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“The makers of the blueback charts”

*John Davies*

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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 makers of the blueback charts*

*Visit to Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson Ltd*

*John Davies*

Imagine a mapping company older than Ordnance Survey. Imagine a company that published nautical charts before the Admiralty. Imagine a company still family-owned after many generations. And imagine navigational charts being produced in the heart of land-locked Cambridgeshire.

Imray (as the firm now styles itself) is all of these. Willie Wilson, the current proprietor, kindly hosted a recent visit by the Society, explained the history and showed us how things are done today. The origins of the firm go back to 1781 when John Hamilton Moore set up as chartmaker in Minories, by London's docks. It was not until 1795 that the Hydrographic Office of the Admiralty was established (whose first chart appeared in 1800). However, the business of the independent chartmakers thrived as the Admiralty struggled to supply the ever-growing needs of the Royal Navy throughout the nineteenth century. The charts produced by the private publishers were printed with blue paper backing and became known as 'bluebacks' to distinguish them from the official Admiralty charts.

In due course, Hamilton's became Imray's and in time, as demand slowed, merged with Laurie's of Fleet Street and Norie's of Leadenhall Street (by then owned by the Wilson family) to form, in 1904, Imray, Laurie, Norie and Wilson, at 156 Minories. In 1939 with the threat of war, the firm moved from London to rural St Ives, into the mill in which the charts were already being printed.

The early charts were hand-drawn from reports submitted by mariners (the firm has never had its own surveyors) and several such manuscripts exist in the archives with corrections and additions from later voyages. Later charts were produced, as they are today, from data derived from Admiralty charts.

Today Imray, located in a handsome 1820s former hotel in St Ives main street, has a total staff of 24 and has its own two-colour printing press. The firm produces charts, pilot books and guides for coastal waters and inland waterways, on paper and DVD, of the British Isles, Europe, the Mediterranean, the Adriatic and the Caribbean, under the Imray and Stanfords brands. Latest updated information, in the form of 'correction notices' is distributed via the website.

On arrival, Gerry Zierler who had set up the visit, introduced us as the gastronomic wing of CCS, and so Willie Wilson joined us for lunch in the local pub, the Oliver Cromwell (named after the local soldier). Thanks to Willie and his staff for their warmth and patience in showing us round.

For more information about the history of Imray and nautical charts, see *The Makers of the Blueback Charts* by Susannah Fisher, published by Imray, 2001, or go to <http://www.imray.com/> for their current catalogue.