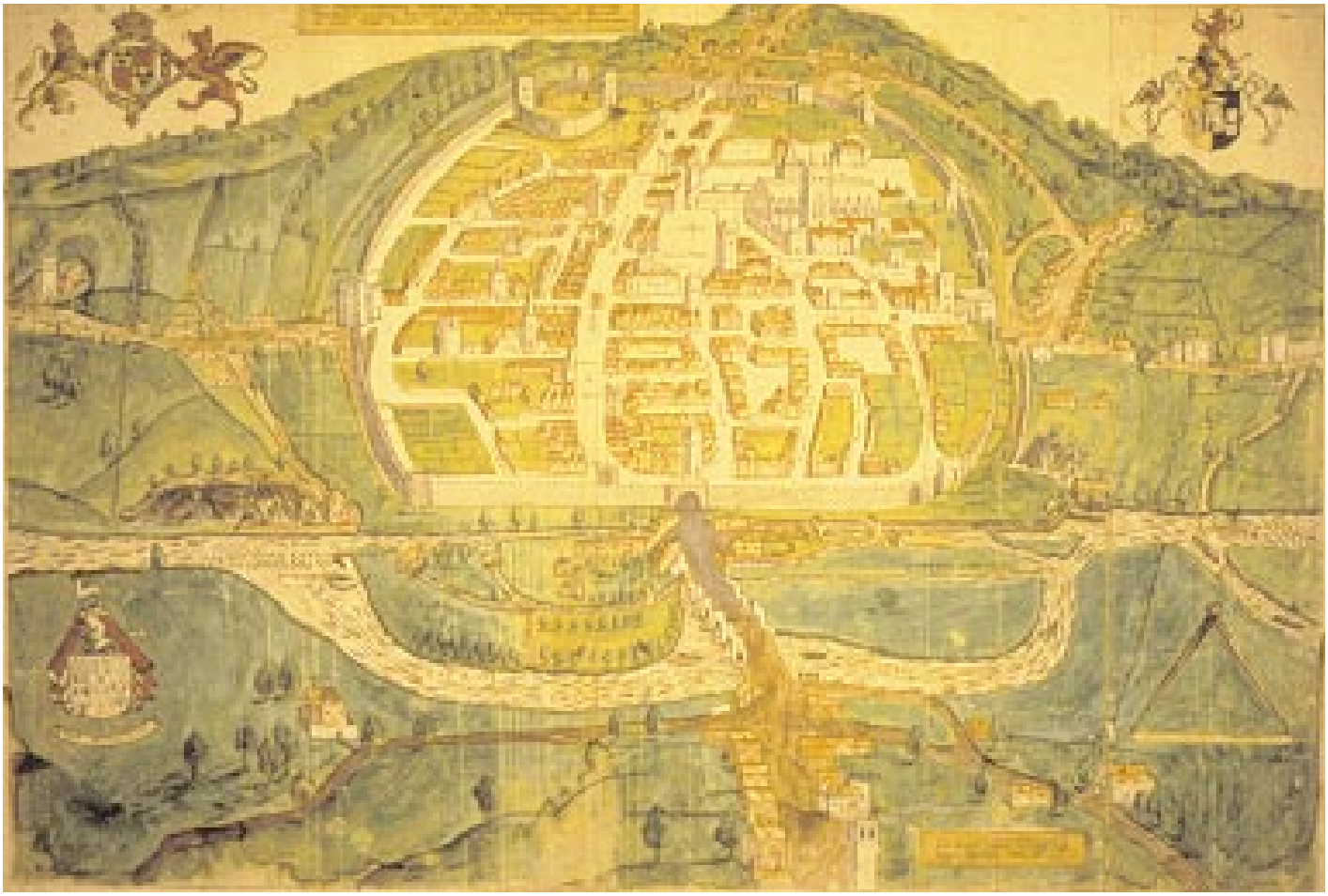
British Town Maps, 1470–1895

A catalogue and cartographical analysis

The study of the urban cartography of Great Britain forms part of a long-term research programme, based at Exeter University Geography Department, to record and analyse the pre-Ordnance Survey, large-scale (i.e. highly detailed) maps of the nation. The first two parts of the programme concerned maps of rural parishes and townships made for tithe commutation and enclosure purposes.[1] **Professor Roger Kain FBA**, *programme director, expands upon the current project which was adopted by the British Academy in 1998.*[2]

