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### 'A Sense of Place': Map Collections in the British Library

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In the obvious sense, the 'place' of the British Library's Map Library presents no problems. It is in the Library's flagship building at St Pancras in London, with the reading rooms and offices on the third and fourth floors and most of its approximately 4.5 million maps in Basement 4. In a less literal sense, however, a 'sense of place' is central to the structural and intellectual problems of the Library's map collections as well as being, I hope to show, the key to the way forward.

#### **Physical access: the reading rooms**

In the past there has been no single authoritative centre or comprehensive point of contact for the British Library's map collections. This has led to understandable confusion on the part of our users. The 'Map Library', known in the British Museum days as the 'Map Room', is the descendant of the map section of the British Museum's Department of Printed Books and in most respects it is the heir to the British Museum's short-lived Department of Maps (1867-1880), though few readers can be expected to know this. Other sections, notably the Department of Western Manuscripts, Humanities and Rare Books, and Oriental Collections also have significant cartographic holdings, including some of what are generally considered to be 'star items' such as the Rotz Atlas or the earliest printed Ptolemies. Until now these have been viewable only in their reading rooms and with little by way of back-up either in terms of reference material or on-site curatorial expertise. To complicate matters still further, western and oriental, manuscript and printed maps can be found in all sections, regardless of their official titles. Though such a situation is to be found in many other large libraries in Great Britain and throughout the world, it has made cartographic research in the British Library unnecessarily complicated. It has also meant that the spacious new Maps Reading Room in St Pancras, with its large desks, extensive reference library and open-access collection of maps, atlases and facsimiles is less used than it should be, while in other reading rooms a lack of sufficiently large tables has caused frustration to cartographic researchers.

## Remote Access: catalogues

The same historical factors which led to a multiplicity of reading rooms where maps could be studied also led to a multiplicity of catalogues in which map records could be found. Each of the British Museum's and later the British Library's departments catalogued maps according to its own rules and according to its own priorities, which often meant that maps did not get catalogued at all. To complicate matters further, some of the catalogues continue to refer to maps and atlases held by the British Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, though the British Library separated from the Museum over a generation ago.

To be fair efforts were made to bring the manuscript map collections together into one catalogue as early as the 1840s under the auspices of the Keeper of Manuscripts, Sir Frederic Madden and his assistant, John Holmes. This led to the publication of two volumes, with the appearance of the third delayed until 1960, though it had been completed a century earlier (and had not been updated). Apart from spasmodic efforts at collaboration, reflected in scattered entries for manuscript maps and for maps and atlases from the printed book collections in the evolving catalogue of maps held in the Map Room, further catalogue co-ordination was delayed until the late 1980s when the curator of manuscript maps was moved from the Department of Western Manuscripts to the Map Library. Compatibility of cataloguing standards was achieved, though only a few manuscript records were incorporated in the by-now automated principal map catalogue. Of greater immediate importance was the transfer of the funding for the purchase of manuscript maps from the department of western manuscripts to the Map Library, though for the sake of continuity the maps thus acquired have continued to be housed in the manuscripts' section.

An enormous step forward was made in the course of the 1990s, pushed ahead with characteristic gritty determination by my predecessor Tony Campbell. Well over 80% of the Map Library's collection and the contents of the nineteenth-century catalogue of manuscript maps was automated and, in collaboration with Primary Source Media, made available on a CD-rom which enjoys extensive functionality which enormously facilitates research, particularly in the history of cartography.

Much remains to be done, however. Some specialist catalogues of Map Library collections, for instance of the Crace Collection of maps of London, remain to be incorporated into the Cartographic Materials file while the cartographic holdings of other parts of the British Library, and particularly of the Oriental section (including the India Office Library and Records which only joined the British Library in the 1980s) are little known even within the British Library.

