

# YOU ARE HERE

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**In this article, Peter discusses the complex relationship between maps, space, place and identity. He also explores how teachers can use local maps to investigate pupils' sense of identity.**

Maps matter – they help to engender a sense of place and identity as well as providing us with factual information. Most of us have multiple, nested identities based on our home and family, our neighbourhood, region and nationality, as well as other affiliations and attachments. I am, despite my Yugoslav name, a 'Man of Kent', yet not a 'Kentish Man', the latter being a label determined by which side of the River Medway a person is born and something that can be cartographically determined! I was born in Chatham.

Our sense of identity and personal geography involves not only the values and meaning we attribute to places, but also our perceptions of self in relation to space and place. A person with a significant physical impairment may read and map the environment very differently from a person without that impairment. For example, the monumental steps of a cathedral, supposed to create a sense of awe and reverence, may be resented by a wheelchair user. Our identity is also mediated by the wider geopolitical space, as many British Muslims will have experienced from the 1990 Gulf War onwards. Their identity, which is often chosen and defined by others, is affected by the news from regions of conflict far from our shores. Some people hear the term 'Muslim' and make immediate, limited and sometimes negative, connotations. These associations are often made by individuals with no day-to-day experience of particular peoples – another example of the importance of place and lived experience. Modern school atlases, with their focus on everyday lives, can be used to challenge such perceptions in our pupils.

Children develop their sense of identity from an early age, surrounded as they are by a range of cultural signifiers. As Distin (2011) points out, a child's world is created and often bounded by the assumptions and rules set by parents and later by school, and many children in multi-ethnic Britain must also negotiate complex affiliations linked to language and religion. Maps are but one powerful form of signifier in this process. We live in a map-immersed world,

one in which cartographic products (e.g. weather maps, maps in adverts, road atlases) are common and appear to be a natural re-presentation of the world around us. The fact that these maps are cultural constructs and often contain contradictions created by editorial decisions is often overlooked. What maps do not contain – their 'silences' – can be as important as what is shown. Examining what is and what is not included on a local tourist map makes for an interesting class activity related to sense of place (see below).

Pupils' early encounters with maps and map making are often at the local level. This might include mapping their classroom or school grounds. Creating free-hand maps of their route to school can throw up interesting material related to the pupil's view of themselves and their environment. A wider introduction may come through exposure to maps of their home area, including promotional maps produced by local authorities, government agencies or NGOs as well as community maps. Community mapping projects have grown in number in recent decades, and many schools have contributed to their production. For example, many communities have engaged with the Common Ground's 'Parish Maps' project since the late 1980s, with the originals often to be found in schools and community halls. These maps have been produced in a variety of formats – some as traditional paper maps and others in textile or clay – but all provide a lasting record. The maps may be the work of a single artist drawing on local experiences, or a group effort. A good example is the ceramic map of Selsley (Cotswolds) placed on the wall of a local public house, of which reproductions as postcards or posters find their way into homes and schools. Community mapping is generally concerned with placing value on local environments and creating a sense of identity with place. Parish mapping was explicitly 'political' too – presented as 'a process of self-alerting, putting people on their toes against unwanted change and producing an active sense of community' (Crouch and Matless, 1996). An interesting pupil activity would be to map the locality of your school in terms of positive (e.g. traffic crossings) and negative attributes (e.g. traffic hazards).

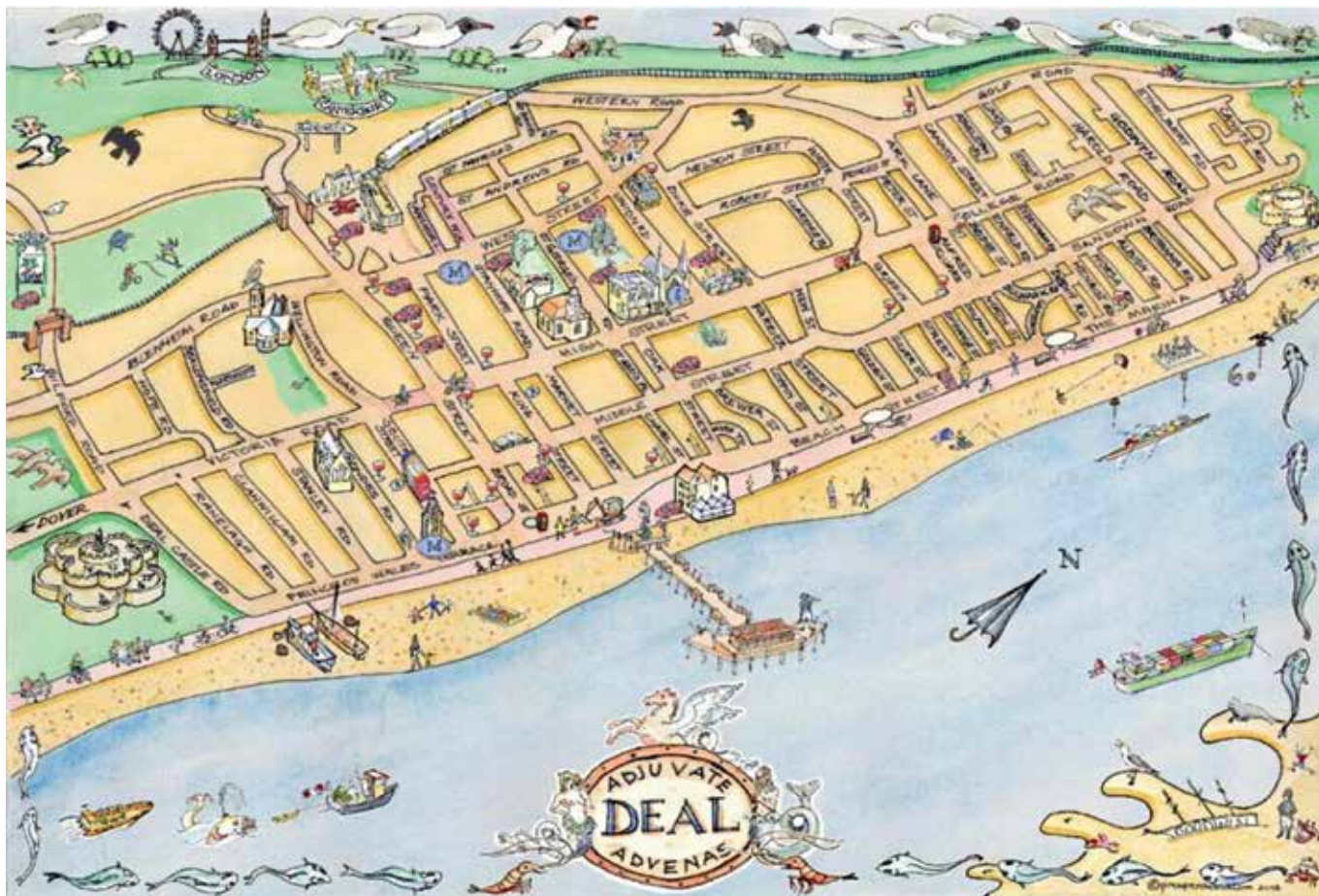
The extent to which maps are apt representations of the lived landscape can be disputed. Many Parish maps show rural settlements as 'rural idylls'. While many people would wish to defend this aspect