Towns present the map-maker with the most complex landscapes of all. Buildings within a town tend to be of different ages, styles (vernacular or designed) and functions. They are arranged on their plots along streets in different ways, streets may be broad and ruler-straight, or narrow and tortuous, or may be formally-created terraces, crescents, circles, or squares. Towns also contain a range of land uses – residential, commercial, industrial, administrative, ecclesiastical, recreational – which contribute to spatial differentiation. They may be sited on hilly or on relatively level terrain. And, underlying all, invisible in the landscape but a key to the urban texture, is the property ownership cadastre.[3]

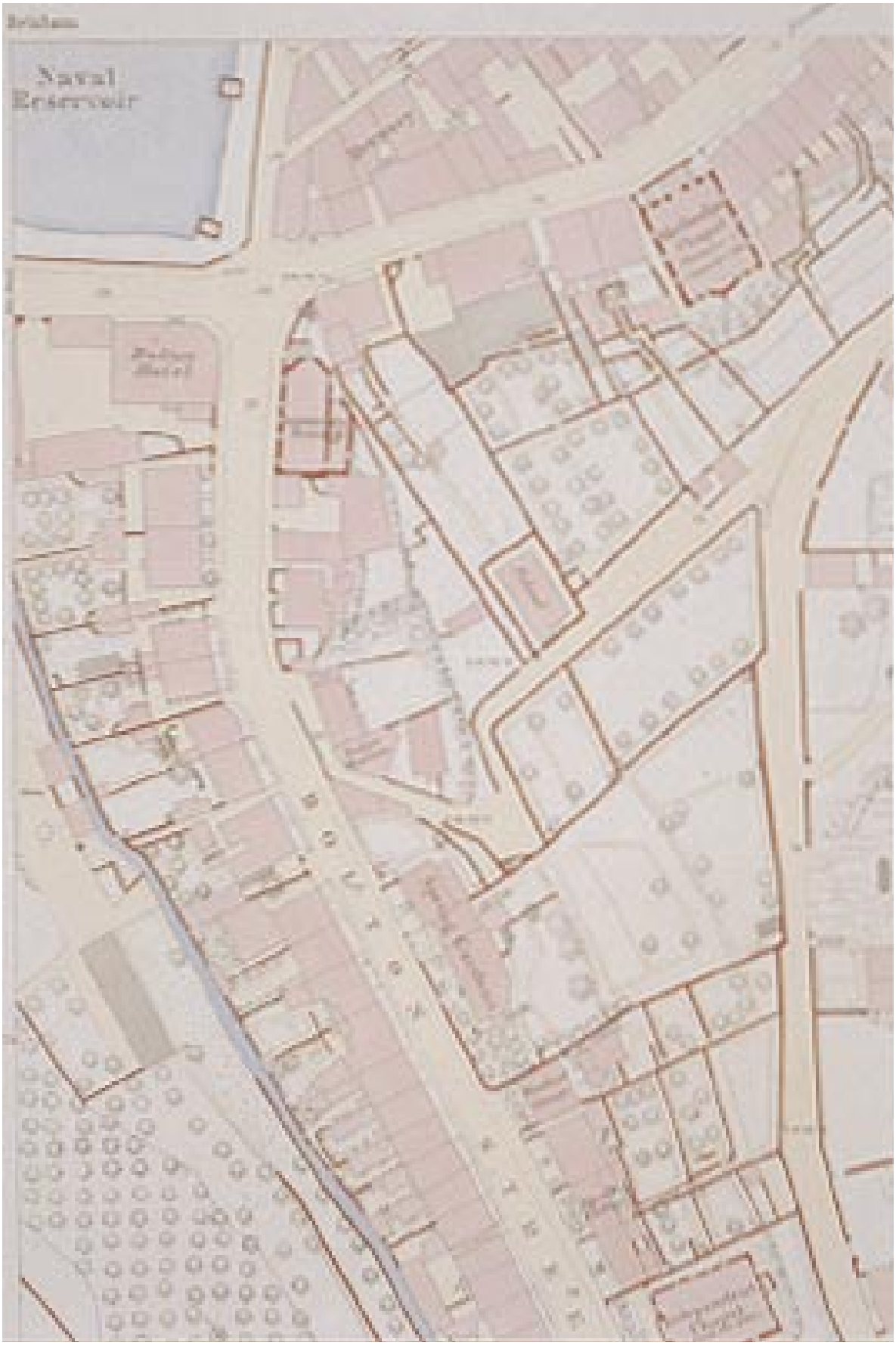
Concomitant with the heterogeneity of townscapes is a variety of cartographical genres subsumed by the general designation 'urban map'. Two maps drawn from this variety are illustrated here. One is a late sixteenth-century manuscript bird's eye view map of the city of Exeter – not drawn to a strict scale, highly decorated,



