

## No. 12: THE MAP AS REPOSITORY OF MEMORY

Commentary by David Woodward

My visits to Newton Abbot to visit Brian Harley in the 1970s were always special events. I had begun to know Brian from the two major venues in the history of cartography at the time: the international meetings in the history of cartography in Brussels (1969) and Edinburgh (1971) and the Kenneth Nebenzahl, Jr. Lectures in the History of Cartography, Chicago in 1970 (William P. Cumming, *The British Cartography of Eighteenth Century North America*), and 1972 (*Five Centuries of Map Printing*). Everything about the trips to Devon was pleasurable, beginning with the three-hour train journey from Paddington, with a front-row seat of the wildlife in the English countryside and the magnificent seaside estuaries. Brian had chosen a house at 6 Knowles Hill Road halfway up the hill overlooking the market town of Newton Abbot, some half-an-hour's drive from his teaching position in the Geography Department at the University of Exeter. The house was laid out in two main sections, one containing a dining room sporting a magnificent nineteenth-century theodolite on the mantelpiece and a front door that was seldom used. Also hanging in the dining room was the Ordnance Survey six-inch scale map of the local area. The other section contained a living room with fireplace and two staircases, one of which led to the guestroom that seemed to be perched on top of the house with a view of the rooftops of the town and estuary beyond. Memories of awakening jet-lagged in the early hours and sensing the lonely silence of the town from this outpost are still very vivid. Indeed, jetlag seemed to be a general problem for me at that time, and Brian's daughters nicknamed me the "dormouse" as a result—it seemed to be my normal state whenever they saw me. Also off the living room was a hallway leading to a small study heated with a space heater under the worktable, used only on demand by desperate research guests. The building was laid out on a triangular plot that Brian gardened energetically. The main way into the house was through the apex of this triangle where the car was parked. One walked through the terraced garden, by the large retaining wall that magically fell down the day after he sold the house, and in the back door to a large country kitchen where most daily activity took place.

In 1987, when *The Map Collector* invited prominent historians of cartography to choose their favorite map and write about it, it was not surprising that Brian—with his passionate interest in the large-scale mapping of England—should select the six-inch Ordnance Survey sheet of Devonshire, CIX, S.E., Newton Abbot, hanging in his dining room. The essay has become celebrated since then as a literary model of how maps can evoke deep memories of a lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Brian loved Ordnance Survey maps and had a deep knowledge and interest in the technical *minutiae* of early maps, as much of his early work with English county maps and the Ordnance Survey clearly reveals; this technical grasp of how maps were made always lay beneath the surface in his later work. He recounted his delight in assigning students to compare a tiny portion of a sheet of a local topographic map with what was actually on the ground. Outside the polemical arena, in the everyday workings of the History of Cartography Project, for example, his aphorism was "start with the maps!"

The map that he chose has also become a repository of memories for me because of its early association with my friendship with Brian and the origin of the History of Cartography Project.

So, the map revives her words, the spot, the time,  
And the thing we found we had to face  
before the next year's prime;  
The charted coast stares bright,  
And its episode comes back in pantomime.  
—Thomas Hardy, *The Place on the Map*.

The origin of the *History of Cartography* can be pinpointed on this map to a specific spot and time. Whenever I look at it, I am reminded of the welcome walks to spring us from the freezing office and exercise Bella, the family's boxer dog. The usual route can be traced on the map excerpt shown here—east along Knowles Hill Road, north through the meadow near the right edge of the map, to work our way over to the pathway leading up to Highweek Church, and to circle back home through the residential areas. On one such walk, late in May 1977, at a spot on the Highweek path where the hedgerows opened up to a field on the right, discussion



