

Archivists unearth rare first edition of 'The Map that Changed the World'

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William Smith 1815 map. Credit: The Geological Society

A rare early copy of William Smith's 1815 Geological Map of England and Wales, previously thought lost, has been uncovered by Geological Society archivists. The new map has been digitised and made available

online in time for the start of celebrations of the map's 200th anniversary, beginning with an unveiling of a plaque at Smith's former residence by Sir David Attenborough.

The [map](#), the first [geological map](#) of a nation ever produced, shows the [geological strata](#) of England, Wales and part of Scotland. The newly discovered copy is thought to have been one of the first ten produced by William Smith (1769-1839), who went on to produce an estimated 370 hand-coloured copies of the map in his lifetime.

Now fully restored and digitised, images of the new map can be viewed on the Geological Society's image library from March 23 – William Smith's birthday. It will also be on display at the Geological Society during a number of events celebrating the map's bicentennial.

Often called 'the Father of English Geology', William Smith pioneered the science of stratigraphy and geological mapping. His map of England and Wales became the basis for all future geological maps of Britain, and influenced geological surveys around the world.

'Smith's importance to the history of our science cannot be overstated' says John Henry, Chair of the Geological Society's History of Geology Group. 'His map is a remarkable piece of work. It helped shape the economic and scientific development of Britain, at a time before geological surveys existed.'



Close up on Gloucestershire. Credit: The Geological Society

Smith's story was popularised by Simon Winchester's 2001 book, 'The Map that Changed the World', which tells the story of his relationship with the Geological Society, who produced their own geological map of Britain in 1820.

'These maps are extremely rare' says Henry. 'Each one is a treasure, and to have one of the very first produced is tremendously exciting.'

Although it is difficult to estimate the value of individual William Smith maps, an early copy was recently made available for sale at £150,000. The newly discovered map was found by the Society's then Archive Assistant Victoria Woodcock in 2014, during an audit of the Society's archives led by Geological Society Archivist Caroline Lam.

'The map was found among completely unrelated material, so at first I didn't realise the significance of what I'd uncovered' says Woodcock. 'Once we had worked out that it was an early copy of one of the earliest geological maps ever made, I was astonished. It's the kind of thing that anyone working in archives dreams of, and definitely the highlight of my career so far!'

The map was identified as a first edition due to its lack of serial number, and [geological features](#) which Smith was known to have updated on later versions.



Close up on London. Credit: The Geological Society

'The very first batch of maps Smith produced did not have a series number or signature' says Henry. 'Other indications that it is a first edition is the geology depicted on the Isle of Wight, the lack of an engraved line on the Welsh border, and lack of granite around Eskdale in the Lake District.'

Records of the Geological Society's Council minutes from 1815 suggest the map was purchased by the Society in that year for the sum of £5 5s.

Since then, its 'disappearance' means it has rarely been exposed to light, preserving the incredibly bright original colours.

A number of organisations, including the Geological Society, the Natural History Museum, the British Geological Survey and National Museum Wales, are joining together throughout 2015 to celebrate the bicentennial of William Smith's map through a range of events.

'We're incredibly excited by the discovery' says Geological Society President Professor David Manning. 'It's wonderful that the map has been restored and made publicly available in time for the bicentennial celebrations, and we're very grateful to the sponsors who have made this possible.'

Provided by Geological Society of London

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