“Fingerprints all over it”

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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.
I have been looking at a new series of local street maps which is gradually covering much of the country. Called Focus maps they prominently display the OS logo on the cover with the legend ‘Mapping sourced from Ordnance Survey’. No doubt this endorsement coupled with the affordable price of £2.25 will attract many sales. You can check the range available at www.focusmaps.co.uk.

My local sheet is 43, Loughton; the others I have seen are similar. It’s on heavy duty paper and folds out from about "9" × 6" (slightly larger than A5) to about 24" × 18". Printed on both sides, it shows several town or village centre plans with associated indexes. Each of the plans has an Ordnance Survey logo in the corner with the message: ‘This product [sic] includes map data licensed from Ordnance Survey by permission of HMSO. Crown Copyright reserved 2004.’

The OS symbol and the date seem to assure you of quality and topicality but the grammatical error rather makes you worry about how much care has been taken. And indeed, the accuracy of the information portrayed is poor. In the small area near my house there are at least four misspelled names and, more seriously, anyone using the map to reach the prestigious Repton Park housing development would be sadly lost. In its place the map shows Claybury Hospital, complete with a blue cross. The hospital was demolished in 1998 and the housing built the following year.

Even more startling than the accidental errors are the deliberate errors. This one map includes the following fictitious roads: Bravo Ridge, Charlie Hill, Delta Court, Delta Crescent, Echo Court, Echo Croft, Foxtrot Crescent. The neighbouring Harlow sheet has Golf Drive, Hotel Croft and Tango Terrace; no doubt you could collect the entire phonetic alphabet by buying a few more sheets in the series.

It is common practice in the commercial map industry to include a subtle ‘fingerprint’ or two so that you can detect and prove plagiarisms. But Focus maps appear to indulge in fingerprinting to a hilarious extent. More like bootprints than fingerprints. These, with the careless mistakes, make these maps poor value. I think it can only harm the reputation of the Ordnance Survey to allow themselves to be so closely identified with such a misleading and unreliable product.

But the buyer can’t say he wasn’t warned; the front covers show a magnified extract of the map. Prominent on the Loughton cover (illustrated) can be seen an invented fingerprint and a spelling mistake! Under the magnifying glass, just north of its centre, is the phoney Delta Crescent. This stretch of road does exist but is simply part of Wellfields (misspelled on the map as Wellfieds!), separated by a grass strip. In some of the other fingerprints, the stretches of road are invented as well as the names.