

MAPPING HISTORY

• a guide to using historical maps •

**Welcome to Mapping History:
Video Transcript: A Guide to Using Maps**



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Welcome to this Mapping History website, I'm Chris Fleet, Senior Maps Curator at the National Library of Scotland. We've created a number of activities and step-by-step guides to reading and using a range of maps, including historical maps, and to introduce things, I'd like to say a little about the history of mapping Scotland, as well as say a little about how useful these maps are in understanding the past.

Scotland has a very interesting history of maps and map-making activities. The earliest maps based on an original survey date from four centuries ago, through the pioneering efforts of Timothy Pont Sometime between 1583 and 1614, Pont mapped perhaps all of Scotland, and his hand-drawn maps were the main source material for Scotland's first atlas, published by Johann Blaeu in Amsterdam in 1654 Pont's work was updated by John Adair from the 1680s, who drafted county maps and nautical charts.

We then find an important new cause and type of map-making in Scotland - the threat and reality of Jacobite rebellion. In the first half of the 18th century this resulted in a significant phase of military map-making arguably culminating in William Roy's Military Survey, from 1747-1755, when all of mainland Scotland was mapped by teams of military engineers.

The relative pacification of Scotland that resulted from the 1750s allowed maps to be made for many new purposes over the following century: maps to plan new canals and roads, maps dividing common land, town plans for the expanding urban centres, and estate maps and county maps, particularly sponsored by landowners and the gentry. The best county maps of Scotland were all brought together in 1832 in John Thomson's great Atlas of Scotland.

Ordnance Survey trace their origin to 1791, but they did not actively map Scotland until the 1840s. Their state-funding allowed a very comprehensive survey of all of Scotland over the next 40 years - many landscape features appear for the first time on OS maps because they were so thorough.

These maps were all revised around a century ago, and thereafter were revised at intervals right up to the present day. More populated areas often have several revisions or editions of mapping, allowing us to view detailed change on the ground for any particular place.

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Ordnance Survey's maps were also used as source material or base mapping by other map-makers, including commercial map-makers such as Bartholomew, as well as other public bodies, such as the Geological Survey, or the Land Utilisation Survey. At the same time as Ordnance Survey mapped the land, the Hydrographic Office of the Admiralty mapped the seas, with charts that are often very useful for the history of coastal areas and ports.

All of these maps provide a key insight into the landscape going back in time. Maps can be read at a number of levels, and most obviously they provide an immediate insight into what was where at a particular point in time. But they often can tell us far more than this. Making a map involves conscious or unconscious selection from the real world - excluding some things, and including others - and so what is shown or not shown on the map provides an insight into the map-maker, their purposes, their audience, and their time period.

Roy's Military Survey of the 1750s, for example, was a map surveyed quickly in relatively hostile country. It picks out features of military interest for English army commanders, helping them to control and subdue Scotland. Bartholomew's half-inch to the mile maps were particularly geared towards recreation and travelling for pleasure, particularly by bicycle and on foot, and their maps select features of interest for these main leisure markets.

We all instinctively want to trust the map, to believe its features are a true and accurate reflection of reality - but in practice, it may be safer to mistrust the map until we know more about it, or can confirm its information from other sources. We can also trust the map better, and interpret what it shows us by trying to find out who made the map, why and how they made it, and who they made it for.

When we look at who made the map, and what their main purposes were we can try to understand why they included some features rather than others. Modern web-mapping by Google or Bing, for example, show roads as very significant features in rural areas - sometimes in rural Scotland, roads are the only topographic features shown as their rural map information comes particularly from car navigation mapping. But as we go back in time, the importance of using maps for travel declines, especially before the 18th century, and the Blaeu maps, for example, show very few routeways. The Blaeu maps were not made to help find the way from A to B.

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It's always been easier to copy someone else's map, than set off outside to record things directly through an original survey, and so many maps may be copies of someone else's map, potentially from a much earlier survey.

The beautiful engraved county maps in Blaeu's Atlas of Scotland in 1654 relate to a survey done half a century earlier by Timothy Pont. Blaeu's map of Scotland had a distinctive shape, including a bend in the Great Glen and a flat top to Lewis, that appear on later maps for at least the next century, as these maps were copied from Blaeu.

Ordnance Survey's most detailed mapping very helpfully carries a date of survey or revision, usually just a few years earlier than the date of publication - but their less detailed maps are often not based on a standard date of revision. We also need to watch out for maps that show proposed developments, such as new railways, roads or buildings - which may never have been built.

Surveying techniques have radically changed over the centuries. The Royal Military Surveyors were probably the first in Scotland to use theodolites allowing angles to be measured between points across the landscape, and then using trigonometry, calculate accurate distances between these points. Before this time, the surveys of Pont and Adair were based on much more approximate distances and directions.

Accuracy has always been relative - William Roy later described his map as "a magnificent military sketch, rather than a very accurate map of the country". Ordnance Survey a century later employed better instruments with much greater manpower to record the landscape in unprecedented detail. But better technology doesn't always mean better mapping.

The use of aeroplanes for survey work in the 20th century allowed Ordnance Survey to revise many of their rural maps at less detailed scales very selectively, without more thorough surveying work on the ground.

Over time, we also find the interest in depicting particular features changes. For example, the interest in and understanding of archaeological features has grown particularly in the 20th century. Ordnance Survey employed their first Archaeology Officer in 1920, and before this time, their mapping of archaeological features was often quite poor or misleading.

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Early OS maps often describe features such as druidical circles or camps, which were neither, or took information from folklore. In addition to the huge impact of aerial survey in the 20th century, the recording of archaeological features on OS maps has also improved from the 1980s with information being incorporated from the various Royal Commissions. But the recording of other features have sometimes declined over time.

Ordnance Survey's mapping of towns from the 1840s to the 1890s were the most detailed maps they ever made of urban areas, recording interiors of public buildings, and a mass of street-level information, including positions of manholes, lamp-posts, steps, and even drying poles in back gardens.

Maps represent history in one of its most enthralling forms, and above all, we hope that this website encourages you to enjoy studying and using maps. We're lucky too that there are more historic maps available on the web every year - over 50,000 historic maps of Scotland just on the NLS website, for example. We've included links to these and other resources, and we hope that this website helps you to explore and understand these maps, as well as help explore and understand the historic landscapes that they show.