

Keeping the nation's map collection: An interview with Tom Harper

Jeremy Crump

jeremy.crump@livingmaps.org

Jeremy Crump is reviews editor of Livingmaps Review.

Keeping the nation's map collection

Tom Harper is a lead curator of antiquarian mapping at the British Library and curator of the library's major exhibition 'Maps and the 20th Century: Drawing the Line' (2016-17). He also curated the 2010 exhibition 'Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda and Art', and (with Philip Hatfield) 'Lines in the Ice: Seeking the Northwest Passage' in 2014-15. Tom showed Livingmaps Review editors Phil Cohen and Jeremy Crump around Maps in the 20th Century: Drawing the Line and talked about his enthusiasm for working with the national collection. This article is an edited transcript of what he told us about the exhibition.



Figure 1. *Target Berlin* (detail), by F E Manning, 1943. Copyright: British Library.

I don't think I'm atypical. I'm someone who grew up surrounded by maps, The Children's Atlas, drawing maps, copying maps, learning about the world through them. Coming to work at the British Library was an absolute thrill and a joy, and it still is. I'm an art historian, I studied Art History at Birmingham University and through that I gained an enthusiasm for the history of printing, particularly in Germany and Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries. My job now is to deal with antiquarian maps in the historical collection.

Any maps that are printed in the UK are required to be deposited in the British Library and the other four legal deposit libraries, the same as for books. The British Library also has the national collection for prints and drawings, but there's no set policy for works of art which feature maps. We collect artworks that employ cartography or use maps in some way, but we are very selective. The artworks have to have some sort of perspective on cartography. We have a fund for collecting historical maps, and our focus is on maps relating to the British experience, complementing collections we already have and not overlapping with those of other institutions. We've got as good a collection of historical printed maps as you can find anywhere in the world. There are things we are on the lookout for. We're pretty good on the major historical categories – early Dutch atlases, the atlases by Mercator and Ortelius, British publications from the 17th and 18th centuries. It's often the more unusual, ephemeral items, sometimes things which almost weren't seen as maps 30 or 40 years ago that are increasingly interesting for us. For example maps included in early newspapers. We have the newspaper archive but those early maps and supplements tend not to have been kept. Also maps that are in unusual forms, maps that are stitched or hand drawn or knitted, although we are very selective with three dimensional objects. I'm really interested in how today we are obsessed by technology in mapping. How we collect digital maps is a big interest. The e-Legal deposit guidelines enable the British Library to collect a copy of anything that is published online. We harvest websites and can go behind paywalls.

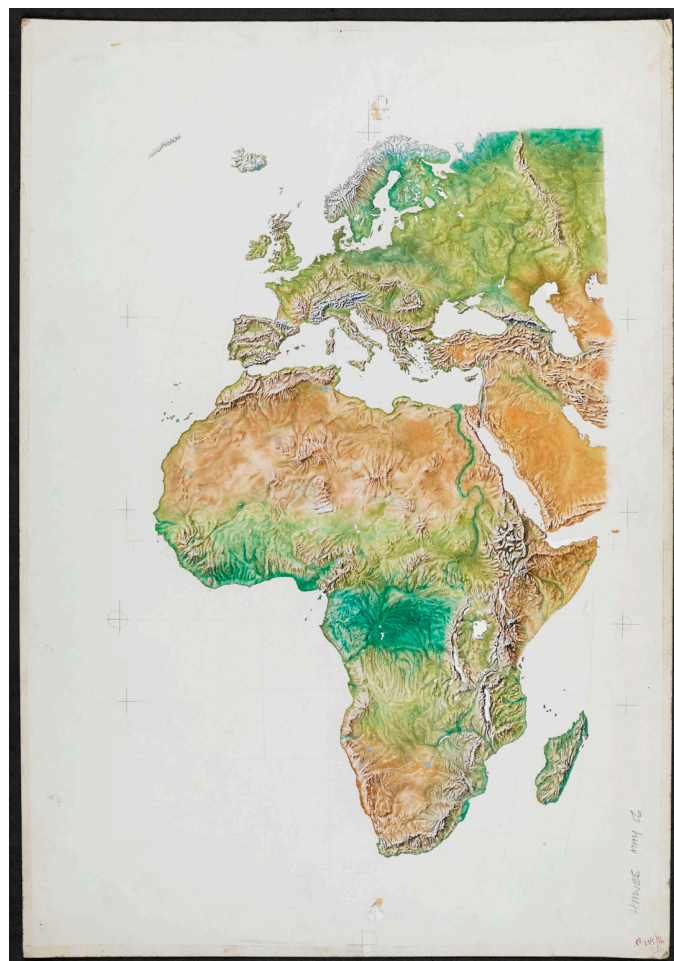


Figure 2. *Watercolour map of Africa, 1957.* Copyright British Library and Philips Business Archive

