

The Ordnance Survey and perceptions of the British landscape: lessons for the future?

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Wherever and whenever we think the origins of our discipline lie I suspect that we all agree that one significant individual is General William Roy and one significant event is the foundation of the Ordnance Survey (OS) in 1791. From the outset the OS was concerned to show antiquities as physical features in the landscape and, though its success in doing so was not consistent, nevertheless it formed a robust body of data that, especially through the efforts of its Archaeology Division in the middle decades of the 20th century (Bowden and Mackay 1999), became a vital database for the discipline of archaeology in Britain. But more than just in the depiction of antiquities OS maps became an embodiment of the time-depth of the British landscape; not just because the various editions from the 1860s to the 1970s are snapshots of the landscape at different times but because time depth can be read in the maps from the mundane records of field shapes, communication patterns and settlement plans.

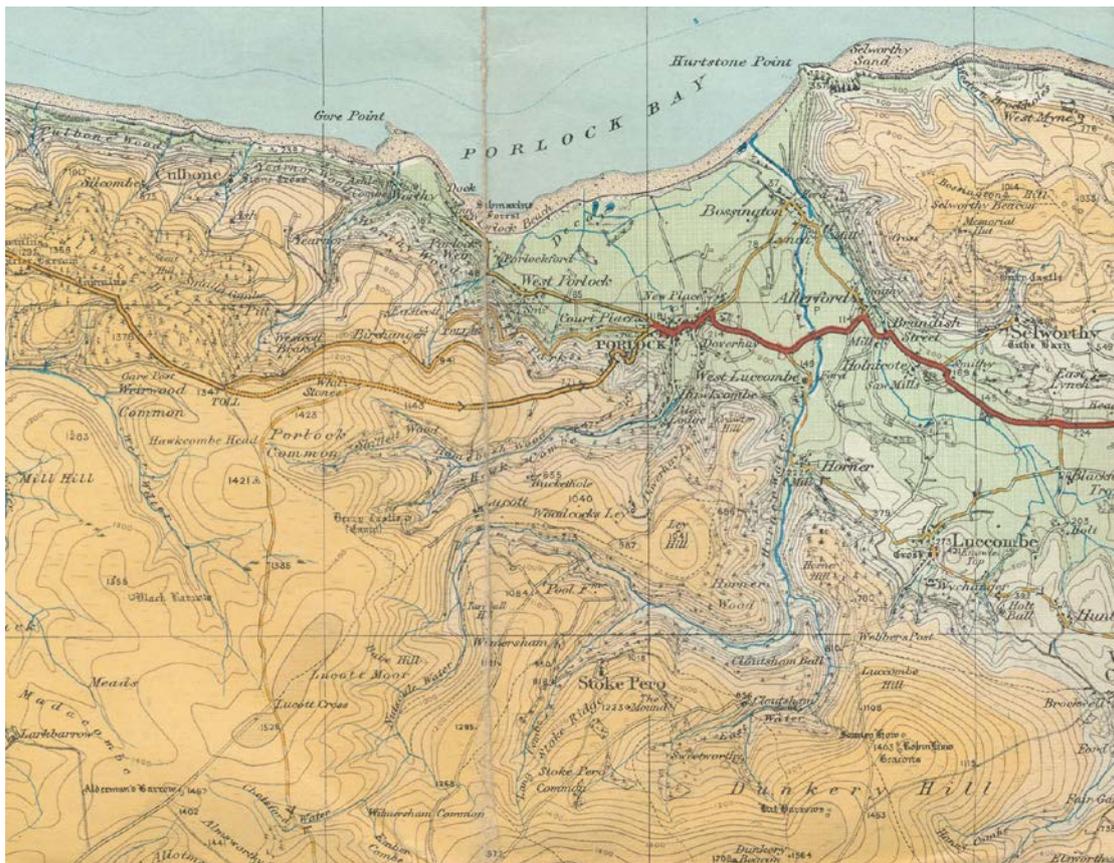


Fig 1: 1927 OS 1-inch tourist map of Porlock Bay with lush green valley, brown hills (shade becoming darker with increasing height), clear typefaces and well designed symbols

Beyond that, the style of OS mapping imprinted itself on the national mindset because, I would suggest, it was so well designed, appropriate and – to use modern idiom – so fit for purpose (Fig 1).

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Certainly in my mind there is a strong correlation between the landscape and the OS map – of course there must be such a correlation because any map is, or should be, a representation of landscape, but what I am trying to highlight is a particular relationship created by the OS; the OS map has probably had a disproportionate influence on generations of landscape specialists and on the public alike.

Cartography is a set of skills like any other that we do well to nurture. The OS, in its choice of symbols, of typefaces, of colour palettes, showed remarkable aesthetic sense as well as readability.

I am not going to comment on the metaphor of ‘reading’ a map (something which Alex Langland touched on in his paper at the conference), but a map needs to convey information; in order to do that successfully it needs to play to the strengths of the viewer: so symbols should look like what they are attempting to portray, typefaces should be consistent and appropriate, as should colours. (This is not to say that houses should be shown by little pictures of houses – the symbols should be abstract but should refer clearly to the entity they represent.) The OS was the best in the world at this, though sadly no longer – the poorly designed Mastermap being a product that any cartographer would be ashamed of.

In a forthcoming paper in *Antiquity* Simon James expresses his concern about the diminishing ‘visual competence’ of archaeologists. This struck a chord with me because it is something that has concerned me too.

