Figure 1: 1832 Reform Act plan of Lincoln (courtesy of Lincolnshire County Libraries)
What is a Place?

R C Wheeler

Ordnance Survey’s view of the hierarchy of settlements was derived from the English county map: there were market towns, parish towns, and hamlets. The distinction between the first two categories left scope for argument; the division between hamlets and villages that constituted (or gave their name to) parishes was more rigid.

The system worked well in rural areas that had nucleated villages. Elsewhere, the Ordnance Survey could be led astray. Figure 1 shows Lincoln from the Old Series (actually from the lithographed Reform Act plan but the differences are not pertinent here). St Peter at Gowts and St Botolph are shown as parish towns. Administratively, their status was no different from that of the other twelve parishes that together made up the borough. We do not know why the OS chose to single them out in this way but because they are not named on Henry Stevens’s original drawing or on the early proofs of the engraved map, we must assume they were added at Colby’s direction.

Figure 2 shows part of Revised New Series sheet 314. North Charford was a long, thin parish, stretching 4 miles west to east across the Avon valley. The erstwhile manor house, now the Agricultural College, had been treated as the parish town on the Old Series but now the name was placed by the greatest concentration of houses, right at the eastern extremity of the parish. That group of houses continued to be shown as North Charford as late as the 1:50,000, even though the parish had long ceased to exist. In fact, the hamlet there was known locally as Hale Green, never as North Charford. OS had a system of ‘name books’ to record their authorities for the form of names, but I am not aware that they were ever used to address the question of whether a parish name might properly be used to designate a place.

Within this scheme of things, roads were incidental. It was very much a view of the country conditioned by owners and occupiers of land and the professions that served them.

An entirely different approach might be taken by the traveller, in particular by the early motorist, in which the roads were what mattered and places were merely nodes on the road.

---

1 British Library – Hill drawings.
2 Information from an uncle who was sub-postmaster of an adjoining hamlet for some thirty years.
network. A Bartholomew 1:1,000,000 map of the 1920s (Fig. 3) is a good example of this: villages not on a main road are omitted, whilst the most insignificant group of houses can be named if it marks a road junction. The A15 (as it now is) north and south of Lincoln provides some good examples. Caenby Corner had merely an inn, but marked an important fork and the name is still widely used. Hare Park, on the other hand, was the former Green Man inn, once the first stop of the London stagecoach after Lincoln, but long since converted to a farm. The Bartholomew map probably shows it because it stands at the junction of the road to Navenby, even though that road does not appear on the map.

From the idea of places as nodes on a road network, one can progress to the idea of co-equal nodes such that a road is deemed to be ‘going to’ its next node. Such a network of ‘primary towns’ was of course defined by the Ministry of Transport in the 1960s. ‘Co-equal’ is a notion that needed to be stretched somewhat: the Editor pointed out that Llangurig as a primary town is slightly ludicrous. In fact, the scheme was moderated by the designation of ‘super primary towns’, including (inevitably) London but also less likely candidates such as Brighton and Hull. Despite its strains, the system has served the motorist well for forty years.

The matter of where a road was ‘going to’ before the introduction of primary towns was often a matter of universal agreement, even though there is no convenient record that one could refer to at the time, or can look back at now. In some cases, the naming was entirely obvious; in other cases, it could be a source of perplexity to strangers. Thus, the A50 heading SE from Leicester was ‘the Welford road’ and appeared on the old generation of road signs as ‘A50 / Welford’, causing incredulity in the minds of some motorists that so great a road should be signed as for so insignificant a village. Part of the explanation here was that, although the A50 continued to Northampton (and indeed London), travellers could also