One of the real strengths of the British Library is its 20th century map collection. Of the 4 million maps in the collection at least two thirds are from the 20th century, and that really reflects mapping as a 20th century pursuit, and that really cemented the goal of the exhibition. There are a number of very different 20th century collections which we wanted to show, from a collection of postcards, which 30 years ago wouldn't have been thought of as part of a map collection, to the Ministry of Defence map archive that we have here in our role as a place of deposit. One exhibit is of Bert Hawes' hand drawn, watercolour maps for a Phillips atlas in the 1950s. They would have been thrown in a skip if we hadn't taken them. We've got the Phillips business archive, and these were part of it. We are very lucky in that people think of the British Library.



Figure 3. *Map of China*, Compiled by John A. Diakoff, Harbin: Northern Trading Company Ltd.
Copyright: Cartography Associates <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

The exhibition includes a big map of China which gives you some idea of how the British Library used to treat its maps. It's on 4 sheets, but what they used to do was to cut up the maps, stick them on linen and then fold them up to go in quite small boxes. So pretty well all our big maps, including some unique examples of 16th century woodcut maps, have been chopped into little bits. They were just maps. It was all about the information, it was nothing to do with the object and its cultural value. Now if you want to do something with these maps, like georeference them, those gaps are a real problem. We've included this map in the peace section because it's from Harbin in 1931, just before the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Harbin was a haven for White Russians fleeing Russia in the 1920s.

Of course, there are limitations to the exhibition, reflecting those in the collection. It's focused on Britain and the British experience, it's a fundamentally western view. We've been very keen to include ephemeral maps, maps that were produced as posters, for propaganda, advertising, beer mats, plates... Until the early 1990s, those things were shunned by the cartographic cannon. We're still catching up in that area and there are some very good collections elsewhere in the world, like the P J Mode collection of [Persuasive Maps](#) at Cornell. I was really lucky to be able to go down to the stacks and look for publications to include. Most of the atlases we've got are like these economic school atlases. And then you come to something like Michael Kidron's *New State of the World Atlas* by the Pluto Press.

I'm interested in map use. There is a Gallipoli map in the exhibition with annotations by an officer, from the War Office collection. It's quite rare for a map in the British Library to have had something done to it, it's been used. Generally the copies we have, if they are the legal deposit copy, are unmarked, and you kind of want something more.

Getting outside our conventional ways of reading maps is difficult. We are so used to the Ordnance Survey, and how those maps work that it can be very difficult to look at them objectively. One of the things we considered doing in this exhibition was showing a number of different maps produced by different mapping agencies to the same scale to look at how they differed. That would be something which told us not only about mapping conventions and style but also about how places look. One notable omission is that there is no Arno Peter's map here. We figured that people may have had enough of Peters. Possibly we could have done more on projection.

We have looked at maps as statements of power and control, which ties into why this exhibition has maps largely from a Western perspective, although we have maps in the exhibition which were produced in all sorts of places, in Kigali, in Korea, the Marshall Islands. We have to engage with the disjoint between map and territory. Including more about community mapping and participatory mapping was something we thought about. We don't have any of the Common Ground maps here, although it would have been possible to borrow them. We can't just ignore everything that J B Harley writes about. A book I have found very useful is Geoffrey King's book *Mapping reality*, he tries to get to the idea of the map coming first, preceding the territory. Can anyone come and look at the 200 maps in our exhibition without having some perception of the places they show? Chris Perkins did a really good paper at a symposium we had as part of the magnificent maps exhibition (2010) talking about how we have created a very self-conscious space and that by exhibiting something a new meaning is constructed. Whenever a map is looked at it is created anew. People bring everything they have to the map to create it anew.

We've got a learning programme for primary and secondary schools, and also for adult learning as well. The workshop leaders here do a lot of work with the historical maps. They are very interested in seeing what a map has to say about as many things as possible – geography becomes almost secondary to social history and what the map has to say about the circumstances of the time. I really hope the exhibition will stimulate more demand from people to use the collection. One experience of working in our reading room, something which the maps reference team staff say, is that they have to do a lot more work and spend a lot more time with readers – other reading rooms aren't teaching people how to read books, but they have to teach people how to read maps. There's generally a few stages of finding out what the reader wishes to discover from the map. It's about finding out what they are looking for, and then helping them interpret what they are looking at.

We allow photography in reading rooms now, so providing it's out of copyright you can get a copy for private research. I am on a crusade to convince people of the value of maps, not just for finding our way around and understanding who we are. Whenever I tell people what I do, they say. 'I love maps', but I don't think it should stop there.