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Total immersion: maps, landscape and memory

Peter Vujakovic and John Hills

Abstract

It has been argued that we live in a map immersed world, but that the ubiquity of maps may actually lead to their devaluation and perhaps, even a form of invisibility. This paper describes a project designed to share ideas about the value of maps and mapping with the people of the county of Kent (UK) during International Map Year (IMY). The project involved a team of geographers at Canterbury Christ Church University writing a series of articles on maps and landscape to celebrate the year, but also engage people with mapping.

Introduction - Living in a map immersed world?

Denis Wood coined the phrase 'to live map-immersed in the world'. By this he meant that individuals are so surrounded by, and so frequently use maps that these become indistinct from other 'taken-for-granted' consumer products. Maps are no longer special, the property of privileged élites or institutions, but are regarded by society as 'apparently reproduced ... *without effort*' (Wood, 1992; p.34), with many seeming to believe that that digital maps only take 'a couple of mouse-clicks' to create. In fact it could be argued that the ubiquity of maps may actually lead to their devaluation and perhaps, even a form of invisibility - when this happens the power of the map to fascinate lapses.

During two centuries characterised by mass production and consumption, maps have become tools which are encountered, used or produced in every walk of life. They are commonly used in advertising, as route maps, at recreational sites, in schools, for weather information and the news. Maps are an integral part of the processes of symbolic communication embedded within an ever widening array of methods of (re)production, transmission and consumption. As communication technology develops, enabling 'information-graphics' to be more easily produced,

maps will continue to grow as a source of information. The danger is that the deeper value embedded in some maps, value that has to be worked for, will diminish.

This paper examines how exploring 'sense of place' and landscape can provide a means to promote an interest in cartography amongst the public, and a deeper re-engagement with maps through a total immersion in the landscapes portrayed. In recent years there has been a renaissance in writing that focuses on the British landscape. Authors such as Robert Macfarlane (*The Old Ways - a journey on foot* (2013)) and Roger Deakin (*Wildwood - A journey through trees* (2007)) have reinvigorated the tradition; similarly, Nicholas Crane's BBC 'Coast' series has engendered greater interest in geography. This interest has generated a useful channel for promoting the importance of maps to society. Maps are, in a sense, our *landscape memory*ⁱ or as Brian Harley (1987) has stated, 'the map is a biography of the landscape it portrays' (p.327). It must not be forgotten, however, that landscape is not simply terrain, but is a complex social construction (Seymour, 2000), and as such it is beholden on cartographers and geographers to ensure that the power invested in and through mapping, as part of this social construction, is also part of the wider discourse on cartography (see Harley, 2001).

The Heart of Kent - maps and landscape

This paper describes a year-long project designed to share ideas about the value of maps with the people of the county of Kent (UK). The project involved a team of cartographers and geographers at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) writing twelve articles on maps and landscape for a monthly magazine, *Kent Life*, to celebrate International Map Year (IMY)ⁱⁱ. IMY was organised by the International Cartographic Association (ICA) and supported by the United Nations (UN). The series was designed in the spirit of IMY, which encouraged cartographers and others to 'focus attention on the power of maps', to '[d]evelop lectures ... to get people interested in maps and related topics', and to engage with childrenⁱⁱⁱ. The team used the opportunity to work with *Kent Life* to reach a wide regional

readership. As well as promoting cartography and geography, the project has had other significant 'spin-offs', not least in allowing the team to reflect on their own writing, research and teaching. Several of the articles have generated resources and themes that will be used in undergraduate teaching, including practical sessions and field work.

Kent Life, with its strong emphasis on 'sense of place' and landscape, provided an excellent vehicle to reach a wide audience. Launched in 1962, it seeks to be 'an inspirational magazine for a local audience and aim[s] to reflect our readers' passion for their county and the people and places that make us proud to live in the Garden of England'^{iv}

The team was first contacted by *Kent Life* with a request to provide the coordinates for the geographic centre of the county. This was to form the basis for a series of photographs showing the changing seasons at the 'Heart of Kent'. The position was calculated using Geographic Information System (GIS) software to find the county's 'centre of gravity', rather than just the mid-point between extreme north-south and east-west locations. The county's centre based on the distribution of its population was also calculated; this is much further to the north (OS map reference TQ 868 596, close to Bicknor), reflecting Kent's highly urbanized north coast and the 'pull' exerted the Medway towns.

