“Postscript to Aberystwyth”

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Postscript to Aberystwyth

R C Wheeler

Since I produced my notes for the visit to the National Monuments Record for Wales that appeared in Sheetlines 68, I have learned rather more about the Large-Scale Master Drawings (or MS Plans, as the OS usually referred to them). I have had an opportunity to look at a sample of the Scottish MS Plans – National Library of Scotland is the only institution where one can rely on being able to compare the MS with the published plan. I have also read what Winterbotham¹ published on the topic, which is somewhat more comprehensible when one has seen some of the material he describes.

To summarize Winterbotham, when general revision started in 1892, a process called card revision was used. A pull of the previous edition was taken on stout cartridge paper and cut into six pieces, each about one foot square. The reviser noted any changes on his card using graphic revision techniques, based on linking in to existing detail with the measuring of distances but not of angles. The changes were transferred by tracing to the original zinc plate using litho transfer paper.

Only in 1900 did the practice come in of drawing a new MS Plan based on a ‘blue’ of the previous edition. Because of concerns about distortion, it was considered a point of principle that this blue should be taken from the original MS Plan (by a process called Vandyking) rather than from the plate.

From 1918 to 1921, the OS reverted to a form of card revision, at least for sheets with few changes. After that, blues were again employed but a pull from the plate was considered adequate. From 1930, the OS used celluloid-coated paper for the MS Plans. This had the advantage that deletion was possible (using phenyl) so it was possible to take a black pull, which saved the need to redraw features that had not changed. The corresponding disadvantage was that ink took a very long time to dry, so in 1934 the OS was reverting to blues on paper on sheets with a lot of changes.

The first point to note from this is that, for revisions of maps up to 1900, there were no MS Plans. One of the questions asked at Aberystwyth was where the Montgomeryshire blues had gone to. The answer is that, since no Montgomeryshire revision was done after 1901, there were never any blues!²

The second observation is that we must expect to find three types of blue impression according to whether they were taken from the previous plate, or from a previous MS Plan, or (somehow) from card revision material. These will be considered in turn.

Previous Plate

Blues taken from the previous plate are the least interesting category. Towards the end of the period, some of them show price stamps, implying that they are photographic copies of a normal impression. Otherwise, there is little to be said.

Previous MS Plan

Blues from a previous MS will normally be second editions which explains why (as my Aberystwyth notes stated) they tend to be of the period before 1914. However, there are

² Not entirely true: Richard Oliver’s Concise Guide notes two sheets revised in 1924. But that did not stop Winterbotham from recording the county in 1934 as 100% on card revision.
counties with a late enough second edition\(^3\) and an early enough third, for the third to be produced from blues of the MS Plans of the Second. Edinburghshire is such a case.

These blues lack names and they lack areas of parcels. Just occasionally (e.g. the Carnarvonshire part of Pembrokeshire 7.8 (1906) shown at Aberystwyth) parcel numbers and stamped ornament are lacking as well. I postulated in my Aberystwyth notes that these represented an intermediate state of the previous edition’s MS Plan, before names and areas had been added. This hypothesis does not accord with Winterbotham’s statements about the processes used. Such an intermediate state would presumably be a photographic copy, with names etc being added to the original drawing; but can one vandyke a photograph? On the other hand, redrawing or tracing the previous MS to produce a blue would violate the principle of keeping close to the original. This only leaves the possibility that names and areas have been deleted from the vandyke of a complete MS Plan. If deletion was so easy, why was the whole business of drawing on blues followed, until the equally troublesome process of pulls on celluloid-coated paper? I can only suppose that one could somehow prevent part of the original from vandyking but that the vandyke copy was not good enough to print from. Certainly the blues have thick linework and are of nothing like the crispness of a modern photocopy.

One of the maps on display at Aberystwyth (Carmarthenshire 47.5 (1913) – a third edition) had blues which extended slightly beyond the neat lines. I still cannot explain this and I have not found another instance.

Previous Card Revision

As soon as the OS embarked on a third edition (as early as 1904, in Cheshire), it will have encountered the problem that it had no MS Plans of the previous edition it could work from. Before addressing the question of how the blues were made up, there are two other matters that must be addressed.

The first is Winterbotham’s remark that anything added in the first revision was ‘ringed around and drastically tested in the field’.\(^4\) If the fit was seen to be bad, this detail was omitted from the trace. The traces were printed in red so that the blue print of the MS for revision could be seen more clearly and to allow legible correction in black. This suggests a three-stage process: testing, using perhaps merely an annotated pull of the second edition; field drawing, on tracing paper printed in blue with a copy of the first edition MS and in red with the tracings made at the first revision for transfer to the plate; and finally the drawing of a new MS on a blue base whose nature is yet to be explained.

The second matter is the material on the blue which is not from either of the previous editions.

a. A number of the junctions of field boundaries are annotated ‘J’ in upright Egyptian lettering. Winterbotham notes (p.35) the ending in 1918 of the practice of classifying junctions of fences; all junctions in future were to be regarded as equally reliable. He does not explain how junctions were classified in the first place, but clearly ‘J’ is a precursor of the ‘rp’ of 50 years later.

b. One sometimes encounters ‘OLD’ in similar lettering, often with an arrow. Is this perhaps a warning to the reviser to avoid confusing old detail on the map with a new.

