

# LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BIRMINGHAM

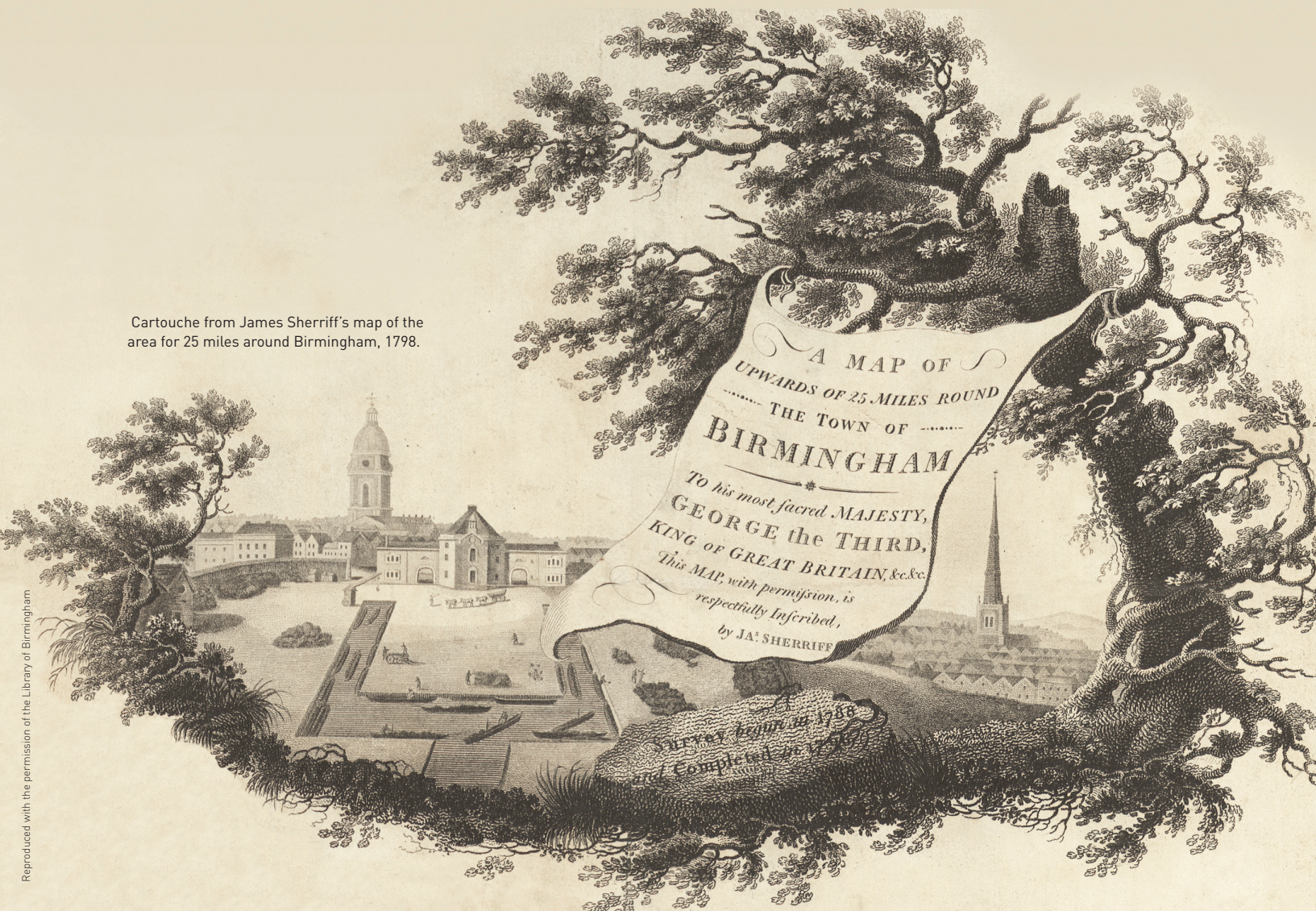
## A HISTORY IN MAPS

John Townley

**E**arly town maps provide one of the most useful sources for urban historians, whether they are looking for the location of places, events in the past or understanding the growth and development of a town. With more than twenty maps covering the century from William Westley's plan of 1731 to James Drake's plan of 1831, the Birmingham historian is better placed than those of most other industrial towns.