The 'Heart of Kent' was identified as an area of farmland just to the south-east of the village of Lenham (TQ 902 514). The location provided an excellent opportunity to explore landscape through the lens of maps, being adjacent to the scarp slope of the North Downs and in an area of complex geology, and close to the source of two important Kentish rivers, the Great Stour and the Len (a tributary of the Medway). The site is also surrounded by a series of east-west arterial routes ranging from prehistoric trackways to the M20 motorway and the High Speed 1 rail line. By using map extracts of various types and scales centred on 'The Heart of Kent', their value as rich sources of historical and other information could be explored in detail.

The series introduced readers to a wide range of map types and styles, from the obvious - various scales of topographic maps - to the less obvious - maps on postcards and 'dot maps' of insect distributions. As well as exploring the power and value of maps for an understanding of local landscapes, the series dealt with some of the issues and complexities of map making.

Exploring the 'Heart of Kent'

Maps are a time traveller's guide to the world. They allow navigation in both time and space. Try it for yourself. Scour your local charity and second-hand bookshops for old Ordnance Survey (OS) and other map series that cover your local patch or 'parish', and see if this is not true. You will soon find yourself fascinated by the changing landscape that you discover.

Extract from 'Heart of Kent' article in February 2016 edition of *Kent Life*.

The series allowed the team to promote various types of mapping; topographic and thematic, formal and pictorial. The first map examined was an extract of the Geological Survey of Great Britain published in 1959 (one inch to the mile). This set the scene for the articles that followed, describing the geology of the region and its impact on landscape. It also provided the opportunity, from the start, to link the potentially parochial focus on the 'Heart of Kent' to the wider history of mapping, in this case with reference to William Smith's 1815 geology map of England, Wales and Scotland and its role in the industrial revolution and the development of geological mapping (Winchester, 2001).

Several series, scales and dates of topographic map were introduced to show how different aspects of landscape history might be explored - the map as 'time machine'. The OS's first civilian map series, the 1:25,000 'Provisional edition' or 'First Series' (1937-61), provided an excellent basis for exploring the physical landscape of the region. Water features and topography are shown boldly in this series (it is much more difficult to follow the course of the Great Stour, for example, at the same scale on the more modern Explorer series). The article with the 'First Series' extract also focused on the cultural heritage associated with the rivers and the location, for example, of mill ponds - historically a very important element of the

local economy; not just to grind grain, but also bone for fertiliser, and to power manufacturing of various types (e.g. paper mills).

An extract off the OS 1:2,500 series was used to illustrate the detail available for landscape histories. The article focused on Chilston Park (map dated 1908) about a kilometre and a half south of the 'Heart of Kent'. The map provides incredible detail of both the buildings and key landscape features of this estate, down to the individual trees making up the grand avenue. Another fascinating aspect of this map series is the fact that each parcel of land is numbered and the precise area given in acres. This even applies to relatively small features, such as the circular ice pond (given as .492 of an acre) that supplied Chilston's ice-house. Advice was provided on access to high-resolution scans of this and other map series, for example, via the National Library of Scotland's excellent on-line map collection: <http://maps.nls.uk/index.html>.

Figure 1. Chilston Park, OS 1:2,500 (1908), Canterbury Christ Church University map collection. - [place about here](#)

Other scales and series were used to illustrate further facets of landscape history and geography. These were again designed to feed into a growing fascination with the past and the 'sense of place' associated with, for example, understanding the origins of place-names and their relationship to landscape (Gelling, 1984), or the development of transport infrastructure. The OS New Popular edition at a scale of one inch to the mile (published between 1945 and 1947) provides a snapshot of the county prior to the dramatic changes in the landscape associated with suburbanisation and the post-war explosion in motor vehicle ownership.

