

## Uncle Max and his use of the Ordnance Survey

MacDonald 'Max' Gill, the younger brother of typographer Eric Gill, has been called 'the king of the Decorative Map'. His great-niece Caroline Walker gave CCS members a fascinating illustrated talk about Max's use of the Ordnance Survey in the creation of his own more elaborate maps. After first giving a brief overview of her great-uncle's diverse artistic output – including graphic design, mural art, and lettering for the war graves – Caroline then turned to his mapping output. To illustrate his use of Ordnance Survey maps, she focused on three very different examples of his work: a beautiful painted wind-dial panel for a Lutyens-designed villa, a humorous pictorial map poster for the London Underground and a smaller printed map for a book describing the history of the wool industry in the Colne Valley.

Relevant OS sheets were matched with surviving artwork to show the development of Max's works from his first ideas to the finished map. The OS map provided a skeleton of roads and rivers, an 'artistic playground'<sup>1</sup> that Max brought to life with pictorial detail reflecting the locality and its inhabitants. Max made no secret of the importance of Ordnance Survey maps in his work. In an article for *The Studio* he wrote: 'The Ordnance Survey ... should be the frame around which we build ... Our decoration should not be gained at too great a sacrifice of topographical accuracy for, as is true in all the arts, an enforced discipline is good'<sup>2</sup>

Max also used Ordnance Survey maps in his profession as an architect. The example Caroline illustrated was the model farm and village project in Dorset where he was architect-in-residence during the First World War. Here he used large scale OS maps as a base for his estate plans on which he meticulously plotted the existing, planned and newly-built cottages and farm buildings.

His collection of OS map sheets was put to less dignified use during the Second World War. In that time of paper shortages Max used many as protective wrapping around rolls of his precious map posters prior to their safe storage. A good example of recycling – but an ignominious ending some might say – for maps that had played such a vital role!

Caroline's amply illustrated and acclaimed biography of her great-uncle *MacDonald Gill: Charting a Life* was published this year. It is available to Charles Close Society members at the special price of £20 (reduced from £30) + UK £3.50 p&p from the publisher's website using the Promo Code: CCS. The offer runs until 31st December.

<https://www.unicornpublishing.org/page/detail/MacDonald-Gill/?k=9781912690893>

You can find more information on MacDonald Gill at [www.macdonaldgill.com](http://www.macdonaldgill.com)

---

<sup>1</sup> Gill, MacDonald, 'Decorative Maps', *The Studio*, December 1944, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.