As well as providing snapshot images of the growing town maps have the potential to both add to and make clearer the evidence provided by documentary sources. However, they should not be trusted until their accuracy has first been assessed. Not every street or feature shown on a map existed and not everything that existed was necessarily shown. At times, even the date on the map should be questioned.<sup>1</sup>

Cartouche from James Sherriff's map of the area for 25 miles around Birmingham, 1798.



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Ardnamurchan History & Heritage Association

A plane table and sight or alidade.

### **Eighteenth-Century Map Making**

The equipment and techniques used by a late eighteenth-century or early nineteenth-century town surveyor would have been recognisable to his predecessor from a century before. They would include a plane table, a measuring chain or wheel for measuring distance and a surveyor's compass for measuring direction. However, important modifications over time in the quality of instruments enabled surveys to be conducted with greater precision and speed.

Despite the fact that the theodolite was first described in 1571 and that triangulation was in use by 1615, most

surveyors were slow in adopting these more refined but less direct methods. Only six of the large-scale plans produced for every county in the second half of the eighteenth century show evidence of triangulation.

Using the survey results, the map would be drawn in manuscript form and then carefully transferred to a copper plate by the engraver and incised into the copper using a burin.<sup>2</sup> The cost of engraving was often greater than that of surveying and drawing. After printing, any colouring had to be added by hand for each individual map: the larger and more detailed the map, the greater the expense.<sup>3</sup>

# LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BIRMINGHAM – A HISTORY IN MAPS



'The Plan of Birmingham', surveyed in 1778 by Thomas Hanson & engraved by J. Roe, from *Birmingham before 1800 – Six Maps in the Local Studies Library, Birmingham Reference Library, 1968.*

## Thomas Hanson's Large-scale Map of Birmingham

"This Day is Published, ... The PLAN of BIRMINGHAM. Price 7s. 6d. PLAIN and 10s. 6d. COLOURED".<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Hanson's 1778 map was a luxury item costing half the weekly wage of a skilled man.<sup>5</sup> Like the two earlier maps by Westley in 1731 and Bradford in 1751,<sup>6</sup> Hanson's *Plan* was produced at a scale of 25 inches to a mile and sold as a double imperial sheet, a sufficient scale to show individual building plots and buildings.<sup>7</sup> The *Plan* shows the Birmingham canal with its original terminus at Newhall Hill, created in 1772, and its second terminus with the company office opposite the west end of Paradise Row (later Paradise Street), which was completed in 1773.

Two new chapels can be seen to the north of the town: St Mary's, built on land given by the Weaman estate, opened in 1774, and St Paul's, built on land given by the Colmores on their Newhall estate, which was started in 1777 but not consecrated until 1779.

In the top centre lies the Birmingham General Hospital, begun in 1765 in Summer Lane, but held up by lack of funds, which finally opened in September 1779.

Newhall is shown, centre left, on Newhall Street. The Jacobean house, built in the early seventeenth century as a Birmingham home for the Colmore family, was in a decayed state when leased, at some time before 1777, to Matthew Boulton as a warehouse. The Colmores were eager to develop the estate further but Boulton resisted efforts to move him. The house was finally put up for sale in 1787 with the stipulation that 'the whole be pulled down and the material carried away within one month from the time of sale'.<sup>8</sup> The Information panel in the top left-hand corner of the *Plan* tells us that in 1778 Birmingham had a population of 42 550 living in 7 200 houses.

