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“The shadow of the land-surveyor”

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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.

## *The shadow of the land-surveyor*

*Rob Wheeler*

The nineteenth century surveying profession shades gently into a whole range of other activities. At one end of the spectrum, there were surveyors who were competent civil engineers, able to design and superintend the construction of a modest bridge. At the other end were those who also served as land agents, managing agricultural estates for their owners. For the latter task, an estate map was an essential tool, showing each field with its area. The value of a plot could be determined by multiplying its area by the generally accepted value per acre for land of that quality, and adjusting for aspects like state of fences, provision of appropriate buildings (where appropriate), and convenience of access.

In 1851, Harmston's rateable value (which in those days kept closely in step with annual rents) was £2,892. Of this sum, only about 5% represented the value of buildings. Of course, it was scarcely possible to value buildings separately: a farm was of little value without a farmhouse and vice-versa, but from the instances where figures are available this seems a fair approximation. Harmston Hall with its park was given a rateable value of some £50. Since the agricultural value of the park was about £30, this only leaves £20 for the house: it was seen as elegant but distinctly lacking in modern conveniences. This is not to imply that the occupants were actually *spending* more on the park than on the house: the open parkland could be used (or sublet) as permanent pasture; the plantations produced wood and pheasants; the kitchen garden a copious supply of vegetables. But to a large extent values were determined by agricultural potential.

To appreciate just how useful such a map was for estate management, one need only read a letter from before one was available: a tenant complains that his land used to be reckoned, with two other pieces now in separate hands, as a virgate of 43 acres; these other parts have been reckoned as 10½ acres, leaving him with 32½, but if he looks at the individual pieces that make it up, they do not come to as much as that ...<sup>1</sup> All these calculations are expressed in round numbers and the price agreed per acre (10s) is so round a figure as to suggest that the whole business of fixing a fair rent was a desperate stab in the dark.

Understanding the function of the early nineteenth-century estate map is important because the large-scale Ordnance Survey plan superseded it and indeed was intended to supersede it. That is why so much effort went into calculating the area of every parcel outside a built-up area. It may be objected that the Ordnance Survey has never purported to show land ownership. But, for estate maps, ownership was a minor point anyway. Land was leased far more frequently than it was sold and, even when it was not being leased, its annual value needed to be determined for assessing parish rates. A 'parcel' was generally the smallest element of land that could be leased separately.

So the Ordnance Surveyor, if working on the large-scale plans (as most were) took on the mantle of the old land-surveyor. Academic geographers too liked to do it. The first Land Utilisation Survey is a good example with its traffic-light colours of green for pasture, yellow for heath, and red for 'land agriculturally unproductive' – not just close-set buildings and abandoned works but also marshland too swampy for grazing. Significantly, purple was used not just for orchards and nurseries but also for new suburbs: 'land occupied by houses with

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<sup>1</sup> LAO 2 Thor Har 2/4/2.

gardens sufficiently large to be productive of fruit, vegetables, flowers, etc'.<sup>2</sup> This is decidedly not a modern environmentalist's view of the world.

Wartime service may have reminded surveyors and academics alike that there was another way of viewing land, from its military potential, but both views were rigorously objective in the sense that they were divorced from any consideration of ownership. Meanwhile, another, popular, view has been growing up, in which land is viewed as industrial, or commercial, or houses-and-gardens, or farmers' fields (a horrid but significant term), or public open space. (Granted, there are examples that do not fit happily into these categories, but they are perhaps no more numerous than the examples that do not fit into the Land Utilisation Survey's categories.) This popular scheme is essentially driven by the question 'who uses it?' The two approaches sometimes clash, and I want to describe one such instance, on Bagshot Heath.

