FROM THE ARCHIVES

C B Wedd – the spy who never was

Charles Bertie Wedd (1868–1945) joined the Geological Survey in 1898 as an Assistant Geologist and was promoted to Geologist in 1901 and Senior Geologist in 1922. He retired in 1929.

On 19 September 1914, W H Spaull, a magistrate in Oswestry, Shropshire, wrote a letter which ended up on the desk of the Survey's Director, Aubrey Strahan (BGS Archives: GSM/DR/St/A/4). In the letter Spaull alleged that Wedd, who was engaged in fieldwork nearby, "has twice been taken as a German spy" and that "The last time he was found in a tree at the rear of a camp of about 5000 men" and "the soldiers were with difficulty prevented from lynching him". In his reply Strahan said that he was "aware that Mr Wedd was arrested a few weeks ago by the Military Authorities, but I understood that they were satisfied that he was a Government Official". In a letter to Strahan, Wedd declared that what Mr Spaull alleged "is, of course, wholly untrue in every respect" and suggested that an article "from some local paper, may account for this gossip".

MBER 2, 1914

ALLEGED GERMAN SPY CAPTURED AT OSWESTRY.

ANOTHER MISTAKE.

Only a Government Official.

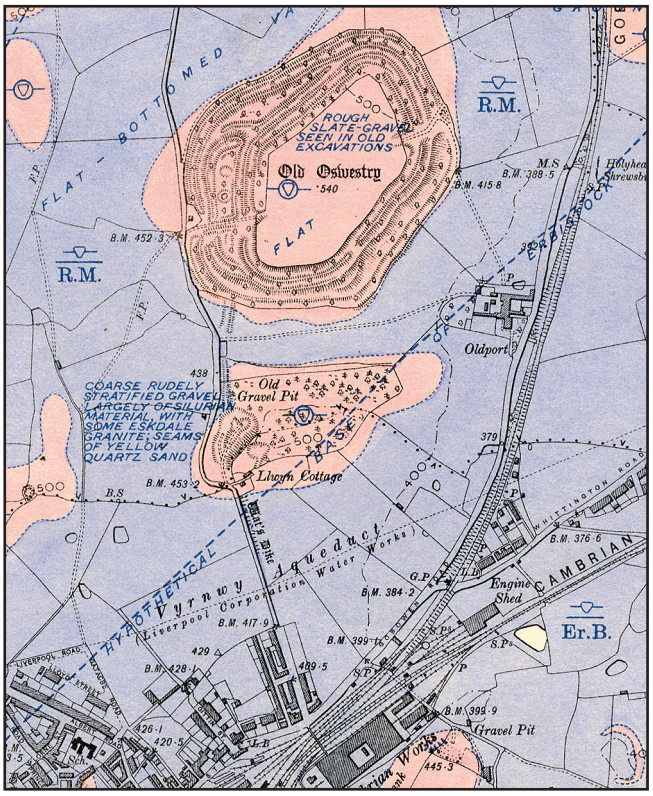
Great excitement was caused in Oswestry on Wednesday evening by the report that a German spy had been captured by the Hereford Territorials in the Oswestry Coppice, overlooking the Territorial camp.

The alleged "spy" was conveyed to the Drill Hall, where the Brigade Headquarters are now situated, and the police were communicated with. Superintendent Hamlet and some police officers hurried to the hall, but, on examination, it was found that the "spy" was a Government official from the Ordnance Survey Department, who was engaged in taking notes for the Ordnance Department. We believe this is not the first experience of the sort this unfortunate gentleman has had. A week or two ago he was "arrested" on the Denbighshire and Shropshire border and immediately released.

While we congratulate the Territorials on their vigilance, it is satisfactory to know that the "German spies" infesting this district are of such innocent and amiable a character.

We understand that while the crowd were waiting outside the Drill Hall for his removal in custody, the "spy" left quietly by the side door for his temporary abode in the Glyn Valley.

Local newspaper report of the arrest of C B Wedd, which evidently occurred in the last week of August 1914. The country at this time was on a heightened state of alert following Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August. Note that the Geological Survey was confused with the Ordnance Survey (BGS Archives: GSM/DR/St/A/4).



Extract from published six-inch geological map of the area north of the town of Oswestry, Shropshire, surveyed by C B Wedd in 1914. The Territorial camp was established during August of that year just to the north of the railway sidings. Wedd was evidently surveying the gravel deposit (coloured pink) in the coppice on the north side of the camp, indicated by Llwyn Cottage, when he was arrested.

This appears not to have been an isolated occurrence as correspondence in 1916 shows that field geologists continued to be "seriously delayed in their work through the action of village constables and special constables and from irresponsible busy-bodies". This was in spite of them carrying documentation showing that they were authorised to carry out work on behalf of the Geological Survey. Such incidents, as well as showing some of the difficulties a field geologist may face, also demonstrate the fear from within the general population about German spies. Such fears and dangers were not unfounded, as on 6 November 1914, less than two months after Spaull had written his letter, Carl Hans Lody, a real German spy, was executed by firing squad at the Tower of London.

Andrew L Morrison
Archivist, British Geological Survey