Access is also deeply unsatisfactory with the rate of technological change leading to raised user expectations to which we have not yet been able to respond. The Map Library's catalogue on CD-rom largely superseded a host of printed catalogues which had previously been regarded as setting cataloguing standards as they appeared from the 1820s onwards. Until about 1985, their availability in most large libraries throughout the world was considered to be the last word in accessibility. When it was published in 1998, the CD-rom was widely regarded as representing the last word in ease of access. Its retail price of £1500 has, however, led to few sales in a world that increasingly expects free access to all the British Library's cartographic holdings from one place, the computer in the researcher's study or on his or her lap or in the palm of his or her hand, by way of the internet. Indeed if there is no such access it leads all too easily to the assumption that the British Library has no maps - an assumption, as I discovered a couple of years ago, that was actually shared by some leading figures within the [British] Library Association!

Here we run into another problem - this time associated with the Map Library's place, and more generally the place of maps within the immensely larger whole of the British Library. It would cost no more than £7000 (approximately \$10,000) for the automated cartographic files, which are now considerably more extensive than those on the CD-rom which are frozen in 1998, to be placed on the British Library's Public Catalogue (BLPC) which is available on the internet. The Map Library actually has this money available

within its own reserves. Faced with a myriad of other automation projects, however, and the over-arching objective of creating a new, comprehensive library catalogue, the ILS, the British Library as a whole has necessarily had to set priorities and maps have not featured high in them.

### **The place of Maps in the British Library and of maps in the research environment**

This leads us to other problems of 'place'. It has two aspects one organisational and the other relating to the intellectual positioning of maps. As a result of the recent re-structuring of the Library along service lines and the downgrading of senior curatorial posts within the British Library it has become more difficult for the voice of the Map Library to gain direct access to the highest-level decision-makers. Where previously the head of the Map Room or Map Library had considerable direct responsibility for all aspects of maps, from reading room delivery services, to conservation, storage and conservation, this is now shared with several other sections. While this has brought considerable advantages to the functioning of the Library as a totality, it has brought with it the downgrading of senior curatorial posts as they have been perceived as losing former responsibilities and budgets. In its turn this made it more difficult for the head of map collections to gain direct access to the highest level decision makers. In many cases, indeed, Maps are not even represented on the bodies responsible for formulating policy in crucial areas. The, while awkward and misleading, has not really been prejudicial - indeed it may even have increased the Map Library's freedom of action on a day-to-day basis.

Still more difficult has been the very concept of a 'Map Library' in the modern world which is perhaps reflected in the positioning of maps (with music and philatelic) in the American and European section of the Collections Directorate. It is almost a commonplace that maps have been all but abandoned by academic geographers, who have a tendency to denigrate them, and that business and commerce are interested primarily in GI and digital mapping. As yet map curators have not seriously tried to counter-balance this by calling on support from leading figures in the important academic disciplines, such as literature, social and political history and the history of art that have recently 'discovered' the value of maps, nor of law and the utilities for whom maps have long been essential. We have not been able to exploit the widely quoted statistic according to which 80% of information has a spatial element. Most striking or all, we have not so far mobilised those large segments the general public opinion which is evidently fascinated by maps in all their aspects: as aids, as art and as mirrors of mentalities and of past ages. The British Library's recent 'Lie of the Land' exhibition is widely regarded as having been its most successful to date and hardly a week goes by without the Map Library being approached by the media. Yet a library department that proclaims its focus as being maps is liable to find itself besmirched by the taint of antiquarianism in a world whose governments increasingly regard history, in Henry Ford's words, as bunk. Bereft of its former godfather and grouped with stamp or postcard collecting on the periphery of the world of knowledge, a map library has no clear position on the map of learning.

### **Opportunities: a new place for maps**

The radical re-organisation of the British Library following the appointment of Lynne Brindley as Chief Executive in 2000 has, with other factors, presented the Map Library with the chance to reposition itself and the Library's map collections. Despite the restrictive connotations of the Map Library's location within the American and modern European collections there has been firm support for the integration of the map collections. For the first time, the head of the Map Library is also, explicitly, Head of all of the British Library's map collections.