A manuscript tracing of the *Plan*, which includes a tracing of the cartouche with the date 1778, shows additional housing along what was then called Church Street (later Ludgate Hill), along Mary Ann Street and Caroline Street.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it shows the world's first steam-driven rolling mill, erected in 1779, on a site between Snow Hill, Lionel Street, Livery Street and Water Street, on land owned by the Inge family. The tracing appears to be the survey for the later 1781 *Plan*.

## LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BIRMINGHAM – A HISTORY IN MAPS



Image Courtesy of John Townley

Detail from *Plan of the Parish of Birmingham taken in the Year 1779* by John Snape showing the town and the immediate surrounding area but not Deritend, which was in the parish of Aston.

Image from the reduced version, at a scale of approx. 1:7600, in *Plans of Birmingham and Vicinity, Ancient and Modern*, printed by order of the Public Works Committee of the Town Council of the Borough of Birmingham, 1884.

### Plans for Rating the Parish

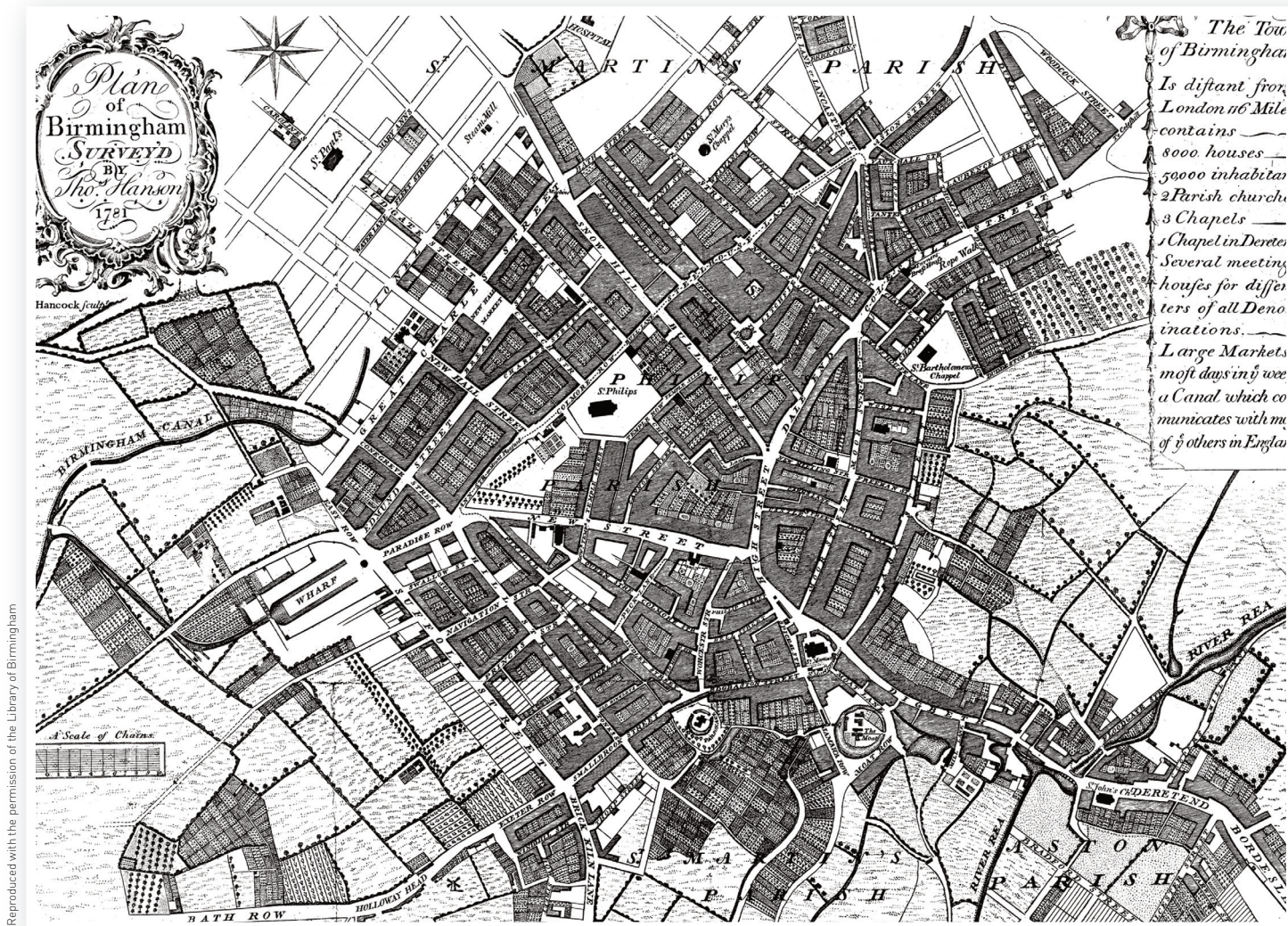
The following minutes of the Overseers of the Poor in Birmingham's *Town Book Old Cross Chambers*, 28 April 1779, assert: '...At a meeting held here this day it was unanimously resolved that the Overseers of the Poor should be supported in giving their Indemnification to any surveyor or surveyors they shall appoint for the Purpose of procuring a Plan of all the Land in the Parish of Birmingham.'<sup>10</sup> It appears that they appointed John Snape, a land surveyor from Moxhall near Wishaw, Warwickshire. Snape's original plan probably existed in manuscript only. No copies survive and there is no indication of its scale. In 1884, when a reduced version was used in the book of *Plans of Birmingham and Vicinity, Ancient and Modern*, the original was held by the Rating Department but when the City

