Sheetlines

The journal of
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps

"Colby's camps"

Iain Thornber and Richard Oliver

Sheetlines, 90 (April 2011), pp.18-22

Stable URL:
http://www.charlesclosesociety.org/files/Issue90page18.pdf

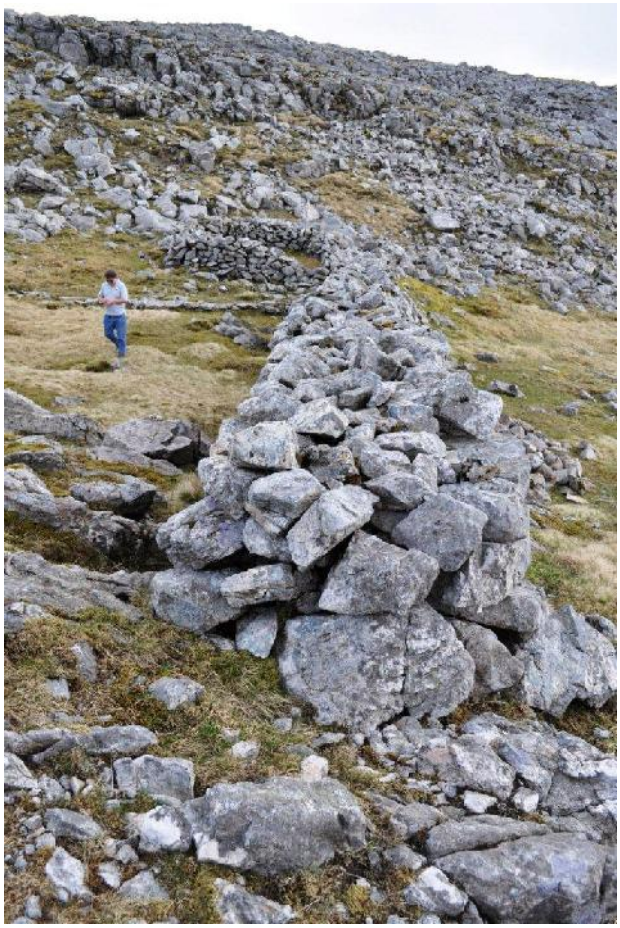
Published by
THE CHARLES CLOSE SOCIETY
for the Study of Ordnance Survey Maps
www.CharlesCloseSociety.org

Colby's camps

Iain Thornber and Richard Oliver

The camp on Creach Bheinn, Ardgour (NM 879576). Visible are the two massive stone wall windbreaks, between which are four semi-circular stone platforms, possibly bases for tented accommodation and a more substantial building near the lower wall, possibly the cook house or officer accommodation.

It is well known that the Ordnance Survey had its origins in a late eighteenth century project to construct a triangulation of Great Britain, starting with a base line at Hounslow Heath. By 1809 most of England had been triangulated, and work was under way in southern Scotland. By 1822 a large part of Scotland had



Creach Bheinn, detail of lower windbreak wall

been observed, and a connection had been established to the north of Ireland. The ensuing six-inch scale Townland survey of Ireland and a greatly increased use in triangulation for control of detail meant that from 1824 to 1837 all Ordnance trigonometrical work was concentrated in that country. When the triangulation of Britain was resumed in 1838 much of the earlier work was felt to be unsound and was re-observed, together with observations of some stations not previously occupied. The fieldwork was completed in 1852, and the results were published in 1858. Because of the extensive work after 1838, much of the later observing can only have had a very tenuous connection with Thomas Colby. Up the late 1820s he had participated personally in the observations in the field, and expected to be away from Survey headquarters in the Tower or at Dublin for long periods in the observing season, but thereafter he was much more desk-bound. No complete list survives of which station was occupied when, but it is evident that the concept of primary, secondary and tertiary orders of triangulation only emerged gradually. Whilst none of the stations observed in Britain before 1824 was of tertiary status, many were later of only secondary status.

Of the stations shown in these photographs, most were not treated as primary stations when the work came to be computed and written up by Alexander Ross Clarke in the 1850s.[1] In fact, the only one that was is that on Jura, presumably first occupied in 1822 at least partly with a view to the connection with Ireland. The most striking group of the photos is of Creach Beinn (NM 870576), which was evidently treated as a secondary station by Clarke's time. In fact, it is unclear whether Colby himself actually occupied it. The foundations for tents are interesting relics: one wonders if they might have been reused or even repaired by visitors later.

---

[1] A R Clarke, *Account of the observations and calculations of the principal triangulation…*, Southampton: Ordnance Survey, 1858: a summary of the work and a diagram of the primary triangulation is in W A Seymour (ed), *A history of the Ordnance Survey*, Folkestone: Dawson, 1980, 33-43, 139-46, and Plate 11.

Beinn an Oir, Jura (NR 495749) above: camp and path leading to summit cairn; below left: the camp; below right: unrecorded stone building about 100 metres below and east of summit, possibly WC or observation hut

Opposite:
Top and middle: trig point and remains of camp on Ben Alder (NN 496718)
Lower: original trig point on island of Staffa, above and to the left of McKinnon's Cave (by the boat)

Colby and others chose stations for their good inter-visibility with other stations, and this meant that it was inevitable that they would be on the summits of hills and mountains, and thus often in rather inhospitable places. The usual way of marking the observing stations was by buried stones, about two feet or so square, with a hole bored to indicate the precise point for setting up the theodolite: on mountains it was usual to protect these stones by erecting cairns over them.

Although a considerable achievement in its day, the 1784-1858 triangulation did not compare well with later European ones, even by 1900, and much of the secondary triangulation had been undertaken to suit county-based rather than nationally-based larger-scale survey. Thus a complete re-triangulation began in 1935: most of the primary observations were completed by 1938, but the results were only published in 1967. Many of the original stations were reoccupied, but now they were marked by concrete pillars, and the building of these tended to result in the partial demolition of the original cairns. Some summits, such as Creach Beinn, which had not been used as primary stations in the original triangulation were now promoted to that status: it would be interesting to know whether any of the camps of the earlier nineteenth century were reused a hundred or more years later.[2]

Photographs and captions are by Iain Thornber (left), narrative is by Richard Oliver.

Iain Thornber, JP, DL, FSA has written extensively on aspects of Scottish history and archaeology. His recreations are deer stalking, photography and local history research.

[2] *The history of the retriangulation of Great Britain*, 2 vols, London: HMSO, 1967: summarised in Seymour (ed), *A history*, 268-72, 307-17, and Plate 18.