“Is Folkestone on the road to Killarney?”
Rob Wheeler

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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.
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Right from the very start, from Mudge’s map of Kent, the Ordnance Survey adopted the convention that bodies of water, and particularly the sea, should be shown by water-lining, lines engraved parallel to the shore but becoming more widely spaced and then vanishing altogether in the space of less than an inch.

When coloured sheets were first published by lithography, this convention was maintained, the water-lining now being in blue. That made it necessary to clean off water features from the black plate and to produce a blue plate by cleaning off all detail except the water features. The process sounds straightforward but difficulties could occur where ‘black’ features were inextricably mixed up with ‘blue’ ones. The supreme example of this was where administrative boundaries ran along a river. Deleting the boundary from the black plate along with the river and then re-drawing it was an option, but a laborious one, especially as the water-lining would also need repairing on the blue plate. An acceptable ‘fudge’ was to show boundaries within rivers in blue, thus avoiding repair work on both black and blue plates. Even so, there might be scope for confusion where, for example, a boundary ran mostly along a river with occasional slight deviations. I have the impression that the processes for dealing with this improved with time: for example on ‘Second Coloured’ sheet 287, just downstream of Edenbridge, the parish boundary between Brasted (det) and Edenbridge vanishes altogether SE of Skinners; by the Third Edition (small sheet series) this section is in blue.

Nevertheless, it had become clear that water-lining on coloured maps caused problems. When the coloured quarter-inch was introduced, and the half-inch in 1903, a new convention was introduced, of a water-tint plate, with the tint being gradually washed out as the distance from the shore increases. The technique is called vignetting and exploits a diffractive effect which is usually regarded as a nuisance. A water-tint plate would require a further pass through the press but this appeared to be thought preferable to the problems that water-lining had produced: in 1905, a water-tint was adopted for the coloured one-inch of Scotland, this
time in a more agreeable shade of blue. Coloured water-lining remained only in England & Wales – either because so much of the work had been done already, or because the greater complexity of parish boundaries there (compared to Scotland) rendered the conversion so much more daunting.

Unfortunately, the production of composite sheets threw up more problems: water-lining on one of the constituents was unlikely to join neatly with water-lining on another. That would not matter if only a river was affected, but sea was a different matter. Thus, for example, the East Kent (South) composite sheet shows no fewer than three such joins.

In March 1913, the Folkestone and Dover District sheet was published. It avoided the water-lining problems of the old East Kent (South) composite by introducing a blue water tint (in a very delicate sky-blue). It will not have been a labour-free option because it will have been necessary to redraw submarine contours. Pwllheli and Criccieth District came out in June 1913, also with a water-tint. Now these sheets have never been regarded as belonging to the sequence of experimental sheets that starts with Killarney and carries on to the Scottish tourist maps of 1920-21. At one level, it was hardly an experiment to produce an English district sheet in a style current in Scotland for the past eight years. But it established a precedent that district sheets could be produced in a more elaborate colour scheme than their parent regular sheets. Indeed, after Folkestone, the only ordinary English district sheet to be produced was of the Staffordshire Potteries (for which a separate water tint would have served little purpose).

Now this short piece has been produced solely on the basis of published maps and the cartobibliographies published by the Society. I do not know whether the deliberations on the form of the Killarney sheet preceded or followed the deliberations on whether Folkestone should have a water-tint plate. But if Folkestone was not on the road to Killarney, I suggest it was at least on the road to Aldershot and the other experimental English district sheets.