Librarian approached the Superintendent Rating Officer to look for various items in March 1940, including Snape's plan, the original had disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

Outside of the built-up area, every field is numbered and presumably the map was originally accompanied by a schedule, which listed the field name, owner and rateable value. Unfortunately, the schedule is also missing.

Born in 1737, the son of John Snape of Aston and Mary Taylor of Halesowen, John Snape became a prolific estate and canal surveyor and civil engineer. He took premises in Hospital Street, Birmingham in 1791 and moved to Aston Road in 1805 where he died on 1 January 1816. It is said that he 'used a *camera obscura* of his own construction to enable him to make his work so perfect'.<sup>12</sup>

## LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BIRMINGHAM – A HISTORY IN MAPS



The Plan of Birmingham', Surveyed in 1781 by Thomas Hanson and engraved by R. Hancock, at a scale of 9 inches to the mile [1:7040], first published in the first edition of William Hutton's *History of Birmingham*, 1782.

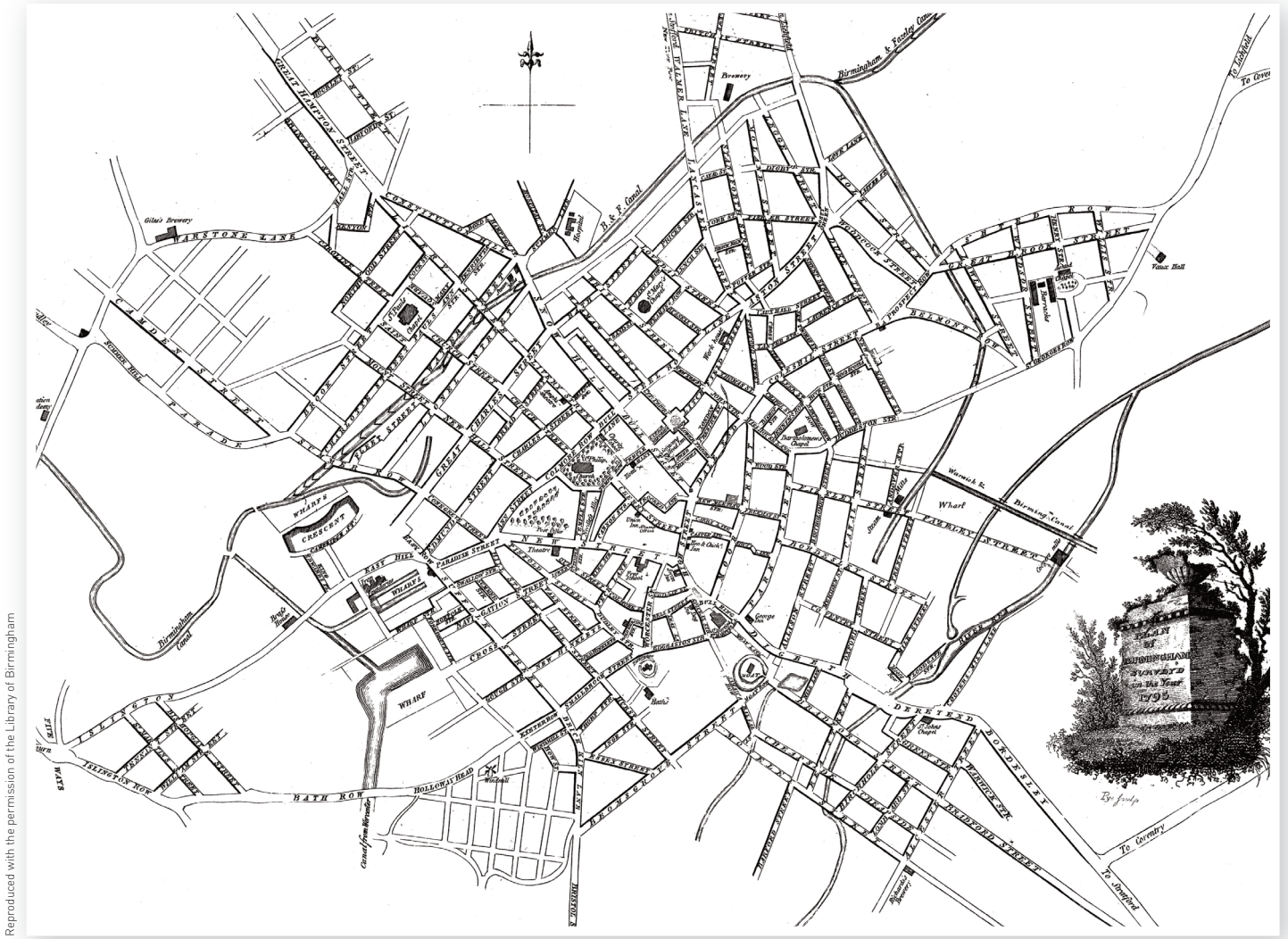
Image from: *Birmingham before 1800 – Six Maps in the Local Studies Library*, Birmingham Reference Library, 1968.

### Plans for use in Books

For Hanson to reduce the physical size of his *Plan* to fit as a folded insert into Hutton's new book, the scale had to be reduced, detail lost and individual building plots and buildings merged into blocks. Reduction from the 1778 *Plan* was probably achieved using a pantograph.<sup>13</sup> Some of the newly developed streets were named for the first time but, probably because of limited space, many names were omitted from established smaller streets, passageways and buildings. As well as the features shown on the manuscript tracing, the Navigation Office is first shown, by the canal terminus opposite the end of Paradise Street, as is the weighing machine, on Snow Hill.<sup>14</sup> The information panel at the top right tells us that, in 1781, the population of Birmingham had reached 50 000 living in 8 000 houses.

