

## ***The 'Withycombe' style***

***Richard Oliver***

My article on lettering in *Sheetlines* 95<sup>1</sup> prompted several responses from readers. One suggested that it might be a good idea to illustrate the 'Withycombe' style as originally designed in 1928, and this appears in the upper part of figure 1.

Although it has been customary for several decades to refer to this style as 'Withycombe', this is really a tribute to the 'project leader', Captain JG Withycombe: much of the detailed work was undertaken by the Ordnance Survey's resident artist, Ellis Martin. It would therefore be more accurate to refer to the style, at any rate as originally conceived, as 'Withycombe-Martin', though that is more cumbersome. Withycombe was described by his Director-General, Brigadier EM Jack, as 'an artist by profession and by nature, in addition to being a surveyor'.<sup>2</sup> That was at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) on 12 November 1928, when Withycombe read his paper 'Lettering on maps', and gave the background to the new style. The object was to produce something that would be suitable for helio-zincography: that is, it had to photograph satisfactorily, ideally without any need for touching-up on the negative, and should not tend to clog and thicken when the image was transferred to a grained zinc plate. Though the primary inspiration was classical Roman lettering, in the form seen on Trajan's column in Rome, that was an insufficient basis for designing lower-case and italic, and so these were devised with reference to styles employed on mapping of the early sixteenth through to the early eighteenth centuries. Withycombe argued that from the later eighteenth century the tendency had been to make the thin strokes thinner, producing 'hairlines' and the thick strokes thicker: this was suitable for printing direct from copper, and was manageable in transferring an image from copper for bulk-printing from lithographic stone, but it was unsatisfactory for printing from zinc.

As published, the subsequent 'discussion' occupies more space than the paper itself. There was a substantial contribution from Arthur R Hinks, the RGS Secretary, who did more than speak: he showed slides, of a style of lettering recently designed for use on maps in the *Geographical Journal* and illustrated in the lower part of figure 1. Hinks contended that the RGS style was about five times faster to produce than was the new OS one. The RGS used quills, and all but larger letters could be formed with single strokes, whereas the OS-Withycombe style was designed for pens: letters were built up by drawing the outlines and then infilling. The general effect of the two styles is fairly similar; preference for one or the other will depend on individual taste, though to me the OS style seems more suited for the large number of minor names on small-scale maps.

Both styles, depending as they did on manuscript rather than type, were susceptible to variation, both because of the personal characteristics of the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Oliver, 'A few notes on map lettering', *Sheetlines* 95 (2012), 33-42.

<sup>2</sup> JG Withycombe, 'Lettering on Maps', *Geographical Journal* 73 (1929), 429-46: quote on 437.

individual draughtsmen, and because of conscious decisions made during drawing. The RGS only employed a handful of draughtsmen and, as compared with the OS, the immediate impression is of considerable homogeneity.<sup>3</sup> Although the style is best-known from monochrome maps published in the *Geographical Journal* from the late 1920s into the 1960s, it can also be encountered elsewhere. Two examples are the multi-colour map of Europe and the Middle East at 1:11 million produced by the RGS for the British Council in 1941, and a group of maps showing inns and taverns, produced some twenty years later by KC Jordan, a RGS draughtsman who had worked on the British Council map. Both give an inkling of what the style might look like on a multi-colour topographic map.<sup>4</sup>

The Ordnance Survey variations are both more familiar and more marked. The Withycombe-Martin style was designed during Jack's directorship, but he was succeeded in 1930 by Brigadier HStJL Winterbotham. At the RGS in 1928 Winterbotham had welcomed the new style in principle, but was critical of some of the individual letters, and his influence may be suspected in subsequent practice. Although the new style was used extensively on the *Map of XVII century England* of 1930, the first sheet on which it was used exclusively was one-inch Fifth Edition sheet 144, published in September 1931. Drawing of this sheet had begun late in 1928, a few weeks after Withycombe delivered his paper, and there are interesting variations in both lettering and road widths: it can be inferred that when Winterbotham took over at Southampton he had some changes made on those parts of the sheet on which the drawing had not yet started (see figure 2.).<sup>5</sup> Evidently these did not wholly satisfy, for further changes were made over the next few years (see figures 3, 4, and 5).

This by no means exhausts the possible varieties of 'Withycombe' even within the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain. The use of the style elsewhere has not been studied, but it certainly had some influence in the British Commonwealth. Two examples, both on mapping put in hand in the mid-1930s, are a 1:500,000 series covering Nigeria and the one-inch of New Zealand. The earlier sheets of the New Zealand mapping particularly strongly resemble the OS one-inch Fifth Edition, in lettering, colouring and marginalia, although the standard of finish varies: work on some sheets was pushed forward for defence reasons during World War II. Particularly close to the OS model is sheet N164, *Wellington*, of 1950.

