

Report on eighteenth century maps as an historical source

The map is without doubt an important item in any historian's armoury: the amount of information that can be gleaned from historical maps is immense and often, if used carefully and wisely, invaluable. Maps have been used for, and indeed still are used for, a wide variety of applications, and there are many extant specialised maps. Estate plans are an example of producing a map for a specific purpose, as they were essential to landowners particularly when land was sold or inherited, indeed Smith (1988, p41) notes that "forty-six per cent of all eighteenth-century manuscript maps in the Bedfordshire Record Office" are concerned with estates. Other specialised maps like tithe maps were important to allow control to be kept of landholders' payments, and drainage maps were important to help people learn about flooding.

Maps concerned with transport were increasingly common as a result of transport bills: from 1765 maps had to accompany road building applications; from 1784 plans of land that might be "compulsorily purchased" which surrounded areas proposed for "canals, navigation or river bills involving new works" had to supplement applications (but it was not for eleven years that the scale of the maps was also prescribed). Applications for canals had to be accompanied with plans from 1794 and plans for proposed railway lines from the early nineteenth century (Smith, 1988, p112ff). As such, the 'Plan of the Navigable Canal from Birmingham' printed in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1771 (Appendix A) showing the proposed route of the Birmingham Canal was obviously not produced for legal reasons, but purely for the delectation of the journal's readers. For historians today, the map gives a fixed point in the overall development of the canal system, and it also indicates the contemporary importance of various places represented on the map.

Certain individuals produced maps and prospects for commercial reasons, with the most notable example being the Buck brothers' 87 prospects of English towns. They were careful only to produce prospects of towns large enough to generate enough subscriptions from the inhabitants to make the process profitable.

Similar influences existed for mapmakers, which explains why the wealthy patrons who financed the map

making are “rewarded by mentions in the finished works” (Leicester University, 2001) through the inclusion of their names, or heraldic images around the map.

It is not just the map itself that offers information to the historian, it was commonplace for them to have empty spaces filled with pictures, and the borders to contain “scenic embellishments”, and “imaginary views of landscape as decorative vignettes” (Harvey, 1980, p176ff). While the existing maps of Birmingham do not offer such delightful artistic flourishes, there is marginal information provided in Westley’s map of 1731 (Appendix B) detailing the growth of the city since 1700 in terms of number of streets, houses, inhabitants, churches and schools. Hanson’s map of 1781 (Appendix C) also gives terse details about the city as a whole: its distance from London, and again the number of houses, and churches. It proudly mentions the daily markets, and the important canal connecting landlocked Birmingham to the rest of England.

Another notable difference between the construction of the two maps is the artistic nature of them. The 1731 map shows important building, such as St Philip’s, St Martin’s, and King Edward’s School, as three-dimensional figures, whereas fifty years later symbols more familiar to the modern eye are employed. It could be argued that the three-dimensional figures offer more historical information in cases of buildings that have been subsequently demolished as they give an indication of their appearance in a pre-photographic age. However, such images are often drawn disastrously out of proportion, and serve only to confound the accuracy of any interpretation of the area as a whole, although it does give an indication of the importance of the building. The issue of scale is also one which is applicable to Bucks’ prospects.

There are five eighteenth century maps of Birmingham which can be used to chart the development of the city today, from Westley’s 1731 map to Hanson’s 1781, including Bradford’s in 1750, a plan of the whole manor by Snape in 1779, and a slightly earlier map by Hanson in 1778. Perhaps the most striking change between the maps is the growth of Birmingham to the North East and North West of St Philips, and the

development away from the Bull Ring area. In 1750 much housing is indicated to be planned to the East of St Philips, and by 1778 this has all been built, and further expansion can be seen to be planned around St Paul's – incidentally present but unbuilt in 1778 (indicated by an outline), and built by 1781 (as can be seen by the filled outline). Such seemingly trivial details can help the historian date buildings and areas of the city. While it is not the case with the church, where there are many other sources of historical evidence, this would not always be so with other constructions. In the hypothetical absence of other evidence for the Birmingham canal, wharf, and Paradise Row, they could be dated safely between 1750 and 1778, as it is 1778 when the canal first appears, and 1750 from when the last survey of the city exists.

As can be seen from this cursory look at the maps, it is possible to glean a great deal of historical information from them. However, there are caveats which must be considered when looking at such maps. The scales used vary widely as no real standardisation came about in England until the Ordnance Survey's first maps, and even within a map, the scale can be distorted by the use of pictorial imagery. While it is not true of the Birmingham maps there are instances where the contents of the map can be deformed as a result of the map's sponsor wanting them to exaggerate some aspects peculiar to them, and by the same token, a mapmaker's personality can also creep through the factual detail displaying their "perceptions and feelings" and the "attitudes and intellectual background of the age and locality" (Smith, 1988, p20) of their production. Copying maps by hand can, of course, also lead to imprecisions, and if the original mapmaker's name and date are omitted any errors could have an impact on the map's interpretation as the incorrect copy could be treated as a new, later survey in its own right.

The other great consideration is the need to look at the maps in their historical context, for example in the development to the North East of Birmingham, the street names are dutifully provided, but the map gives no clue to the source of the names. If the map is looked at in context, the names can all be seen to belong to the same family and are a tribute to the original landowner. In the same way, the maps do not attempt to explain why the city developed latterly to the North, away from the earlier more important river crossing, but again by using them correctly they can enhance the knowledge gained elsewhere. In some

instances, dates on the maps need to be treated with caution, as there would inevitably be a delay between the survey for the map being carried out, and the map getting published, especially when the maps appear in books, rather than regularly printed journals.

Overall the importance of the map and its associated information can clearly be seen, but as with any historical source, and the older the source the more essential it is, the importance of using it in its rightful context is critical. Providing that the user is wary of this, and the innate lack of accuracy, the map can only be seen as a valuable resource to any researcher.

(1292 words)

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Appendix A

Appendix B

Appendix C