A second *Plan*, produced in 1785 at the same scale, was probably for use in Charles Pye's *Birmingham Directory* of the same date.<sup>15</sup> It shows new building developments on the Gooch estates. On either side of the north-west end of Suffolk Street, 139 lots were leased out between 1766 and 1780, with 62 of the remaining 70 plots leased over the following decade. Two projected streets, Bromsgrove Street and Bartholomew Street, are also shown overlaying existing features. The information panel at the top right tells us that, by 1785, the population had reached 52 250 living in 9 500 houses. Thomas Hanson, land surveyor, of 5, Bath Row died at his home on 22 September 1796, aged 62. His burial at Edgbaston parish church is marked by a memorial tablet on the outside of the south wall.<sup>16</sup>

## LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BIRMINGHAM – A HISTORY IN MAPS



*The Plan of Birmingham*, Surveyed in the Year 1795, engraved and published by Charles Pye of Birmingham. No surveyor is named.  
Image from: *Birmingham before 1800 – Six Maps in the Local Studies Library*, Birmingham Reference Library, 1968.

### Plans for Trade Directories

Before embarking on a career in publishing, at the age of 36, Charles Pye tried his hand at watch-making, collecting hearth and window taxes and selling wine. His publishing career began in 1785 with his *New Directory of Birmingham*, followed by further editions in 1787, 1788, 1791, 1795, 1797 and 1800, at least four of which were accompanied by maps. He was a keen numismatist, publishing several books on medals, provincial copper coins and tokens for which he engraved his illustrations.

The two versions of his *Plan of Birmingham* which he engraved and published in 1792<sup>17</sup> and 1795 cover a greater area than any earlier plans. The town expanded in every direction with new estates: in the west at Islington on glebe land owned by St Martins;

to the north and east on land owned by Heneage Legge, heir to the Holte estate; at Ashted with the new cavalry barracks and around the new Birmingham Fazeley canal completed in 1789, where the Digbeth arm curved round the east of the town to a wharf off Fazeley Street on land leased by the Gooch estate. In addition, the plan shows two projected estates: north-west of St Paul's church and south of Holloway Head; and a projected street between Bath Street and the canal, none of which came to fruition.

This is the first street map that shows no housing and few public buildings. Despite this it shows three new breweries and six new inns.

