and one of them was sat on a horse. He was a sergeant. And this sergeant on this horse was this young man's grandfather. This was a remarkable coincidence. I remember how moved the boy was. However it didn't move him sufficiently to do his clay pit. I got it done in the end. It took fifty-six days and there was only about two sorts of weather there, two sorts of conditions. It was either warm and very, very dusty and dirty or it was wet and very, very muddy. There was nowhere in-between. I suppose I got some reward because we were honoured by a visit from the divisional officer. The Ordnance Survey divisional officer. This was the head man in the area in which we were working and he complimented me on my effort. So possibly this was some small recompense. I was getting a bit fed up, a bit fed up.

*To read more of Alfred Buckle's memories on Moira Grant's blog, contact her at [grantmoira@hotmail.com](mailto:grantmoira@hotmail.com)*