of British life, it does offer a skewed view of such localities – celebrating the quaint and the historic over the commonplace and the lived experience of locals. The maps often veil industrial sites, council housing and other scenes that do not 'fit' the idyll. An antidote is to use Google Streetview to 'visit' the site of a Parish map as a class exercise. For instance, if we drop in on the village of Marldon in Devon (see Figure 1 and web panel), we can compare 'reality' with the Parish map. The latter focuses on the picturesque – only two modern buildings (the primary school and village hall) feature, both of which are key community hubs, all the other buildings shown are old; whereas Google Streetview shows the modern houses and bungalows that surround the village core. The only forms of transport shown on the Parish map involve horses, which belies the lines of cars parked along the village streets and the petrol station (a distinctive landmark at an important road junction). How do young pupils read such a map? Can they see beyond the surface and question the inequalities inherent in the silences? Or, when asked to make a map of their locality, would they default (like most adults) to representing it as an idyll?

We must not be despondent. Place identity and family still offer a potent theme for cartographic exploration, although not without hazard. Many older members of pupils' families will be able to remember changes to their locality.



**Figure 1: Parish maps, such as this one of Marldon, can be compared with the 'reality' shown by Streetview. Reproduced with kind permission.**



**Figure 2:** Deal's tourist map evokes the lively bustle of a working fishing culture. Graphic design by Prosper Devas. Reproduced with kind permission.

Oral history is popular (see article by Poole, pages 10-11 of this issue), and can be converted to mappings of changing place and identity. The fact that many elderly and some young people are disabled in some way provides an opportunity to explore perceptions of self related to the organisation of space. This fundamental geographic issue is one that even the youngest of pupils can engage and empathise with. Another theme, explored in a recent book by Aly (2015), involves sites of performance. How do young people reclaim their ethnicity in positive ways? The author examines, for example, the codes of sociability at *Shisha* cafés and the 'ethnic' self-portraits created by British-Arab men and women. You may be able to observe and use similar 'performances' in your locality. Here, the concern is with ethnic identities, but others could easily be represented (e.g. Goths, skateboarders in the local park). Performance can also link to place-identity through use of the environment in season: camps in the woods, conkers and plantain 'guns'.

'Place branding' has become increasingly important in the 'struggle for attention' by localities in a global marketplace. Place marketing seeks to turn a location into a 'destination' through its sense of uniqueness in order to draw visitors or businesses to it. This is especially true for places that have experienced

deteriorating fortunes (e.g. seaside resorts). Decline leads to problems of 'place image' associated with, for example, abandoned leisure complexes, redundant harbour infrastructure and multiple occupancies of once grand houses. Margate's businesses, for instance, have produced a visitor map that reinvents the town as a fun location associated with 'kiss-me-quick' hats and saucy postcards. However, the town's local authority has adopted a more conservative approach, with a map that focuses on its built heritage. Which, if either, of these maps represents the real Margate (a place that has some of the highest deprivation rates in the region)?

Other seaside towns have sought to celebrate their older pre-resort heritage. Hastings and Deal both present their beach-launched fishing fleets, an ancient tradition in the region (Figure 2). The visitor maps currently used in these towns evoke the lively bustle of a working fishing culture. Unlike the 'rural idyll' of many Parish maps, such representation focuses on an important part of the local economy. A collection of colourful, illustrated visitor maps (usually free from tourist information centres) can provide young pupils with opportunities to examine their sense of place and the identity that is being constructed.

Whether you engage your pupils through an examination of existing maps

or through map-making, this inherently geographic form of communication offers a great deal for them to learn about their locality and their place in it.

## References

- Aly, R.M.K. (2015) *Being Arab in London: Performativity and the undoing of identity*. London: Pluto Press.
- Crouch, D. and Matless, D. (1996) 'Refiguring geography: Parish maps of common ground', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21, 1, pp. 236-55.
- Distin, K. (2011) *Cultural Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## WEB RESOURCES

Marldon Parish map:  
[www.marldonhistory.co.uk/html/map2000.html](http://www.marldonhistory.co.uk/html/map2000.html)

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