“Kerry musings”
David Archer

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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.
Kerry musings

David Archer

Here and now = place and time = maps and clocks, but as far as I am concerned, the ‘and’ does not imply equality. Maps are not equal to clocks, they are far more useful. One can get by without a clock, but a map is needed. Knowing the exact time is not a high priority for me. I have never worn a wristwatch, finding that I usually have a good idea of the time, can see a clock nearby, or I can ask someone to look at their watch and tell me the time. However, I do like to know exactly where I am, and can seldom ask anyone to look at their map and tell me where I am. Most people do not carry maps, and as the early Ordnance Surveyors found, locals can get things terribly wrong at times.

Like so many of our members, whenever I go to a new area, I must have a map of the place. To know how the roads work, what should be over that hill, and where the river came from. I always found it strange, when I lived in London, that people in cars would stop and ask directions to a certain street written on a scrap of paper (always a scrap of paper). They drive across the city, aim for a particular area and then hope to find the street. An A-Z is very inexpensive and not bulky. We still have one for London in the car, so why don’t residents? I have a handful of quite old A-Zs for most major cities, ready for any visit, even though today one can call up a useful map on the internet. But an A-Z is still essential for getting in and out of a city.

I suppose that an ‘in-car’ (does this distinguish them from ‘out of car’?) satellite navigation system might help. Tell it where you are and where you would like to be and it takes you there. Easy, just like looking at a map or road atlas. But instead of glancing at notes on a piece of paper on the passenger seat whilst at traffic lights, you can watch a very small screen as you drive. No, these are not autopilot machines as well, you have to do the slowing down and watching for pedestrians, as well as looking at a screen. I have always believed that keeping my eyes on the road is more important than keeping both hands on the wheel, yet mobile phone use whilst driving is banned (one hand off the wheel), but looking at a small screen is not (both eyes off the road). Some machines will give spoken directions as well (for the blind or those who cannot / will not look at a screen whilst driving). So why not just have taped instructions, which would be much safer? One could press a button on the steering wheel to move the tape to the next instruction. What is wrong with planning a route using an atlas? Why are reading street signs out of favour? Memorising directions helps keep the brain working, rather than being spoon fed everything. Do drivers remember the route next time after using a machine? I am always surprised, how one can retrace a route in the opposite direction, after having been given instructions by someone at the side of the road (well, I don’t have that many A-Zs). But maybe these gadgets are intended for those who have no sense of direction at all?

On a similar theme, says he who has never seen either at close range, are GPS (Global Positioning System) devices. I have heard that they are quite tricky to use, which explains why I only know of two people who have them, both over seventy, with ample time to spend on them. It seems that about one in three machines are returned to the shops as not wanted. Ok, you turn it on and it tells you where you are, with various grid references, and even shows the location on a map. Then what? Fine if you are out on the ocean or in the middle of a desert, and can get an instant idea of your location, but what if you are sitting on the sofa at
home? Actually they will not work indoors, in woods or where there is limited access to satellites. So no good for caving, where they would be extremely useful. They might be fine if you are lost, in the open; but I assume the idea is to use them before you are lost. Much better to have a map.

Whenever I need to buy something that I know very little about, I look at the excellent ‘Quick guide’ product introductions in the Argos catalogue. In very concise terms, the main features of an item range and ‘important considerations when deciding to buy’ are given, and are usually spot-on. But after reading about GPS machines, I thought I had stumbled into the toys section. “Track points: an electric breadcrumb trail recording where the user has been. Reverse routes: after navigating a route, users can reverse the route to travel back exactly the same path. Waypoints in routes: a series of waypoints can be grouped together to form a navigable route”. Three of the five selling points. If they do not exist, I assume that the time will soon arrive when GPS systems can be had to wear like a wristwatch. If lost half way up a mountain, it would be much better if a rescuer knew where you were, rather than your knowing exactly how lost you were. And don’t tell me people do not get lost whilst carrying them. Something that gives out a signal would be more useful. Perhaps this could be built into maps, assuming most people at risk take maps with them. Why not make the grid lines of very thin metal foil, as found in bank notes. These could be connected to a micro-chip, and if anyone was in difficulty, they would just stick a pin in the map, showing where they were and an electrical circuit would be activated, sending out a distress call and giving the exact location. Even if the location was not exact, it would help, and rescuers would be alerted sooner than waiting for someone not to return to base. I know that the patent professionals amongst us will point out that one cannot patent an idea, but if anyone takes it up, please remember me.

A small pocket compass could come in handy more often than one would think. Most of us would only take one for a walk, but I have a friend who lives in the heart of central London, and he would never be without his. It is ideal for taking short cuts down unfamiliar streets, but really comes into its own when leaving Underground stations. Whenever I am ascending from the depths at Piccadilly, I always wonder where I will see daylight. But with a compass, one can get a bearing and go round to the next exit in order to gain the street one seeks. Again, driving in unfamiliar cities is often much easier if one has a compass handy, on the dashboard even, but one should not look at it, as this means taking your eyes off the road, so you drive hoping to be stopped by traffic lights before you go too far in the wrong direction. We really are badly designed, surely two pairs of eyes are not much to ask for?

After this goes out, I will be living in fear, that in response to my never having seen a GPS system, one will be sent to me by a well-wisher, just as a plastic map case (with a nice string to go around my neck) arrived for Xmas from a devoted reader. Actually, it was rather good and I was quite impressed with it. Even more so after I investigated a query from Roger Hellyer. Yes, I can recommend them for keeping sandwiches nice and dry when walking in wet weather. An excellent product. But I cannot even start to think what other uses a GPS system could be put to. Answers to the Editor, please.