John Hooker's plan of Exeter, c.1587 belongs to a genre of town maps known as bird's eye views. Hooker was City Chamberlain from 1550 and his map depicts something of the topography and economic life of the city (note the mills, shipping and fishing on the River Exe) but it is also interpreted as a celebration of the wealth and power of this place in Tudor England.

[British Library, Maps C.5.a.3] Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board.

Part of the south Devon coastal town of Brixham on an Ordnance Survey 1:500 (120 inches to one mile) map. Surveyed in 1864, this represents the most sophisticated development of urban topographical mapping in Britain; some 400 towns were mapped at this or the 1:1056 (60 inches to one mile) scale between 1842 and 1895. At this very large scale, urban topography can be mapped in great detail. Streets and important buildings are named, the internal layout of public buildings is depicted (including the number of 'sittings' in churches), features as small as street lamps are located accurately, and much other highly detailed information is included, for example the position of water taps ('W.T.') and stop cocks ('S.C.'). On the other hand, the map is devoid of people and the third dimension of the townscape is absent entirely. [OS 1:500 Devon 128.2.15] Reproduced by permission of the University of Exeter.



topographically generalised yet rich in non-landscape detail (there is fishing and ships are shown at sail on the river Exe, woollen cloths are hung out to dry on tenter racks). As well as being a representation of topography, this map is also in many ways a celebration of the wealth and power of this town in early modern times. The other illustration is of a small part of the south Devon coastal town of Brixham as depicted by the Ordnance Survey on its very large-scale, highly detailed, printed late nineteenth-century town map series, maps which mark the high point of detailed urban topographical mapping in Britain.

Town maps are indeed extremely heterogeneous artefacts. They occur in both manuscript and printed forms, while printed maps may appear as a page in a book, as part of an atlas, as a single sheet or in multiple sheets. Any one printed map may be revised through a number of editions. Town maps are preserved in a wide variety and a great number of archives, repositories, and libraries – national, regional, and local. Towns were mapped for a variety of reasons and the cartographical characteristics and topographical and other content of the maps varies with the purpose and date of mapping. A simple typology of urban mapping would include maps of urban topography found in manuscript or published chronicles, books, atlases or as single sheets; maps, usually manuscript, produced for fortification and defence planning; maps, both manuscript and printed, for the administration and management of towns, for town planning, and for urban wayfinding; and maps, usually printed, which celebrate wealth, power and patronage.

Town maps can be of assistance to a wide variety of historians and others whose concerns touch on the urban past, though their relevance and use varies according the variety of history and the questions posed. For some purposes maps are used to answer narrow questions relating to topography – a map as a quarry of facts about what was there at the time the map was compiled. There can be few urban historians or, indeed, non-academics concerned with urban issues who do not need to use town maps in this way as an index to the location of things and events in the past, while for some investigations, such as town planning history, this kind of topographical information is at the very heart of historical research. Town maps are, though, much more than mere mirrors in which the physical reality of the past is reflected. Town maps (as all maps) are social constructs expressed through the medium of cartography. They can be read as texts in the same sense that paintings, film and theatre can be read and so are of relevance to a broad spectrum of cultural-historical research.

Notwithstanding the number of town maps that are extant, their wide dispersal, and their utility to historians and others, researchers have few descriptive and analytical finding aids to help identify and locate maps of a particular place. This British Academy research project aims to provide a much-needed research tool by locating, cataloguing, and describing all British town maps. It is hoped that the catalogue will both draw attention to the valuable resource of historical map data and also avoid unnecessary inspection of original maps as a contribution to the long-term conservation of these often very fragile historical artefacts.