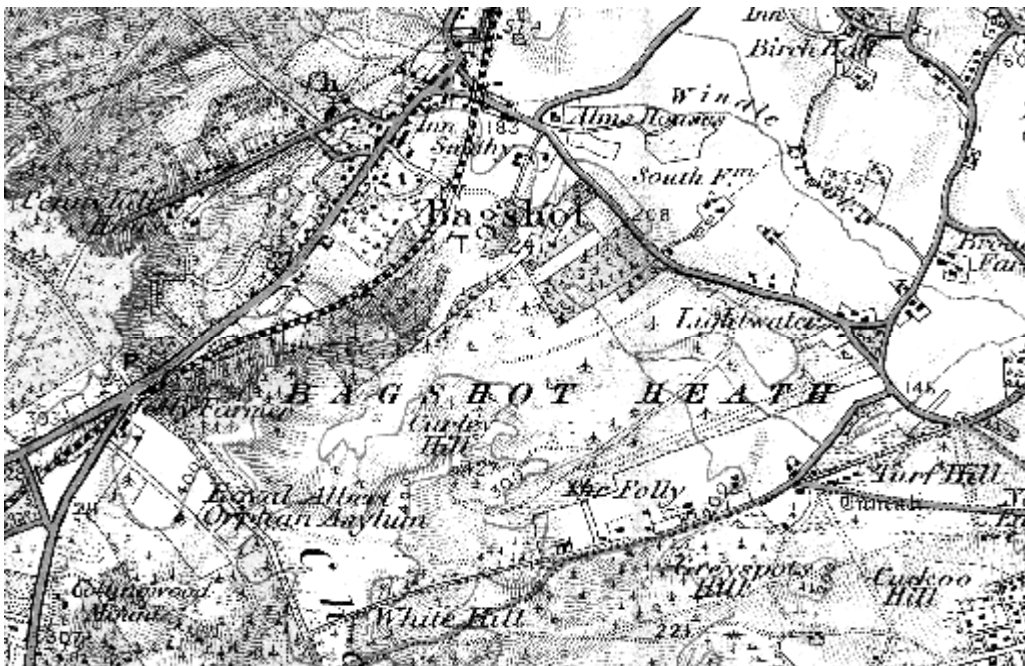


Figure 1: One inch Third Edition (Large Sheet Series) sheet 115, 8.11 printing (enlarged to about 1:50,000)

Figure 1 shows the area as it was at the start of the twentieth century: empty heath but with residential development starting to take place adjoining the metalled road along the southern boundary. We shall focus on the track that leads SE between the 'H' and 'E' of 'HEATH' and splits either side of the 300ft contour, especially its northern arm. By the time of the County Series revision of 1913, that arm had a name, Highview Road, and the purchase and division into plots for residences of the area between that road and the fence shown adjacent to the 't' of 'Bagshot' on Figure 2, had either occurred or was imminent.<sup>3</sup> Figure 2 shows the six-inch based on that revision, with the addition of houses to 1938. These additions were undertaken as part of ARP revision so were fairly sketchy, but show that the developer had been somewhat optimistic about prospective sales. Bagshot station might be just a mile and a half away as the crow flies, but having to negotiate a mile of

<sup>2</sup> L Dudley Stamp and E C Willatts, *The Land Utilisation Survey of Britain, an outline descriptions of the first twelve one-inch maps*, London, 1935, 7.

<sup>3</sup> The Valuation Office assigned a value to the individual plots in March 1915.