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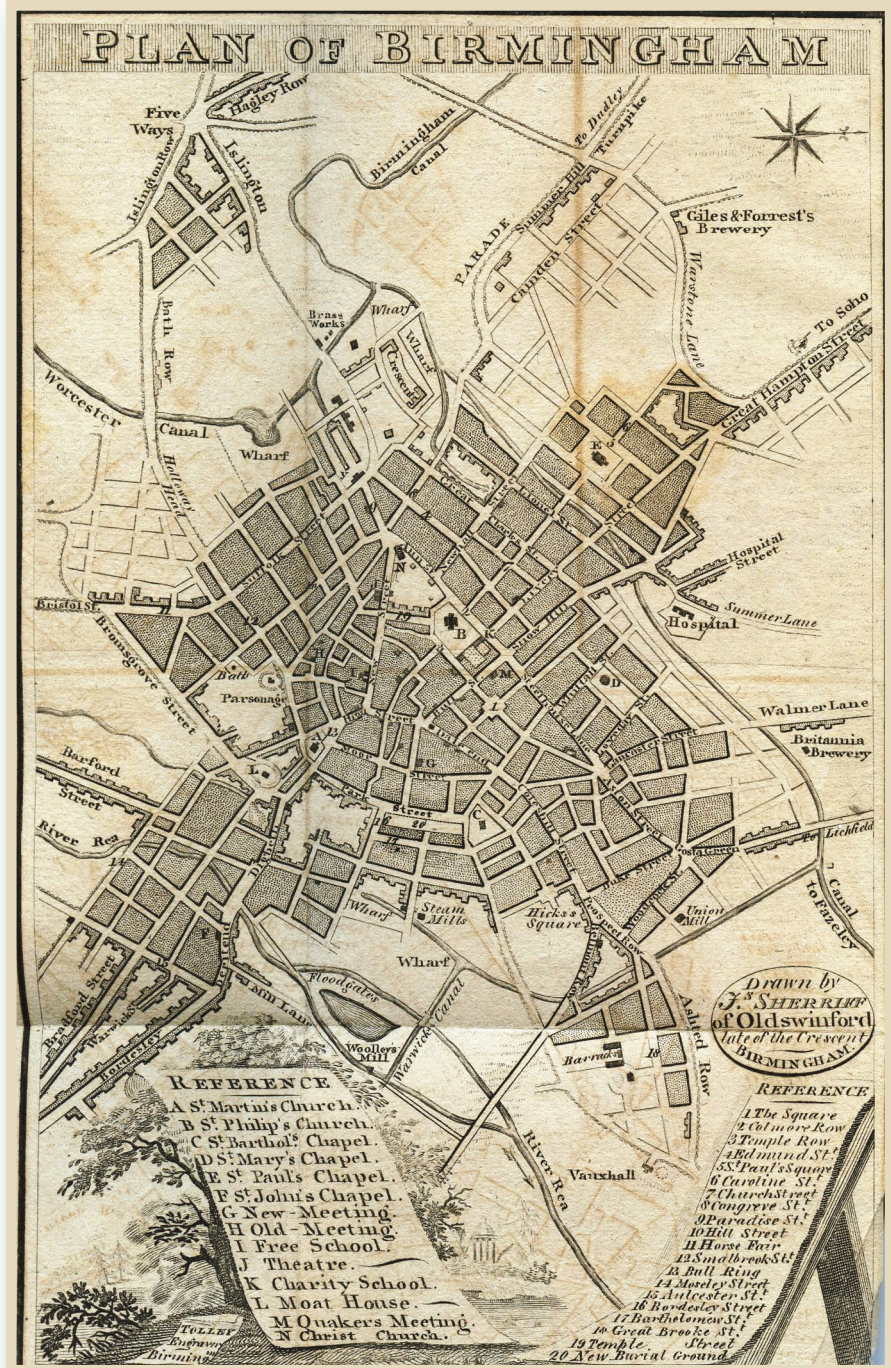
### Undated Maps – Context and Content

James Sherriff was a land surveyor and a gifted illustrator producing views of towns and country houses.<sup>18</sup> He produced two versions of his *Plan of Birmingham*, neither of which is dated.

They show a town similar to that shown on Pye's 1795 *Plan* except for omitting the new development beyond the Birmingham Fazeley canal between New Town Row and Aston Road. New streets were added between the canals and Broad Street and depiction of housing was reintroduced. The small scale of the map means that few streets are named and although many buildings are shown, few are labelled. To compensate, some streets are numbered and some buildings labelled with a letter which corresponds to 'Reference' keys at the foot of the map.

Only three features separate the second version of the map from the first: Christ Church, begun in 1805, labelled 'N', on the corner of Ann Street (now Colmore Row); the mill pool, between the river Rea and the mill leat, off Heath Mill Lane, first shown on a plan attached to a deed of November 1805;<sup>19</sup> and Park Street burial ground, labelled '20', begun in 1807. The burial ground blocks off the junction with Fazeley Street but the link was re-established following a protest to the Birmingham Street Commissioners in November 1808. These features date the map to *circa* 1807.

Maps often survive detached from their original source. An examination of contemporary publications shows that Sherriff's first map originally appeared in James Bisset's *A Poetic Survey round Birmingham* [1800]<sup>20</sup>, the second in *Bisset's Magnificent Guide or Grand Copper Plate Directory for the Town of Birmingham* [first advertised in 1807, published 1808]. The context places the first map at c.1800, whilst both content and context place the second c.1807. By 1808 Sherriff appeared in trade directories as a surveyor and British wine maker & merchant. In 1815 he ran an 'Academy' and at his death in 1823 he was described as a land agent and landscape gardener.<sup>21</sup> ●



'Plan of Birmingham' drawn by James Sherriff of Oldswinford, late of the Crescent, Birmingham. Tolley, Engraver, Birmingham. c. 1807.

