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“Ley hunting with Watkins”

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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.

Ley hunting with Watkins

Ken Hollamby



When I was very much younger than I am today I remember spending many hours poring over my one-inch maps with a copy of Alfred Watkins, *The old straight track*. What was I doing? I was looking for ley lines and I almost convinced myself that they existed but the more I thought about it the more doubtful I became. Ley lines are straight lines on which a wide range of landscape and man-made features lie. In the preface to his book, published in 1925, Watkins says ‘What really matters in this book is whether it is a humanly

designed fact, an accidental coincidence, or a “mares nest”, that mounds, moats, beacons, and mark stones fall into straight lines throughout Britain, with fragmentary evidence of trackways on the alignments.’¹

In Appendix A Watkins lists named points to look for on the map:

1. Ancient mounds, whether called tumulus, tump, barrow, cairn or other name
2. Ancient unworked stones-not those marked “boundary Stone”
3. Moats, and islands in ponds or lakelets
4. Traditional or holy wells
5. Beacon points
6. Cross-roads with place-names, and ancient wayside crosses
7. Churches of ancient foundation, and hermitages
8. Ancient castles, and old “castle” place-names

The old straight track is an expansion of a lecture given by Alfred Watkins to the Woolhope Naturalists’ Field Club at Hereford in September 1921. This was published in 1922 as *Early British trackways, moats, mounds, camps, and sites*. This is not the place to debate whether ley lines exist or not but, in archaeological circles at least, the theory is not taken seriously. On page 31 of the 1922 book Watkins gives these ‘hints to ley hunters’:

‘You must use Government ordnance maps. One mile to the inch is the working scale. Other maps of two or four miles to the inch are quite useless, save for checking long leys.

The (B) “Popular edition, mounted and folded in covers for the pocket,” is the most convenient for field work and is the cheapest, as it contains over double the area of the older (C) 18 x 12 edition; but I have found the latter (uncoloured, in flat sheets) necessary for transferring leys from one map to the next on drawing boards in the office.

¹ The punctuation and syntax in this and the following quotations are exactly as Watkins’ publications.

Maps cut in sections are useless for this exact work.

About four drawing boards, a light 24-inch straight edge, a T square for pinning down the maps accurately to line with the boards, a moveable head T square to adjust to the angle of the ley, so as to transfer to the next map, and a box of the glass headed pins used by photographers (in addition to the usual drawing pins) are the minimum essentials for real work. A sighting compass for field work used in conjunction with a special divided quadrant on the moveable head of square are aids I have found valuable.

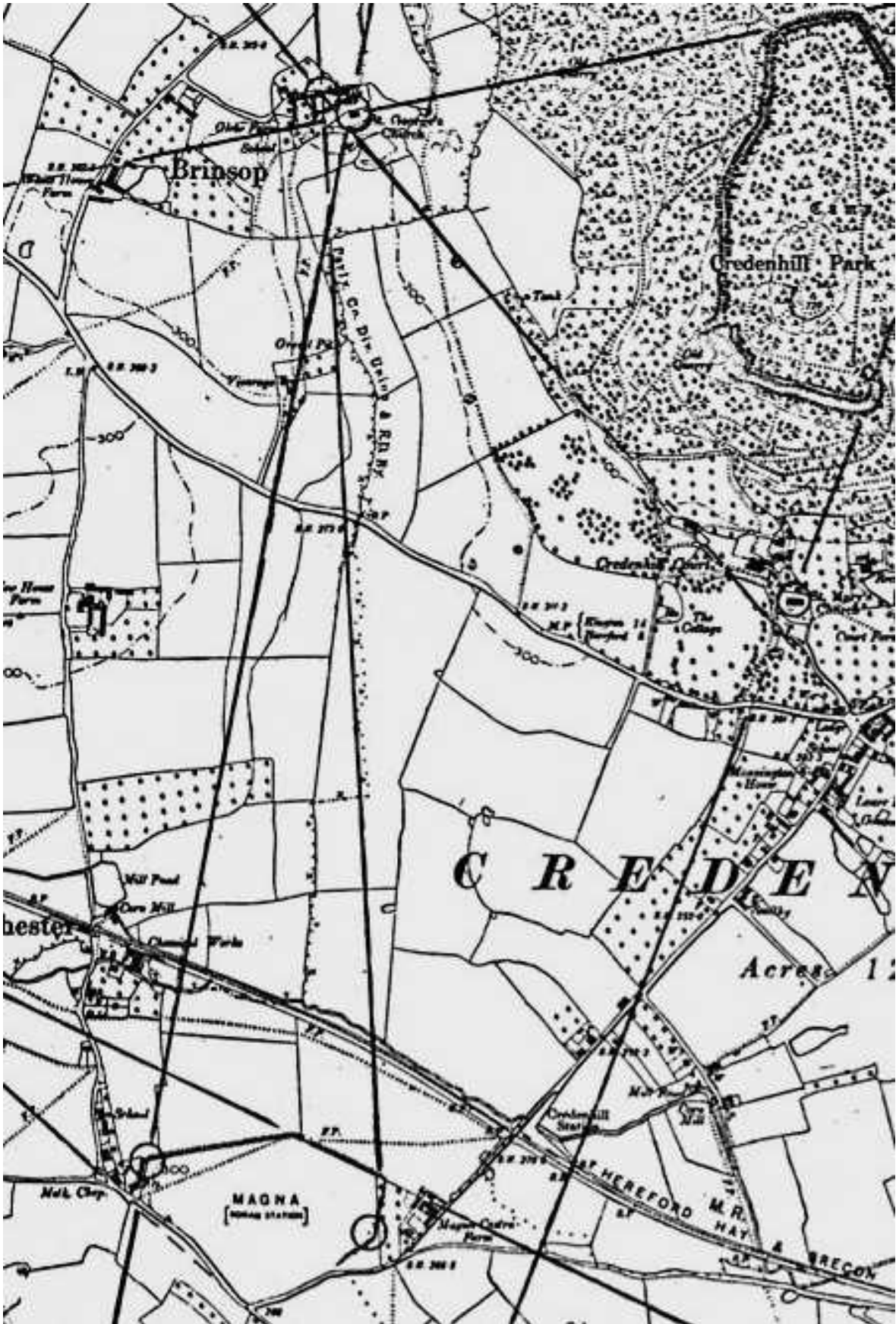
Remember that the entire course of a ley can be found from two undoubted sighting points on it if marked on the map. Therefore stick a glass headed pin in these two points, apply the straight edge, and rule the line, pencil it at first, ink afterwards.

When you get a "good ley" on the map, go over it in the field, and fragments and traces of the trackways will be found, always in straight lines, once seen recognised with greater ease in future.

Where close detail is required, as in villages and towns, the 1" scale is far too small, and the 6" scale is necessary. The angle of the ley is transferred to it from the 1" map with the aid of the moveable head square. Maps must be pinned square on the board by the T square passing through identical degree marks on the edges, latitude for leys running E. and W., but longitude for leys N. and S. The edges of maps are not truly in line with the degree lines, and must not be the guide.'

Watkins concludes by saying 'Ley hunting gives a new zest to field rambles, and the knowledge of the straight ley provides new eyes to an eager observer'. He had a 'mental vision of a Scout Master of the future, out ley hunting with the older boys of his troop'.

Now I know where I was going wrong. We only learnt to follow footpaths when I was in the Scouts and clearly my equipment was inadequate when I later looked for ley lines on the map.



Ley lines in the vicinity of Credenhill, Herefordshire, as plotted by Watkins (enlarged extract from figure 83 of The old straight track)