

Rare map found in an attic gives extraordinary glimpse into life in the 18th century

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The engraving shows life in 18th century Exeter in incredible detail at the time at the height of the dominance in the woollen cloth industry. Credit: University of Exeter

A rare map found in an attic gives an extraordinary glimpse into 18th century life in Exeter before radical changes to the landscape and industry transformed the city.

The mysterious engraving was not known about by experts or archivists until now. It is now incredibly unusual for new maps of English towns

and cities produced hundreds of years ago to be discovered.

Historians think the map is a one-off, and never used, as another, produced in a more modern, fashionable style, was produced by someone else soon after. The map was found in the attic of an elderly lady after she had died. The public will get their only chance to see it up-close this week.

The engraving shows life in 18th century Exeter in incredible detail at the time at the height of the dominance in the woollen cloth industry. It was produced by William Birchynshaw and is entitled A Platform of the City of Exon.

William Birchynshaw illustrates how the [city](#)'s landscape was dominated by cloth drying racks in what is now Colleton Crescent and along the river Exe above the Quay. It is thought this is the last depiction of this industry by a cartographer, as soon after cloth industry in the area died, and soon after many of the Georgian streets and crescents were built.

The map, produced in 1743, also contains one of the few images of the former friary and later mansion Bedford House, birthplace of King Charles I daughter Princess Henrietta, which was later knocked down in 1773 to make room for Bedford Circus. The Georgian terrace was destroyed by the Blitz and was replaced with the Princesshay shopping area.

University of Exeter Dr. Todd Gray, who now owns the map, said: "It's really rare to discover a map of new Exeter produced hundreds of years ago. In this case it's possible the map was a one-off, we haven't been able to source any other copies, despite checking many archives. The fact it depicts areas by the way they look, with pictures, rather than including street names, may have made it look old fashioned, and we know a more up-to-date map was produced the year after.

"But you can still use the map to orient yourself, and it's special to see a map of this Elizabethan-looking style, before they became more clinical-looking."

The map, sold at auction in Exeter to Dr. Gray, will be published by the Devon & Cornwall Record Society, a local educational charity, later this year. It has been comprehensively studied by Professor Roger Kain and Dr. Richard Oliver, experts in ancient maps.

William Birchynshaw is not known to have surveyed other cities. Also in his detailed drawing are well-known buildings such as the Guildhall, Custom House and Cathedral as well as surprising ones such as The Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital, which had only recently been built in Southernhay.

Dr. Gray said: "The discovery of this map is exciting for all those interested in the history of Exeter. William Birchynshaw's map is an intriguing glimpse into the Georgian city and his depiction of many hundreds of buildings will, I am sure, prove fascinating for anyone who loves this city."

Provided by University of Exeter

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