---

3 Southern Scotland and England and Wales. The dating of this map is discussed later.
4 Another uncle was so perplexed (despite having found Welford on his map) that he took the A50 in the opposite direction from that which he wished to follow.
proceed to Northampton via Market Harborough and for a long period this was the better road. Indeed, Thomas Roberts’s 1741 plan of Leicester calls these two roads the ‘London Road by Welford’ and the ‘London Road by Harborow’. Another part of the explanation was that the County authorities tended to regard main roads as going to the County boundary, after which they were someone else’s problem; Welford is just over the boundary with Northamptonshire. Another Leicester example is instructive: the northbound A46 was known as ‘the Six Hills road’, not (as I once imagined) because anyone had counted the successive summits, but after the name of a tiny hamlet (once a junction of Roman roads) beyond which, as late as 1908, the Fosse Way degenerated to the insignificant track that the OS designated a mere third class road. For a couple of miles, this track formed the boundary with Nottinghamshire so, once again, the road was named after the place where it reached the county boundary.

Just as the introduction of primary towns by the Ministry of Transport produced a single answer to the question of where a road was going, so, a generation earlier, the same Ministry (or County Councils acting as its agents) answered the question of the name by which a hamlet at some minor junction should be known to the motorist by putting up its standard place-name signs. But, before that occurred, how was a commercial map producer to decide what names to use at these junctions?

In the case of the Bartholomew 1:1,000,000 map referred to, inspection of a number of such names suggests that usually the most prominent name on the OS one-inch was used. The hamlet of Six Hills provides particularly strong evidence, in that Bartholomew marks it as ‘Six Hills Inn’. That was never the name of the inn there: the present Six Hills Hotel was formerly the Durham Ox. However, the OS one-inch marks the junction ‘Six Hills / Inn [in smaller font]’ and it seems plausible that a hasty compiler took it as a single name. Hare Park is also an instructive case: it appears as such on the first and second editions of the New Series but not on the third.

Nevertheless, there is at least one name, ‘Hedge Corner’, south of Alton (Hampshire) (SU 688304), which is not to be found on any edition of the OS one-inch, nor on any edition of the County Series six-inch. One might be tempted to accuse Bartholomew of inventing a name, were it not that the adjacent farm (created after 1930) is known as ‘Hedge Corner Farm’. Where, one wonders, did Bartholomew get the name from?

Because this particular collection of minor place names is so idiosyncratic, it is easy to spot maps that use it. (Interestingly, there is no link to the Bartholomew half-inch series.) The map reproduced at Figure 3 has a cover (Fig. 4) produced in or shortly after 1923 (and certainly before 1926). The appearance of Hare Park as a name (altered by 1908) with the inclusion of the A46 beyond ‘Six Hills Inn’ as a major road (upgraded after 1908) suggests that the stone had already been updated at least once by this date. It may well be a cut-down version of Bartholomew’s Contour Motoring map of the British Isles showing the best touring roads with heights and distances, a 1:1,000,000 map of Great Britain and Ireland, excluding the Orkney and Shetland Islands, and first produced in 1907. By the 1920s, this particular map used black for place names, contours and the larger settlement symbols, and colour for roads and the smaller settlement symbols. Its material subsequently reappears at

---

5 I am indebted to Tim Nicholson for dating the cars shown.
6 Date in BL catalogue. I have not had an opportunity to inspect this sheet.
7 Print code 421. The copy I have seen had been printed with the black plate only so showed no roads at all!
the twelve-mile scale in the *Dunlop Touring Maps of the British Isles*. These have roads and ferries updated; nevertheless, Hare Park still appears as late as 1960.⁸

![Image of a vintage car advertisement](image.png)

*Figure 4: Cover of the map shown at Figure 3*

It would no doubt be possible to do far more work in tracing the history of this material. I have not tried to present a definitive account, merely to observe that a 1:1,000,000 road map can, sometimes, be a primary source for place-names and that there are aspects of topographic nomenclature which are largely ignored by the written sources.

---

⁸ Seventeenth edition, appearing in the BL catalogue as of that date – the atlases themselves are undated. I am indebted to Richard Porter for drawing my attention to this series.