One fascinating addition to the articles on topographic maps was the inclusion of an extract from the Soviet 1:100,000 series. The Soviet's mapped much of the world, including the UK, during the Cold War^{vi}. A striking feature is the use of Cyrillic script. The names of villages, rivers and woods are all spelled phonetically in

the Russian alphabet. This practice ensured that names could be correctly pronounced by a Russian speaker. 'The label 'Ленем' (Lenem) thus avoids any confusion which might be caused by the silent 'h' in Lenham, a letter which has a throaty, guttural sound in Russian' (Davis, 2016, pp.46-47). The map also allowed contrasts to be made with British maps and the Soviet mappers' attention to detail; for example, the way in which labels are used. The size of the text indicates that the Lenham had a population smaller than 2,000, while the underlining of the name indicates that the railway station shares the name of the village. The use of larger text for the nearby Harrietsham indicates a slightly larger population.

Figure 2: Extract from the Soviet 1:100,000 sheet M-31-26, Maidstone (1964)-
[about here please](#)

The readership was also introduced to Open Street Map (OSM) as an alternative data source and to draw contrasts with traditional mapping formats. The fact, for instance, that some information is not yet available on OSM, such as the contours, while it does contain a wealth of information on local amenities.

An article on satellite remote sensing (using an extract from a Landsat image) provided the opportunity to discuss what is meant by the term 'map', but also to promote the value of various forms of imagery available for landscape studies. Kent is fortunate in having air photo and other imagery freely available via Google Earth in the 1940s, 1960s, 1990s and a whole series of dates in the twenty-first century.

Pictorial and thematic maps

While the focus of the project was topographic maps, other formats were introduced, including pictorial maps, for example, a post card featuring a map of the route of the Pilgrims' Way. Lenham is clearly labelled as a key settlement, a 'rest stop' on the route. This hybrid format, map and illustrations, provided an opportunity to explore 'sense of place' and national history, but also to draw

contrasts with more formal cartography. Pilgrim's Way is now, for much of its length, designated as a National Trail. At Lenham this path, The North Downs Way, is labelled as a historic feature on OS maps, indicating its ancient origins.

Figure 3, Post card map - Image with kind permission of Elgate Products Ltd., Broadstairs

Two distribution maps were also introduced to indicate the variety of maps that can be mobilised for local landscape studies. One focused on historical data and the other on natural history. The first, a 'hot-spot' map was created from data included in a map first published by the *Kent Messenger* newspaper on 15th September 1944 showing the sites of German V1 'flying-bomb' crash sites in Kent. The map showed Lenham as on the very edge of 'bomb alley' and gave the author the opportunity to reflect on his own grandfather's encounter with a 'Doodle-Bug' (V1 flying-bomb) as a member of the Home Guard. The second map featured the distribution of the buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*). It was chosen because, despite this being a common bee, there was a hole at the 'Heart of Kent' indicating a lack of a record for this site; this, despite the fact that the article's authors both observed the buff-tailed there in April and June of 2016, as well as six other bumblebee species. In fact only a single species, the common carder (*B. pascuorum*) had been officially recorded for the 2km square grid square containing the site (Gammon and Allen, 2014). The distribution 'dot' map provided the opportunity to discuss the fact that the lack of a record is not a sign that the species is not found there, but merely that no one has yet entered an official record for the site. It only takes one recorded sighting for the whole 2km square to be included as a dot on the map, so is no evidence of abundance. Many species distribution maps are as much a record of where surveyors have been active as the actual distribution of the species - this does not mean that these maps are not useful, but that they can only provide generalised evidence of where you might expect to find a particular species.

Map users and makers of tomorrow?

The ICA also encouraged map professionals, teachers and others to engage children during IMY, suggesting that they - 'Organize fun and interesting activities that teach children about how to use and make maps'. This provided the basis for the ultimate article in the series. Children from Lenham Primary School were asked to map their village. This type of free-form mapping exercise provides a very interesting insight into the next generation of map makers.

The maps created by the children exhibited their 'sense of place', but also displayed various stages in mapping, as might be expected at this age. Some had already started to use more formal map conventions while others retained a more pictorial style (see for example, Lenhoff and Huber, 2000). Their maps take several forms, some being the conventional top-down street plan, while some are more pictorial and provide an oblique view of buildings and the wider landscape. This is in part a feature of the development of children as mapmakers, with a natural tendency to produce pictorial maps replaced by the conventions of formal cartographic practice. Some, despite using colour coding for buildings and gardens, labelled buildings *individually* as 'house'; one child labelled twenty-five buildings in this manner, another labelled fifty-eight and then a further eleven with their house number.