As well as cataloguing the maps, it is our intention also to analyse the database to provide information for writing a narrative history of town mapping in Great Britain which will be the first book-length exploration of the enmeshing of town maps in the history of any country. The compilation of a computer database is an essential sheet anchor of the whole project. Briefly, data are being entered directly into a portable PC in each archive and library and then transferred periodically to the project database maintained at Exeter. This is structured around a list of all English towns. There are difficulties inherent in defining unequivocally what constitutes an urban place but our philosophy is to be inclusive in the sense that the intention is to record maps for all those places that have been considered as urban at some time since the beginning of town mapping in the late fifteenth century. At the one extreme this will include a number of settlements which were already fast-declining market centres by the sixteenth century; at the other it will include a number of places which only achieved urban status in the nineteenth century. Our starting point is Alan Everitt's enumeration of 760 English market towns. This has been augmented to include late-rising market towns, resort towns, and new industrial centres of the nineteenth century.[4] Towns around London which have been absorbed into the LCC/GLC area since 1870 are counted as separate places for cataloguing and analysis purposes. In sum, there may be about 1,300 'towns' in the whole of England.

We also have had to adopt a definition of 'town map' which can be applied consistently from library to library, and from archive to archive. Part of the definition relates to scale: all maps larger

than about 1:25,000 (2.5 inches to 1 mile) will be included, although in practice very few maps encountered are at scales smaller than about 1:12,000 (London excepted where smaller scales were often used because of the extent of the built-up area). Part of the definition also includes the provenance of a map; a map which is a derivative copy from a known map, for example a tithe map, is excluded. The corollary of this is that almost all pre-1750 mapping qualifies for inclusion. A further component of our definition of 'town map' relates to the area covered. We include only maps of either the whole of a built-up area or (and mostly in relation to London and other large cities) the whole of an urban parish, local board of health or similar administrative area, or discrete suburb. Deposited plans for transport and utility schemes are thus excluded, as are maps of individual urban properties (unless these urban estates cover a whole town or discrete subareas).

We anticipate that the results of our work will be disseminated as a combined electronic and conventional publication. The narrative history of town mapping written after analysis of the database will be a conventional printed book. This will also contain basic cartobibliographical information relating to each map. The remainder (a majority) of the cartographical and topographical information in the catalogue and the coverage diagrams compiled for each of the upwards of 10,000 town maps that the project expects to study will be best disseminated electronically.

Notes:

[1] Work on nineteenth-century parish tithe maps was funded by The Leverhulme Trust, has been completed, and is published as R.J.P. Kain and R.R. Oliver, *The Tithe Maps of England and Wales: A Cartographic Analysis and County-by-County Catalogue*, 873 pages, Cambridge University Press, 1995. Our work on enclosure and related maps was funded by ESRC and Cambridge University Press are publishing our main findings as a combined electronic and conventional book publication.

[2] The Arts and Humanities Research Board has recently agreed to provide five years of funding. AHRB funding is for work on English town maps; it is intended that Wales and Scotland will follow.

[3] The relationship between the spatial complexity of a town and its mapping is explored further in Catherine Delano Smith and Roger J.P. Kain, *English Maps: A History* (London, British Library Publications, 1999).

[4] Our composite list of towns to 1895 is compiled from the following sources: Alan Everitt, 'The market towns', in P. Clark (ed), *The Early Modern Town* (1976), pp 168 ff (originally published in J. Thirsk (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, Cambridge University Press, 1967, 467–506); Christopher Saxton, *Atlas of England and Wales*, 1579; John Adams, *Index Villaris: Or, an Alphabetical Table of all the Cities, Market-towns, Parishes, Villages, and Private Seats in England and Wales*, London, 1680; Ordnance Survey *One-Inch Old Series*, surveyed 1784–1863, published 1805–69; Samuel Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary…*, 1830; Ordnance Survey *One-Inch New Series*, first edition, surveyed 1841–88, published 1847–95; Ordnance Survey *One-Inch New Series*, second edition, surveyed 1893–8, published 1895–99. These sources are augmented with nineteenth-century directories and guide-books, and early nineteenth-century printed county maps.