Image from *A Concise History of Birmingham*, Fourth edition, R. Jabet & J.P. Lucas, Birmingham, 1808.

# LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BIRMINGHAM – A HISTORY IN MAPS

**John Townley** is an independent researcher working on the early use of rotary steam power, especially in Birmingham. His interest in Birmingham's early town maps arose from a need to understand the geography of its developing steam-powered industry.

## Suggested Reading

**Harley, John Brian**, *Maps for the local historian: a guide to the British sources*, London: National Council of Social Service for the Standing Conference for Local History, 1972.

'Town Maps and Plans', in West, John, *Town Records*, Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore, 1983.

**Kain, Roger J.P. & Oliver, Richard R.**, *British Town Maps: A History*, London: British Library, 2015.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Introduction in Kain, Roger J.P. & Oliver, Richard R., *British Town Maps – A History*, 2015; Lobel, M.D., 'The value of early maps as evidence for the topography of English Towns', *Imago Mundi*, v.22, 1958; Harley, J. B., 'Maps for the local historian, A Guide to British sources 1. Maps and plans of towns', *The Amateur Historian*, 7(6), 1967, p.196.
- <sup>2</sup> A handheld steel tool used for engraving in metal or wood.
- <sup>3</sup> Skelton, R.A., "Cartography" in Singer, Charles, Holmyard E.J., Hall, A.R. & Williams, Trevor I. eds, *A History of Technology*, Vol IV, *The Industrial Revolution c.1750-c.1850*, 1958, pp.600 & 602-603; <http://www.jigsawcambs.org/images/Step%20by%20Step%20Guide%20to%20Plane-table%20survey.pdf>, accessed 09/10/2016.
- <sup>4</sup> *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* on October 5, 1778.
- <sup>5</sup> Boulton & Watt's engine erectors were paid 15s per week.
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk/william-westleys-plan-of-birmingham-1731/> & <http://www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk/birmingham-in-1751/>
- <sup>7</sup> 1118mm x 762mm [nearly as large as A0].

- <sup>8</sup> Stephens, W.B., *Victoria County History, Warwick Vol. VII, The City of Birmingham*, 1964, p.9.
- <sup>9</sup> LoB, MAP/669826.
- <sup>10</sup> LoB: CP/B/289314 Birmingham Town Book 1776-1789, p.136.
- <sup>11</sup> Note bound in the front of LoB :CP/B/244501, Parish of Birmingham, Poor Rate Levy Books, Vol 1: 1736-1744.
- <sup>12</sup> LoB: MS1677, Fentiman, A.F. *John Snape Land Surveyor 1737-1816: A Comprehensive List of His Works*, 1986; Trade directories 1791 – 1816; *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 15/01/1816; *Camera obscura* from the Latin meaning 'darkened room': an image of a scene is projected through a small aperture in a darkened enclosed area, sometimes a tent, onto a plain surface opposite the aperture, as an inverted and reversed image, by the same natural optical phenomena as that employed in a pinhole camera.
- <sup>13</sup> A mechanical linkage connected in a manner based on parallelograms in such a way that tracing of an image with a pointer on one arm, produces identical or scaled movements in a pen on another arm.
- <sup>14</sup> LoB: MAP/669826.
- <sup>15</sup> LoB: MAP/72831; Advertisement, *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 8 August 1785.
- <sup>16</sup> Trade Directories 1780-1798; *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 26 September 1796; *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1825, p.393-394.
- <sup>17</sup> LoB: MAP/72833.
- <sup>18</sup> SW prospect of Stourport, 1776; NE view of Hartlebury castle, 1780; SW view of Downton castle, 1780.
- <sup>19</sup> LoB: MS/28/232.
- <sup>20</sup> LoB: MAP/72835.
- <sup>21</sup> Trade Directories.



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