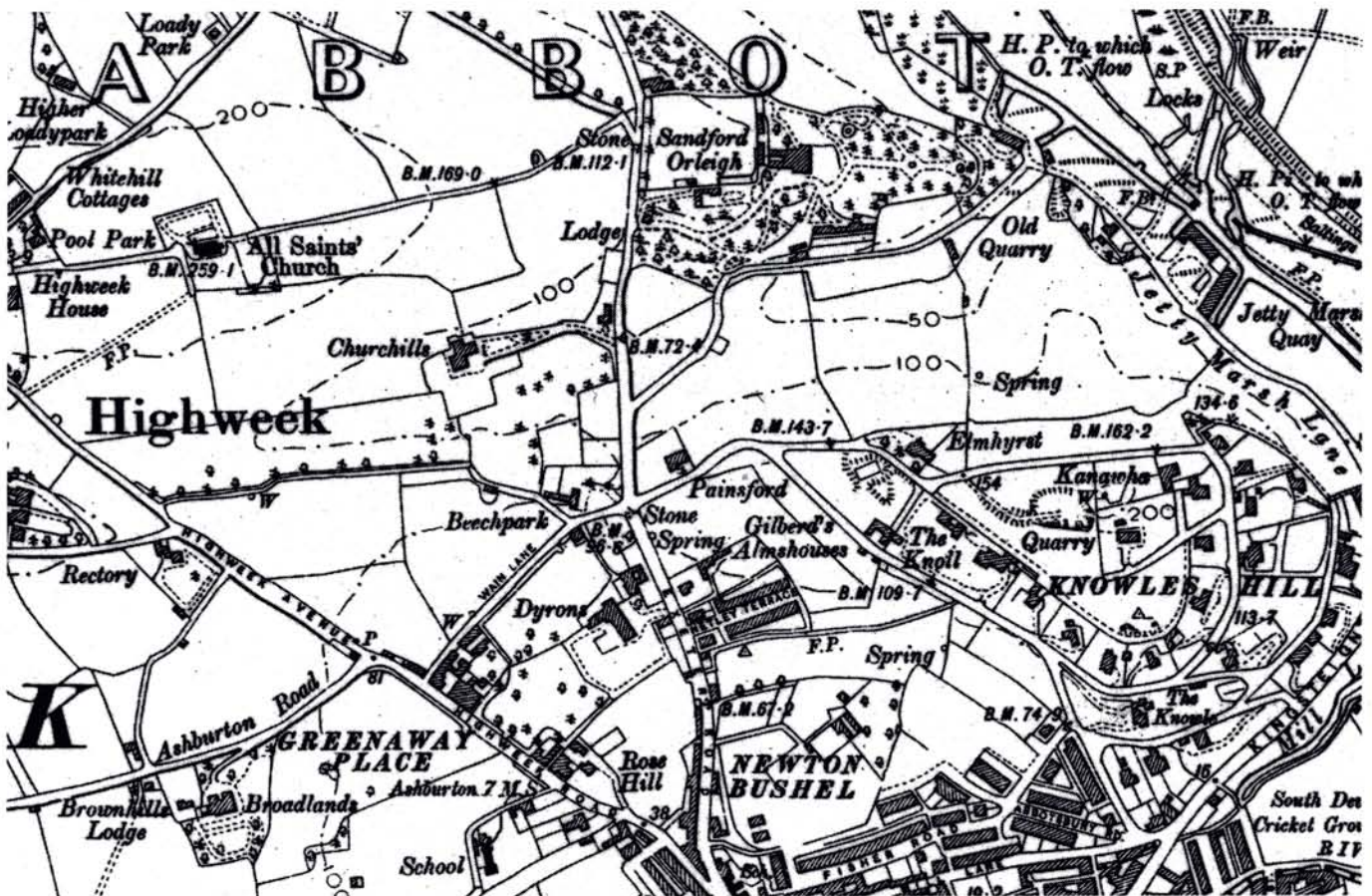
turned to the need for a multi-volume history of cartography. The proposed volumes, which were to be no more than 250,000 words each, and take no more than ten years of our lives, would cover all cultures and all periods, but would stop short at 1900, the twentieth century already looming in our minds as an unwieldy morass of data. How the Project evolved and expanded from there has been documented in the prefaces to volumes in the *History* series and in my 2001 Barcelona essay on the origin and history of the *History of Cartography*.<sup>2</sup>

1. J. B. Harley, "The Map as Biography: Thoughts on Ordnance Survey Map, Six-Inch Sheet Devonshire CIX, S.E., Newton Abbot," *Map Collector* 41 (1987): 18-20. Ed Dahl drew attention to the beauty of parts of this essay as poetry in a letter to the *Map Collector* 42 (1988): 50.

2. David Woodward, "Origin and History of *The History of Cartography*," in *Plantejaments i objectius d'una història universal de la cartografia [Approaches and Challenges in a Worldwide History of Cartography]* (Barcelona: Institut Cartogràfic de Catalunya, 2001), 23-30.

Printed by Tracy Honn on Somerset Book paper with a Vandercook No. 4T at the Silver Buckle Press, University of Wisconsin—Madison. The type is Baskerville set by Michael and Winifred Bixler, Skaneateles, New York. Blocks by Royal Graphix, La Crosse, Wisconsin. Two hundred and fifty copies have been initialed and numbered.

Published 2004 by the History of Cartography Project, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin, 550 North Park Street, Madison WI 53706-1491, USA. Telephone: (608) 263-3992 Fax: (608) 263-0762 E-mail: hcart@geography.wisc.edu Internet: <http://www.geography.wisc.edu/histcart>



Detail from 1:10,560 British Ordnance Survey map Devonshire CIX, S.E., Newton Abbot, second edition of 1906, courtesy of the Geography and Map Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (G5753.D4.s10.G71).