“Kerry musings”
David Archer

Sheetlines, 79 (August 2007), pp.61-63

This article is provided for personal, non-commercial use only.
Please contact the Society regarding any other use of this work.

Published by
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps
www.CharlesCloseSociety.org

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.
Kerry musings

David Archer

A friend had a large collection of railway postcards. As with cigarette cards, they came in various series and had an identification number or code on the reverse. One day, as he was sorting cards at a postcard fair, he realised that he was only looking at the codes and not the pictures on the front. At once, he decided that he was not going to pay vast sums just for publisher’s codes, and he sold his collection.

On Ordnance Survey maps, we tend to call them ‘print codes’, though frequently ‘reprint code’ would be more accurate. They are usually found somewhere in the lower margin, and over the years have come in different forms, giving details of dates of printing, quantity produced, edition, printers and place of printing. The earliest codes were dates, and added to the black plate were both more legible and cost effective, but nowhere as nice as blind stamps. The OS started with month and year codes such as 5.99 and 3.05, whilst Bartholomew used A28 or B28 (found top left of maps, indicating the first or second six months of 1928). Then the number of copies printed was added to the year, giving 400/1902 and 400/03. Although a code of 1,000 is usually assumed to mean that one thousand copies were printed, anyone who has seen a printer’s contract knows that about that number are delivered. An attempt was then made to withhold and disguise information by conflating 2,000/40 to 2040, and experimenting with unique numbers. With the birth of the A/ system, any reference to quantities was dropped, with the code sequence showing the chronological order of editions, and the degree to which they had been revised.

Never intended for the general public, codes have been very useful to the collector and anyone compiling a list of maps. I have several lists that I am trying to complete. With each, the first step was to list every state of the maps that I owned. I then listed the codes for states not held, but which were part of a print code string. There is of course, no guarantee that unseen maps will have differences other than the codes, but they are variant states because of the codes, and must be listed and sought. A print run element in a code should give an indication of how likely it is that one will turn up. All of this is pretty obvious, but not so, is the hidden danger in list compilation.

Once I started a comprehensive, in depth list, I found that I was not bothered whether I owned the maps, especially if I knew who had a copy. I just wanted more items to add to the list, and to have each item described in full. Again, the chase, but the quarry is a list entry, not a map. Eventually the list rules, and takes over from the map collection. A list of what is in the collection and what could be. A far more comprehensive and satisfying entity than an incomplete map collection. Entries are picked up here and there, hints from eBay that should be followed up, items passed on from other collectors, on-line library catalogues, Sheetlines and other CCS publications. All help with the search. Another person’s list, even of the same map series, holds no interest, unless they know something that you don’t. Many readers will have lists other than a wants list, and most will have noted something that nobody else has, that only they know about, and has never been mentioned in Sheetlines. Lists of covers for example, with a dozen different cover state and format combinations for Arthur Palmer’s Oban illustration. There are so many wonderful lists held by members, and all would be horrified by the age-old predicament: would you rather your collection or your list were destroyed? Very difficult. For years, I have kept a non-map list in the form of a birthday
book, with the aim of having an entry for each day of the year. Friends, neighbours, shopkeepers and postmen are all in it. I have two rules; I must know the person and I cannot ask for dates, restricting myself to picking them up when mentioned in conversation. One never knows when one will appear and like maps, great pleasure is obtained from filling a gap. A pointless occupation really.

It was Guy Messenger who first brought intensive cartobibliographical study of Ordnance Survey maps to the attention of most members. His work on the one-inch Third Edition highlighted the fact that a print code is not always attached to a single state of a map. The same print code can be associated with different versions of the detail in the map margin, giving different states. Others have shown that a code can be associated with different detail within the neat line. If print codes form the basis of any list, as they are so succinct, how would we get on without them? What would your wants book look like? You would have a descriptive catalogue of holdings, against which would be checked every map you came across. Very tiresome. Surely this is the case with those who collect Old Series maps? I have yet to see an Old Series wants list, but assume that it will be telephone directory sized. A collector of English Thirds (to use the shorthand) knows that there were at least five states of the Weybridge sheet with an 8.11 reprint code. So, including the original printing, six entries might be beside the sheet number in a list. But there are no codes for the Old Series and lengthy descriptions are needed to identify each state. Even if a map is identified in the Margary listings, which are now becoming rather dated, knowing that you need ‘Margary state 4’ tells you nothing when away from home. No, for Old Series maps, one would have to have a holdings list, which describes each state held, and which probably explains the dearth of Old Series wants lists.

My postcard friend was in a similar position to a lot of map collectors. All enjoy the thrill of the chase, tracking down and acquiring unheld maps (codes). And then. And then? Straight away they go looking for more, without studying those just purchased. Well, why should you get excited when the chances are that only the print code is different? So boring. Much more exciting to continue searching for other maps. New codes, even ones not known to you or anyone else who has a list of the same series. Ah, the list. To be carried everywhere, and pored over of an evening. Copied into a new book when it gets a little sad, when you run out of space or yet again decide to re-structure it and this time use different colours for maps held or needed (maps are always needed, never wanted or lacking). Compilers use symbols in case the book falls into the wrong hands, and all have sleepless nights deciding whether to have a name and address in it or not.

But if you are a true collector, rather than a map enthusiast, then the collecting is the all important thing. A map enthusiast will want two copies of the same map because they are different in some way, and it matters not as to what is different. But a true collector does not need a collection of maps and an empty bank account. A good strong list should suffice, as the hunt is the important thing. Find the maps, be in the position of being able to buy them, and then just tick the item on a list (or colour it). This certainly frees cash so that one can travel and look for more things to tick. But the chance of owning them must exist in order to tick.

What is the point of having lots of maps that one never looks at, just because one collects them? They are just trophies from the hunt. Golfers make do with score cards.

Searching for OS maps and actually buying them is similar to going on safari with a rifle. You return and mount an elephant head on your wall or put a map on the shelf, just to show
that you could do it. Much better not to buy them, to go on safari with a camera or your wants book, and return with a close-up photograph or tick; again, showing that you were able to do it. Ticks in your book also have the advantage that they don’t take up space or gather dust. Why not follow the example of bird spotters and have a life list and an annual one, thereby getting some advantage from looking at endless copies of Popular Edition sheet 133 or Seventh Series sheet 107?