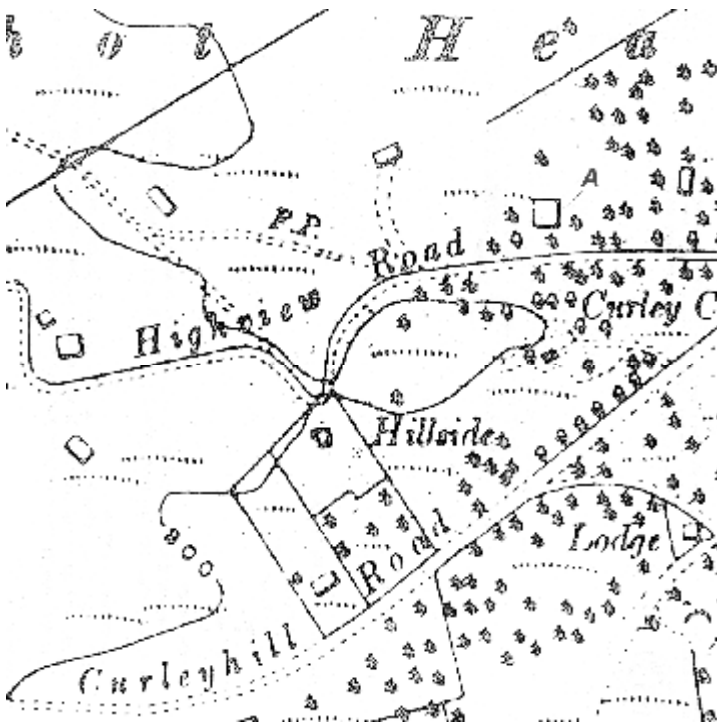


Figure 2: Six-inch County Series sheet revised to 1938 (slightly reduced)

unmade road to get anywhere made the spot just a little too remote – though not for some: the man who had the house west of that at ‘A’ built was suffering acute nervous problems from his service in the Great War and wanted somewhere very quiet.

Resurvey of areas like this was not a priority for the OS and the first properly revised plan since 1913, the National Grid 1:2500, only came out in 1971 (Figure 3). The area was clearly no longer seen as remote, and secondary development had already occurred on some of the larger plots. One can fault the resurvey on one point: the fence at BC has been copied from the County Series but, I am assured, was no longer there. One can see how it might have happened: it was

not easily visible from a road and the surveyor perhaps saw something through the trees (either viewing an air photograph or checking on the ground) that he persuaded himself was a wire fence at just the right spot. So far, no real harm had been done.

By 1983 (the date of Figure 4) further revision had occurred: nothing major, but the fence CD has now been deleted.<sup>4</sup> Worse was to come: by 1990, *all* the subdividing fences stretching back to that rear property boundary had been deleted. Indeed, the new area of woodland so created was large enough to become a parcel (No. 6278) whose area could be calculated. Undoubtedly, Figure 5 looks much more plausible than Figure 4. Probably one cannot tell the difference on an air photograph. However, it is misleading.

A householder then complained. Unfortunately, not being a Victorian land-surveyor, or an academic geographer, he took the popular approach to land utilisation and complained that the OS was showing his garden as woodland. The OS response was that what they were showing as woodland was indeed woodland; and of course they were right ... in a sense. The problem is that people now use OS maps for purposes other than leasing woodland or deciding how many tanks can be hidden there.

The first of these new uses was for designating a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). I am told that Bagshot Heath is Scientifically Interesting. Our poor householder's garden appeared to me to be distinctly uninteresting secondary woodland, and I suspect that parcel 6278 was designated as part of the SSSI because it looked logical on the map rather than from inspection of the garden. Fortunately, an appeal led to a detailed inspection and the SSSI boundary was re-drawn.

<sup>4</sup> The wire fence that previously marked the boundary may have collapsed by this date. The alignment was marked by bushes sufficient in number to satisfy the householders on each side but not sufficient to meet the Ordnance Survey definition of a hedge.