It is now official policy that maps from throughout the British Library should be made available in the Maps Reading Room where the relevant curatorial expertise, an extensive open-access reference library and - last but certainly not least - sufficient large flat surfaces for consultation are available. There has been substantial progress towards that goal. Since the opening of the new library building in St Pancras in

1998, readers have been able to order (almost) all printed atlases and most books from the Library's Rare Book section to the Maps Reading Room and discussions are underway to expand on this. Aided by the fact that the Manuscripts and the Maps Reading Rooms now share the same delivery team, almost all manuscript maps, medieval as well as modern, will soon be made available in the Maps Reading Room for consultation alone or side-by-side with facsimiles and related printed maps. It will even be possible for the rarest of manuscript maps to be ordered so long as the reader - as is the case even in the Manuscripts' Reading Room - can give good reasons for needing to consult the originals. Negotiations have begun with the Library's oriental section for its maps to be made available in the Maps Reading Room, though for logistical and staffing reasons, this would be more complicated. The Map Library in its turn has been trying to ensure that its holdings can be made available in other reading rooms so long as this can be done without damage to the maps. Of course maps from each section continue to be available in their own reading room.

The first priority for the Map Library continues to be to get the Cartographic Materials file mounted on the Internet as a part of the overall Library provision, the only problem remaining being one of timing. At the same time more strenuous efforts than previously expended are being made to co-ordinate map cataloguing and map care throughout the Library, with specific targets in these areas being agreed by consultation within every map holding section between local line managers and the Map Library. There is also closer co-operation over cartographic loans for internal and external exhibitions.

Side-by-side with this the Map Library is closely involved in the digitisation of some of its most important maps and views as part of the Library-wide 'In Place' programme funded by the New Opportunities Fund. Over the next two years this should witness the digitisation and release on the internet of the earliest, pre-1600, images of the British Isles drawn from the western manuscripts' section and the Map Library; of the Crace collection of historic maps of London; of the original early nineteenth-century drawings for the original Ordnance Survey of England and Wales and of the watercolours and aquatints from King George III's Topographical Collection.

Over the past year the Map Library has been repositioning itself intellectually. On the one hand it has been expanding beyond its traditional primary emphasis on antiquarian maps. It is now much more actively purchasing recent mapping such as, for instance, Soviet mapping of the world and national atlases as well as continuing to receive enormous disposals of recent mapping from the Ministry of Defence. In common with the other British copyright libraries, the British Library is now also receiving, making available and archiving the latest, digital Ordnance Survey mapping. CD-roms are being purchased in increasing numbers. Following the appointment of a curator of digital mapping who will be starting work at the beginning of September, we hope to move actively into the selection of cartographic websites for long-term archiving and into collaboration with other libraries in the acquisition of digital mapping. We shall also be keeping under constant review the possibilities of providing a GI service to our readers though at the moment this is not considered to be much needed nor, consequently, viable..

These changes form part of the wider long-term objective of transforming the Map Library into the British Library's centre of expertise on all aspects of place. This is primarily a response to the realisation that most of our readers regardless of background are interested in place, however expressed: whether through maps, views, travel descriptions, gazetteers or GI. With that objective in mind and while retaining the curatorial expertise in the fields of antiquarian printed and manuscript maps that distinguished the British Museum and later the British Library throughout the twentieth century, I would eventually like to recruit curators with expertise in travel and other written descriptions of place, such as gazetteers, and in views and visual topography. Their remit would be Library-wide and not confined to the Map Library. They would work on tightly-defined projects having as their aim the identification of material that has hitherto escaped most traditional book cataloguers' notice. We would hope to attract external funding for these posts - which could offer profitable returns to investors.

It is a development that follows on naturally from the development of a services-based structure within the British Library. Loss of administrative and other responsibilities puts the emphasis ever more strongly on the core aspect of curatorship that remains: the curator's unique knowledge of the collections and their intellectual context, usually allied with the ability to explain them in clear, simple terms. Moreover the removal of 'ownership', as traditionally defined, of their specific collection which is now shared out between numerous sections (preservation, operations as well as collections), brings with it the reciprocal chance of increased intellectual and managerial involvement throughout the Library's collections - to the long-term benefit of all our users. Bit by bit, Maps in the British Library are finding their place.

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