

Visit to Durham Records Office

County Durham is well known for two related industries, coal mining and the development of railways, and illustrative examples of maps and plans for each of these were included in the display arranged for the CCS visit by county archivist Liz Bregazzi, assisted by CCS member David Butler.

An estate plan of Gibside dating from 1716, then owned by the Bowes family, illustrated early coal mining activity. Later coloured plans illustrated both ownership and workings in specific coalfields and showed the extent to which coal extraction had become a major industry. Another example of a coal-related item was a plan drawn up to assist in the investigation of the underground explosion in Easington Colliery in 1951. The explosion caused the deaths of eighty-one miners and two members of the rescue teams. The plan showed the location of roof falls and displaced supporting structures, as well as where, in the complex of mine roadways and tunnels, the body each of the miners was found. A plan showing lead seams at the head of Derwent Water represented another extractive industry, lead mining.

To maximise the value of coal extraction, effective transport infrastructure was essential. The precursor of railways were waggon ways and a plan of the Derwent Valley Waggon Way (1720) and the New Washington Colliery and associated works (1790) showed the early developments in this area. Plans concerning water transport, the development of staithes and the proposal to canalise rivers to improve the movement of coal by boat were evidence that mine ownership was not the only source of wealth in the area. Also on show were the plan and Book of Reference for the Stockton and Darlington Railway prepared by George Stephenson.

An international flavour was provided by two maps of Africa, the most important aspect of these was a series of annotations by Viscount Castlereagh, then serving as foreign secretary. In these he noted that despite the slave trade having been abolished by both Britain and the United States, it was still active. Ostensibly this was by ships flying the Portuguese flag but in fact they were operating at the behest of British or American interests, as until this period there had been no Portuguese slave trade.

Ordnance Survey was not ignored and several examples of large-scale maps were laid out to enable comparison with estate plans and other town plans, for example those of Foster 1754 and John Wood 1820. The importance of surveying and mapping by serving military officers was superbly illustrated by an exercise

book belonging to General de Lisle and a map of Sandhurst produced by him while a cadet there in 1882. The final example of OS material was a copy of 1:100,000 map of Lens, once the property of Lt HH Nicholson (6th Batt Durham Light Infantry). It had been in his tunic pocket when he was shot and as a result saved his life, blood stains and holes in the map were evidence of its value for this purpose.

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