All too often, rather than thinking carefully about how to convey information most readily through the use of symbols, labels and colours on maps and plans, archaeologists seem to slap them down at random. As many of the papers at this conference have demonstrated, there is a plethora of new technologies available to make surveying simpler and quicker but also to enable new forms of presentation of the data – slope aspect and digital elevation models, for instance – but the means of creating readable depiction seem to have been lost (Figs 2 and 3). This is a topic on which one has to remain self-aware; not all of one’s own work is of unimpeachable quality. The problem is that software puts the means of production into the hands of the untrained, giving them ‘enormous power – to make one hell of a mess’ (James forthcoming).

Of course, the information archaeologists are trying to convey is often complex and full of confusing detail, so there is a certain obligation to learn the conventions. It is a two-way process.

My plea would be that we do not lose sight of the idea that in presenting the results of these surveys there is an obligation upon us to make them comprehensible, ‘readable’ perhaps, and also to consider the proposition that there is no harm in making them aesthetically pleasing.

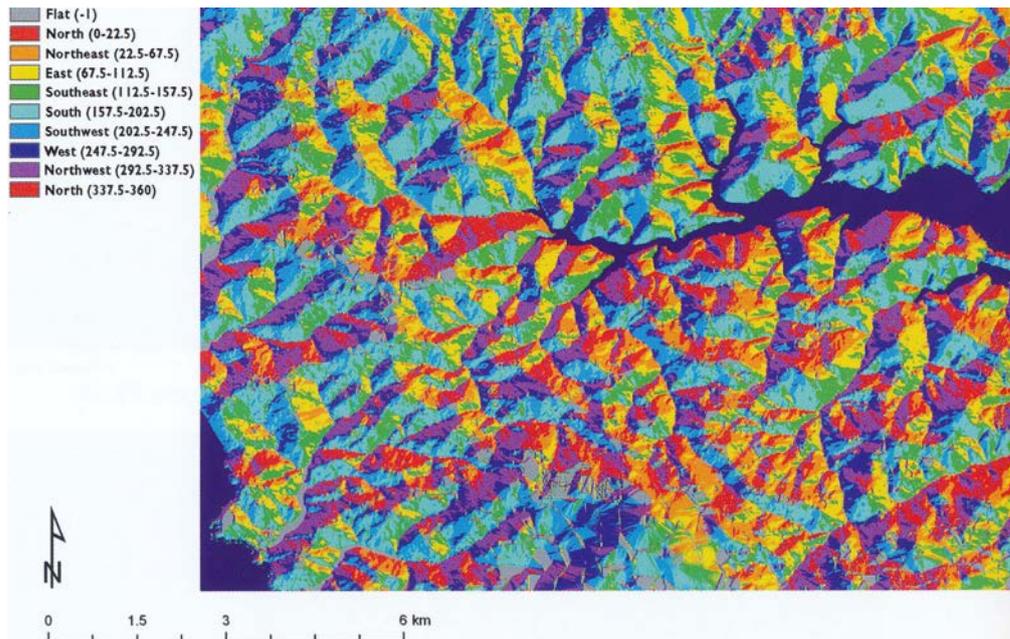


Fig 2: Slope aspect model: one expects, in the northern hemisphere, that south-facing adret slopes would be shaded in the warmer red and yellow tones while north-facing ubac slopes will be represented by the colder blues but one's initial 'reading' of the map is rudely interrupted by the realisation that this cannot be the case (look at the river estuary to the right); the key confirms that exactly the opposite colour ramp has been used. (Image after Chapman 2006, plate 6, modified)

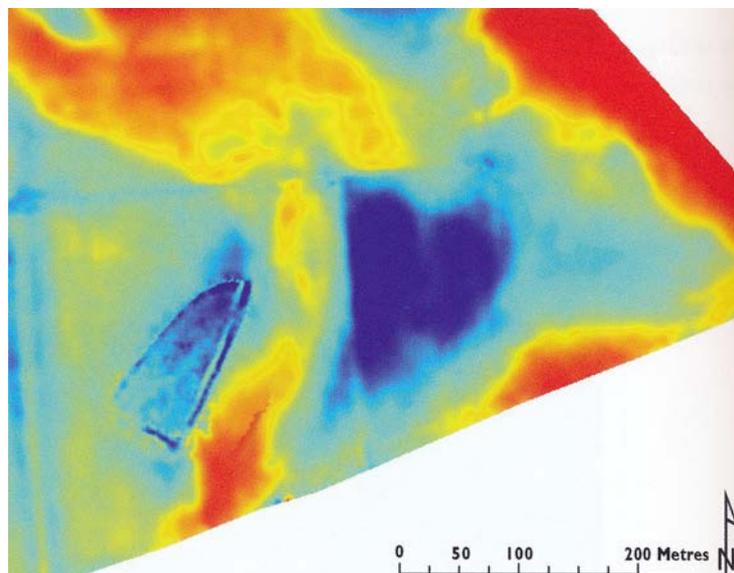


Fig 3: Digital Elevation Model of part of Sutton Common: one sees a low-lying area, perhaps water-logged, near the centre, surrounded by higher ridges and another low-lying area to the west with a sub-triangular ditched feature. No, the key on the original illustration tells us that red tones indicate low ground and blue tones indicate high ground! Even if correctly used, why is this rainbow spectrum thought appropriate for the depiction of elevation in the landscape? See Fig 1 for an example of how to do it properly. (Image after Chapman 2006, plate 7, modified)

References

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This paper summarises the author's presentation at the Landscape Survey Group's conference in Sheffield, 2014. It does not necessarily express the views of the Landscape Survey Group. Text © Mark Bowden