The essence of the 'Withycombe style' was the minute variation due to hand-work. However, a broadly similar substitute, such as the High Tower demonstrated in *Sheetlines* 95, can give a similar general effect. I leave others to decide the relationship of High Tower to 'the Withycombe-Martin tradition'.

<sup>3</sup> A more careful study might modify this view.

<sup>4</sup> See Arthur R. Hinks, 'Making the British Council map', *Geographical Journal* 100 (1942), 123-30. The Jordan maps of inns known to me are Surrey (1958: in a dyeline copy), Sussex and the Lake District (these two published by Bartholomew, n.d., evidently early 1970s): these interesting maps deserve more extended study.

<sup>5</sup> The one-inch Fifth Edition sheets were drawn in several 'sections', at twice published scale.



Figure 1. (top) 'Alphabets designed for the new one inch map of the Ordnance Survey', (bottom) the style designed for the RGS: from *Geographical Journal*, 1929.'



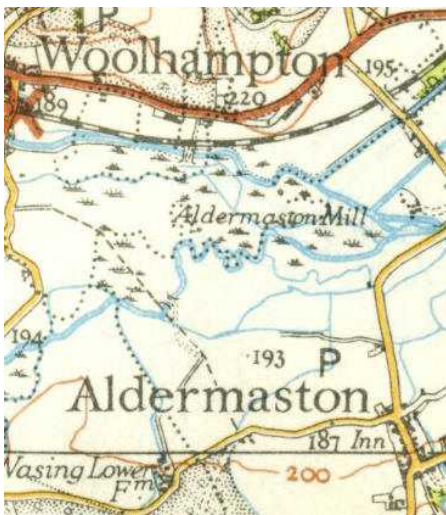
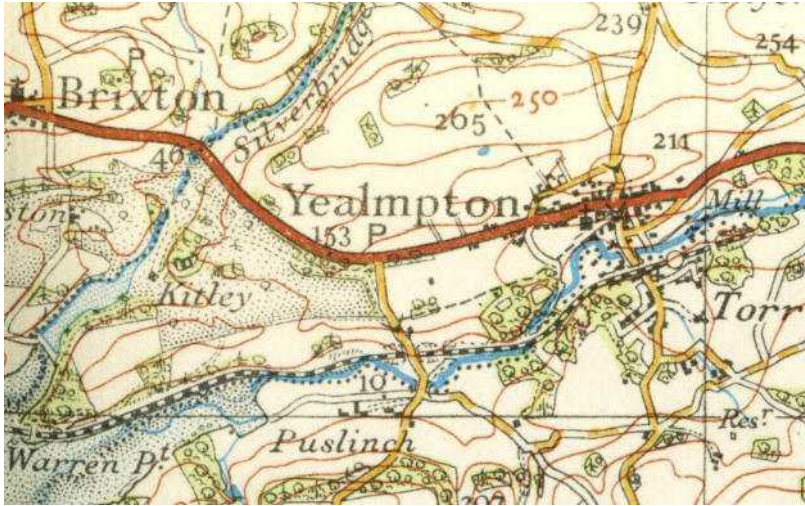


Figure 2 (above). Lettering on one-inch Fifth Edition sheet 144, published 1931, (above left) in south-east part, which was probably drawn first, (above right) in north-west part. Noticeably different are the treatment of the lower-case 'o' and the italic lower-case 'l', although all the italic lower-case has a greater contrast of thick and thin strokes than do the later examples.

Figure 3 (left). Lettering on one-inch Fifth Edition sheet 113, published summer 1933. Compared with figure 2, the parish-village names are written distinctly larger and have a more 'open' feel.

Figure 4 (lower left). Lettering on one-inch Fifth Edition sheet 118, published autumn 1933. The contrast of thick and thin strokes is distinctly less pronounced than on sheet 144.

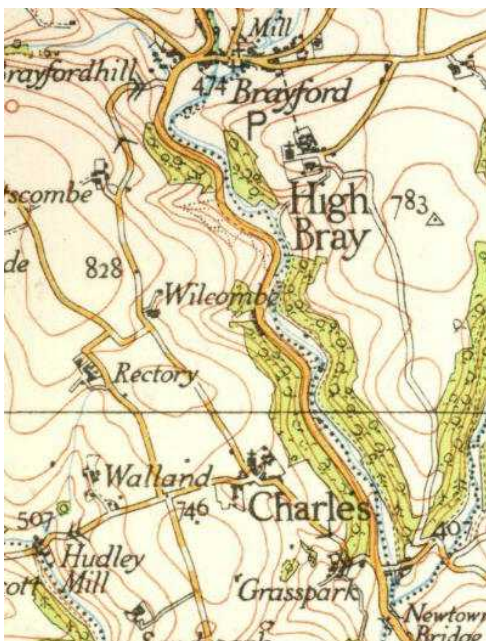


Figure 5 (below). Lettering on one-inch Fifth Edition sheet 93, published autumn 1939. A maturity of style?