Figure 3: 1:2,500 National Grid Series plan SU9161 of 1971

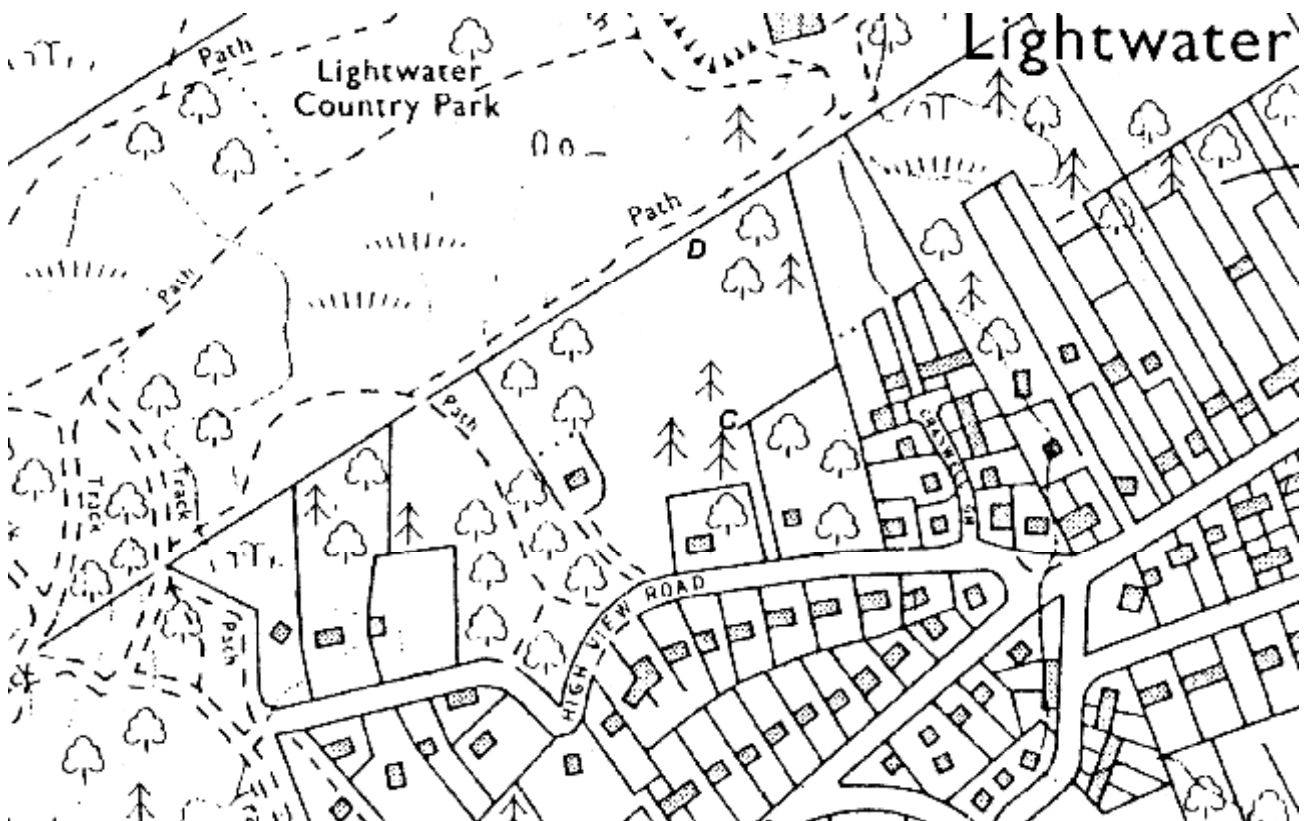


Figure 4: 1:10,000 sheet SU 96 SW of 1983 (enlarged to about 1:6,500)  
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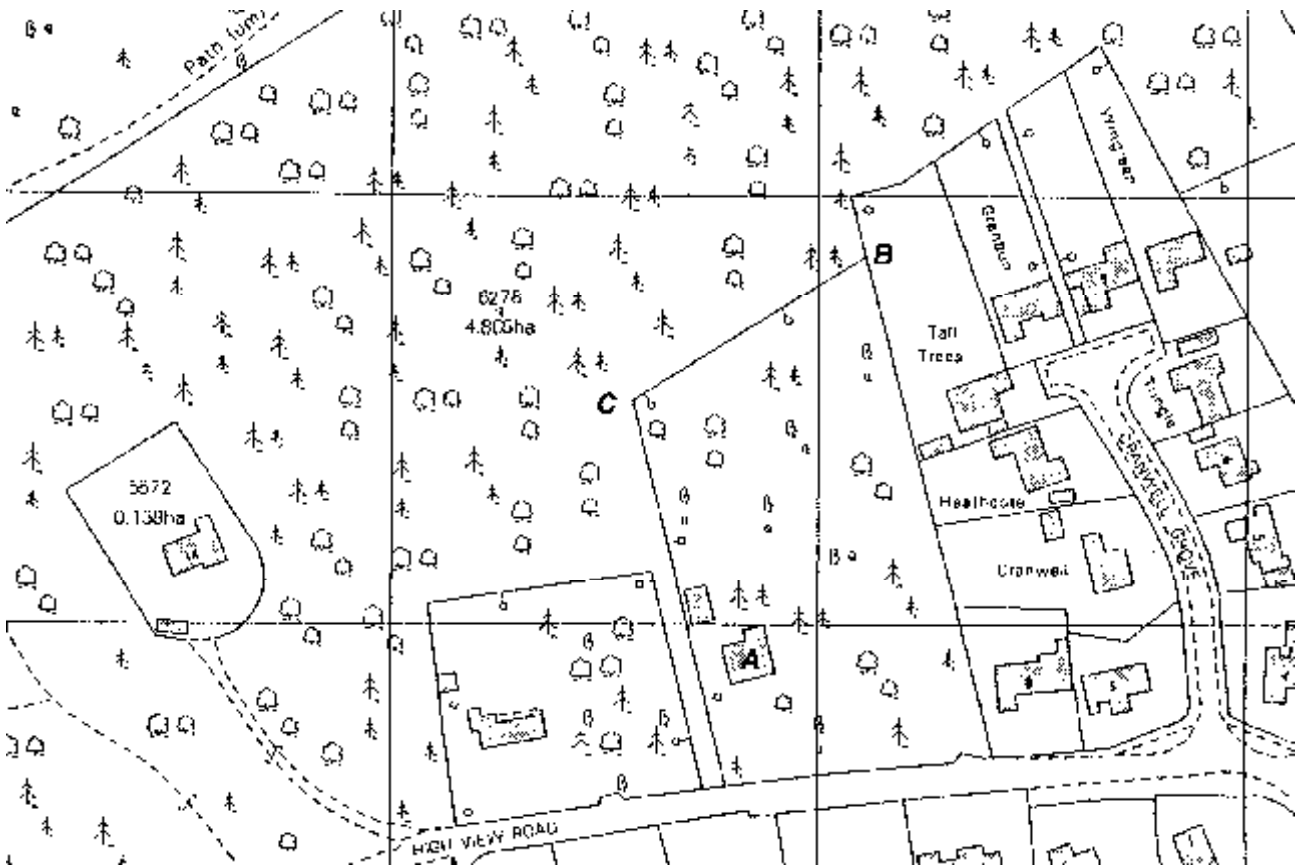


Figure 5: 1:2,500 National Grid Series plan SU9161 of 1990. © Crown Copyright NC/00/1340

Being told one mustn't dig up one's trees and plant potatoes instead might have been no great hardship on such poor land, but worse was to come. Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, many of these woodland gardens backing onto the Country Park were declared Access Land. So some of the residents now find that ramblers have every right to wander round what they have always regarded as parts of their gardens.

Now my purpose in relating this tale is not to lambast the Ordnance Survey. Everyone can make mistakes, and I understand their database now has the missing fence at CD restored. Nor is it to criticise Victorian land-surveyors: readers of *Sheetlines* are well aware of my admiration for J S Padley – and are probably thoroughly sick of reading about someone whose association with the OS was so brief and so unofficial. It is rather to observe that we may need to recognise what I have termed the *popular approach* to land categories – even if we refuse point-blank to talk about “farmers’ fields”.

**Postscript.** Since this was written, I have learned that the OS regards BC as representing an old bank. When I visited a few years back I did indeed observe a shallow linear feature such as often survives when a hedge across pasture land has been removed, but it did not appear to be something that even an archaeologist would regard as a functioning boundary.

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DEFRA designates ‘nitrate vulnerable zones’ in which, to safeguard water quality, farmers must limit the animal manure applied to their land. We hear of a case in Devon where the zone boundary follows a no longer existent fence on the large-scale OS map. Hence the farmer is required to control the amount of sheep droppings in one of part of his field but not in the other. His latest idea is to erect a notice informing his sheep in which area they should perform their natural functions. – CJH