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\(^3\) For the replotted counties, editions here are counted from the first 1:2500 edition. Dates are of revision, not publication.

\(^4\) Winterbotham (1934) p.32.
feature alongside it? At any rate it seems to be, like the ‘J’s, an addition made as part of the second revision process.

c. Some buildings, or building-like shapes, are filled with an X. This appears to date from the first revision and to be an indication that what might otherwise be supposed to be a building should not be shown as such on the second edition.

d. There are dotted lines, seemingly representing verges to roads or other boundaries of vegetation types, which do not appear on the second edition.

e. There is detail which does not appear on first, second, or third edition. For example, on Linlithgowshire 3.14, there is an industrial tramway which appears only on the second edition. At one point there is a passing loop which, on the blue, has a small building over one arm of the loop; this building does not appear on the published map. One of the principal reasons for wanting to understand how the blues were made up is to understand the significance of such detail.

f. Finally there are graticule crosses, or sometimes continuous lines, to facilitate division into six card-sized pieces. This clearly dates from the making up of the blues, because, where the meridian has changed for the third edition, the graticules correspond to the new sheet lines rather than the old ones.

Also on the blues are handwritten notes which provide useful evidence. Carnarvonshire 11.6 (1916), shown at Aberystwyth, has:

The detail within the fine dotted line has been replotted, the first examiner’s corrections, and first revision improvements, have been added, the whole area requires careful examination on the ground.

This serves as a reminder of the material available: the notebooks of the original surveyor for the first edition, the tracings made during field examination for that edition, and the cards from the first revision. We should note that improvement seems to mean update. On Linlithgowshire 3.3 (1915) we have:

The Field Ex. tracings of the portion of [old] 1.7 of Linlithgow on this sheet are in such a dilapidated state that it is impossible to use them for the purpose of ascertaining old junctions.

Again we see the field examination from the first edition being made use of, in this case as part of the ‘J’ process. Linlithgowshire 3.6 has two notes:

NOTE: Owing to discrepancies between MS plans the boundary and other detail between Linlithgowshire and Stirlingshire cannot be inserted. Reviser will test and supply omissions.

NOTE: Revised cards differ at ABCDE. Reviser to test.

The first of these reflects a problem with the plans of adjoining counties on different meridians failing to join properly. The second is a problem at the junction of adjoining sheets (on the old sheet lines) where field boundaries on one sheet were consistently a couple of millimetres west of those on the adjoining sheet.

The blues lack names. They lack parcel numbers (as well as areas) though on some Welsh sheets parcel numbers have been added roughly by hand. They lack ornament, including the diagonal hatching of buildings and vegetation symbols. Isolated trees are the only exception to this. How were they made up?
Winterbotham’s account of what was used by the revisers in the field suggests that, as a base for the fair drawing, a vandyke of the first edition MS was taken with unwanted material (including anything deleted at first revision) removed, and the tracings onto litho transfer paper from that revision added. The whole must have been assembled onto the new sheet lines where necessary and given a new border with the new sheet designation, not to mention graticules. This would correspond to the process described in the note on Carnarvonshire 11.6, except that there the original MS was clearly thought unsatisfactory. This was a most laborious process: could they not have used the cards from the first revision? Recall that the cards were based on pulls from the first edition plate. Winterbotham clearly reflects a view that the distortion involved in transfer to the plate was unacceptable. Besides, as confirmation that the cards were not used, if the line on the blue where cards join is inspected, there is not the slightest hint of misalignment. The easiest approach would have been a pull from the second edition but the presence of detail not on the second edition clearly excludes this. The deletion of parcel numbers only for them to be roughly added later seems inefficient: either the preparation of an uncluttered basis for the field revisers was paramount, or else the convenience of the area men was ignored.

If this view is accepted, then detail found on the blue which is not on the second edition may represent detail drawn on the cards in the field at the first revision and traced onto litho transfer paper but not subsequently transferred to the plate – is that possible? – or else deleted from the plate. Alternatively it may represent material from the first edition MS which had somehow vanished by the time that plate was used to print the cards and hence was not marked for deletion because it was not there for the reviser to delete. There again, it could be material on the first edition plate which ought to have been deleted but was not. This third category ought to be capable of being checked against the published first edition; the first two cannot in general be distinguished. The tramway example given at (e) above is a rare case where the context establishes beyond doubt that the material dates from the first revision.

Perhaps further examples will make it possible to lay down some rules about the correct interpretation of extra detail from this category of blues. Until that happens, users should be aware of the potential ambiguity.

Observations

The processes for making up blues described above can only be regarded as a hypothesis. It would help to confirm or refute that hypothesis if some of the material used – first edition MS plans, field examiner’s tracings, tracings from card revision, or even the cards themselves – could be compared with the blues derived from them. Has this material perished in its entirety?

When security deletions were required, it is believed that a duplicate plate was made and the offending material was expunged from this ‘Sales copy’ plate. A blue made from a MS Plan – i.e. of up to 1918 – should be unexpurgated. A blue made after 1918 will only be unexpurgated if it was made from the ‘Official Use Only’ plate. So the appearance of a price stamp on the blue may indicate that there had been no deletions on that sheet. Or perhaps there was some good reason for using the Sales version in all cases, perhaps because that was the original plate and the ‘Official Use’ version was a copy, with potential for distortion. There is scope for further investigation here.