



“FROM GOUGH TO GOOGLE” – MAPS OF OXFORDSHIRE FROM C14 TO C21ST

John Leighfield kicked off SAVA's theme for the year in his excellent talk in April. The subject was maps and John presented them in such a compelling way that even the male drivers in the audience sat up and listened. He demonstrated how map making was subject to many factors not perhaps immediately obvious: the needs of the church or the military, the commercial exploits of publishers and the plagiarists who fed on the hard work of their predecessors.

The oldest map in Britain, the “Gough” map now in the Bodleian Library, was made in about 1360 but not by Gough who paid half a crown for it in 1774. Its purpose was to guide pilgrims on their way. The real revolution came in the C16 with the advent of the printing press and advances in the surveying profession. It was also powered by the military threat which compelled Queen Elizabeth in 1574 to commission Christopher Saxton, the first real map-making hero, to produce a book of maps. These were superior in accuracy and detail to anything before. Nonetheless, rivers and the coast were more important than roads for getting about at this time. When Saxton was compiling a map of Wiltshire in 1578, there was a hamlet where he had doubts about the correct name. He therefore wrote on the draft map “quaere”, the Latin for “query” as a reminder. This was mistaken by the engraver of the map as being the name of a hamlet or village and it was dutifully included. Saxton's maps were copied in many forms for centuries afterwards and each time the error was reproduced.

Improvements in transport and printing gave rise to a variety of map forms such as strip maps which guided the reader along particular routes, playing card size maps for easy carrying and maps with colour for display and tourism. However, French mapping was superior by the mid 18C and the riposte came from the Society of Arts who gave a £100 prize for original surveys of counties in 1759.

This brings us to the time of the focus for the SAVA exhibition in November this year – the Inclosure Map of Steeple Aston made in 1768. These maps were prompted by an Act of Parliament and were a response to the need to clarify ownership of land. It is unusual for any village to own its own inclosure map as Steeple Aston does and it is a remarkably detailed object.

Moving on, John Leighfield brought us right up to date with information about the beginning of Ordnance Survey maps in 1792 (again in response to military threat), through the Battle of the Scales (one inch to the mile or two miles or five?), a Cold War Soviet-made map of Oxford (complete with sitings of electricity sub-stations and water supplies!) and all the way to Google, whereupon he ended the talk neatly with a Streetview journey to the very Village Hall that accommodated us. Finally he laid out, for perusal, his own collection of Oxfordshire maps which absorbed his audience for some time after his talk. All came away with the feeling of wanting to know more about maps of our own locality. Luckily, they only have to wait until November for the exhibition!

David Jarratt