None of the children, at this stage, had attempted to use contours for hills (see Wood, 1992, on children, hill signs and the history of mapping). One of the maps included a sophisticated 'plan' of the village itself, drew the Downs to the north of the village in oblique view. But this is how many children and adults experience hills, and make sense of them as the backdrop to their lives. The hills in this case were drawn with a sensitive use of colour and tone to suggest depth; with bright greens of the foreground, fading to cooler blue-greens in the distance.

Figure 4 - Map drawn by pupil at Lenham Primary School.

Individual 'sense of place' was generally inscribed by reference to specific landmarks, although ephemeral elements were sometimes mapped. While some

landmarks are common to most of the maps, the school and church, some were particular to individuals, for instance, Rachel (Year 5) was the only child to represent a pond with accompanying duck and edged by trees in autumnal colours. She also drew some exquisitely detailed gravestones in the churchyard. Another map included details of the various swings and slides in the local park.

All of the children put a great deal of care and attention into their maps, suggesting an inherent interest in the mapping process.

Conclusion

Working with *Kent Life* in 2016 provided a unique opportunity to engage with a wider public during IMY, to encourage a meaningful immersion in maps and landscape. Like any public engagement of this type, the exact impact is hard to judge. It was a reminder that we tend to write for our peers, whether in trade, professional or academic publications, and need to consider the role of popular formats in consciousness raising, especially of the next generation of users and potential producers (hence the engagement with Lenham school). The experience was also a useful reflection on our own understanding of maps and landscape, especially for those of us who teach undergraduates. Several of the themes using key map series will be introduced to a recently revised undergraduate programme. Understanding the local environment and its heritage is vital to economic regeneration in regions like East Kent, and the 'map as landscape memory' is a vital teaching tool.

The authors recognise that the role of maps in society is contested (see various papers in 'Power and Politics of Mapping' in Dodge, et al., 2011). The rhetorical power of maps to construct specific versions of reality is acknowledged (and one of the authors has written extensively on this subject^{vii}) The articles for *Kent Life* have inevitably taken a 'matter of fact' approach to maps as factual documents that glosses over the contradictions, the 'silences' and the rhetorical nature of maps. It is argued that a popular engagement with maps, landscape and local 'sense of place' may draw people into this debate, much like the popularisation of

family history has opened people's eyes to social history more generally (Bottero, 2012, 2015).

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Biography

Peter Vujakovic is Professor of Geography at Canterbury Christ Church University.(CCCU) He specialises in maps and geopolitics, with a special interest in maps in the news media. He has also worked on local maps and 'sense of place'. John Hills is a Research Fellow and GIS Technician at CCCU. John has produced designed maps for a variety of publications including *An Historical Atlas of Kent*. He is currently researching crime-mapping in Kent.

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Notes

ⁱFederal Office of Topography swisstopo - Landscape Memory <https://www.swisstopo.admin.ch/en/knowledge-facts/geoinformation/landschaftsgedaechtnis.html> (accessed 10/02/2017)

ⁱⁱ The articles can be accessed at the *Kent Life* digital archive: <http://www.kent-life.co.uk/magazines/digital-archive>

ⁱⁱⁱ International Map Year - "Get involved" at <http://mapyear.org/get-involved/>

^{iv} *Kent Life* - <http://www.kent-life.co.uk/magazines>

^v the Ordnance Survey's (OS) first civilian series at that scale and the forerunner of the familiar OS *Explorer* and earlier *Pathfinder* series

^{vi} Davis, M. and Kent, A. J. (2015) Soviet military mapping of the UK and contemporary Ordnance Survey mapping: a comparative analysis. 26th International Conference on the History of Cartography, 12th-17th July, 2015, Antwerp, Belgium.

^{vii} Peter Vujakovic has written extensively on the power of maps in the news media (see Vujakovic, P. (2014) 'The state as a 'power container': the role of news media cartography in contemporary geopolitical discourse, *Cartographic Journal*, 51(1), 11-24 - this contains an extensive reference list to previous research), as well as contributing to popular understanding in Vujakovic, P. (2014) 'The power of maps', in *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World*, 14th Edition, Times Books : London, pp.42-43.