



# *Sheetlines*

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“Brian W Adams”  
*C Ian M O'Brien*

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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.

### *Brian W Adams, 1924 - 2005*

Brian Adams, one of our earliest and most active members, died peacefully, shortly before Christmas, at his home in Fulham, where he had lived alone since his wife's death.

Brian was born in 1924 at Wembley (Longitude  $0^{\circ} 18' 00''$  West as he told us in his talk to the 1994 AGM) though both his parents came from the Cambridgeshire Fens. Visits to their home county were to stimulate his interest in the Ordnance Survey through purchase and use of the relevant Popular one-inch sheets. This led on to some very early essays into DIY mapmaking.

In 1936 Brian entered Latymer Upper School, Hammersmith (alma mater to two other of our honorary members), which was notable for its high standards of geography teaching. In due course he left to read mathematics at Queen Mary College, University of London. However, following the outbreak of the Second World War, the University's constituent colleges had been scattered far and wide, so Brian found himself studying in Cambridge. Wartime university life was very distant from the free and easy social and drinking culture often described in the press today, being overshadowed by the Joint Recruiting Board which determined whether each new graduate should be directed to the armed forces, research or industry. In Brian's case their decision was industry, but fortunately a letter arrived at a critical point, saying that the Hydrographic Department of the Admiralty required a mathematician, its only professional mathematician being on the point of retirement. Brian

was appointed a civil hydrographic officer and posted to the department's wartime headquarters at Bath.

By this time the focus of departmental activity had shifted from European waters to those of the Far East. Brian was immediately directed to the section charged with the gridding, or regridding, of charts of strategic ports and coasts, Chinese rivers and so on. Here he worked under the redoubtable J C B Redfearn, a notable, self-taught mathematician. It is evident that each man learnt from the other. One of Redfearn's objectives was to persuade the department to adopt the Transverse Mercator Projection. The formulae that Redfearn produced, with Brian's assistance, for the use of the Naval Surveying Service were subsequently used by the Hydrographic Department to produce their National Grid conversion tables a year before Ordnance Survey published its own.

When the bulk of the Hydrographic Department migrated westward to Taunton, Brian remained in London, serving its Whitehall unit as a Principal Civil Hydrographic Officer until his retirement. An early member of the British Cartographic Society, he was a regular attendant at its meetings, though it was the formation of the Charles Close Society, shortly before his retirement, that was to provide a new focus for his intellectual pursuit and for his mathematical abilities.

Before Brian, historical studies of the evolution of Ordnance Survey mapping had focussed upon such matters as content, graphic technology and the political background to the Survey's operations. Where projections and grids were concerned, writers had tended to accept, as received wisdom, the view of past masters such as Close and Winterbotham or statements that had appeared in OS official publications. This was unacceptable to Brian, who was to write 'Most references to county meridians in OS publications for at least sixty years have contained errors'. He set out to weed these out and to present the true position in clear language readily understandable by lay readers.

It is not possible here to provide a full bibliography of Brian's writings but among key contributions were his '198 years and 153 meridians',<sup>1</sup> his 'From eighteen minutes west to longitude zero – episodes from the life of a cartographer and a meridian'<sup>2</sup> and his contributions to Roger Hellyer's *The 'ten-mile' maps of the Ordnance Surveys* (1992) and *Ordnance Survey small-scale maps indexes : 1801-1998* (1999). Indeed it was through his, freely given, salient contributions to the work of others that Brian probably left his greatest legacy to future researchers. One of his beneficiaries, Roger Hellyer, writes

Brian's gifts were rare indeed, not least in his ability to express complex concepts in plain language. I consider myself extremely lucky to have known him and to have had the privilege of collaborating with him on at least three books, confident in the knowledge that because of his support they would not be blighted by my ignorance of matters technical.

Yolande Hodson could write in her *Popular maps* of the table of geographical and Cassini co-ordinates, computed for her by Brian, '... anyone familiar with Adams's work will know that they have been rigorously double-checked'.

While it is difficult for a lay person to fully evaluate Brian's contributions as a hydrographer, cartographer, mathematician and life-long map enthusiast, neither is it easy to do full justice to him as a human being. It was evident that he was sustained by deeply held humanist beliefs which had helped him to keep going after personal loss. He could be

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<sup>1</sup> *Sheetlines* 25, 26 and 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Sheetlines* 40.

reserved, but be forthcoming when matters of concern to him arose. I suspect that few wholly knew him. His ‘adopted’ family were very fond of him but, while he fitted very happily into their home circle, they seem always to have found that there was a distance between them. Brian was, for them as for most of us, a very private person who gave out as much of himself as he chose, and no more. For our Society his loss is grievous, as we cannot replace his unique combination of knowledge and insight. As Yo Hodson has written: ‘He had so much left to do’.

*C Ian M O’Brien*

### *Projections and origins*

Brian Adams was a unique man with unique knowledge. Most of the standard references for the projections, construction data and, in many cases, the sheet lines of nineteenth and early twentieth century Ordnance Survey maps are to his articles scattered through the *Sheetlines* of fifteen or more years ago. For other information you have to hunt through his contributions to the forewords and appendices to several of the Society’s books, as well as two others published by David Archer. Brian never collected all this information together into a single work.

Roger Hellyer has now had the opportunity to go through Brian’s papers and has discovered further, previously unpublished, data on similar subjects. To preserve all this information in one easily accessible source, and as a tribute to a distinguished and much loved Honorary Member of the Society, we have produced a small book, *Projections and origins*, a copy of which is being sent to each current member of the Society with this issue of *Sheetlines*.

As Dr Christopher Board, OBE, Chairman of the Charles Close Society, writes, “Brian Adams was a scholar who worked very much on his own and although his published work was widely scattered it was the product of an extremely sharp mind. His constant objective had been to ensure that other writers on the survey and mapping of the British Isles were able to avail themselves of the most accurate data in anything they wrote. A century of more ago such research would have been sufficient to have guaranteed him a much enhanced status. By bringing together much of his research on OS mapping we acknowledge our debt to him and believe that this research will prove to be long lasting in its impact.”

This is the book that Brian Adams should have written himself. We hope that it is also the book that he would have wished to have written and that it will be appreciated both by his many friends in the Society and by those who did not know him personally but who will enjoy his inimitable style. Further copies will be on sale at the forthcoming AGM in Ludlow and through our usual distribution channels.

We have had the full encouragement of Brian’s family in this project and are also very grateful to them for generously allowing his research papers, with associated maps and books, to be deposited in the Charles Close Society Archives in Cambridge University Library. Here future researchers will have the benefit of Brian’s collected papers on topographic and geodetic survey being preserved as a coherent whole.

There is no ‘Kerry Musing’ in this issue of *Sheetlines*. David Archer’s musing on ‘Brian’ makes the perfect tailpiece to the book, and that is where you will find it.