



Mapping the metropolis in an age of reform: John Britton's London topography, 1820–1840



Stephen Daniels

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

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ABSTRACT

John Britton (1771–1857) built a career as a prolific producer of illustrated works on the topography of Britain. This article focusses on a display map Britton produced: *Topographical Survey of the Borough of St Marylebone*, a work commemorating the Reform Act of 1832. The article addresses the making, meaning and marketing of the map. It does so as part of wider ways of picturing the movement for Reform and Britton's concern with the problems of portraying London and its development in a period of such rapid change. One of the new metropolitan boroughs, Marylebone represented many of the issues of reformist ideology, beyond the franchise, in matters of building, education, publishing, religious affiliation, local government and railway development. The map was personal as well as political, charting reformist concerns close to Britton's home in a period when his financial fortunes declined.

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Display maps are designed to project a powerful visual impact, in the manner of artworks, articulating the architectural spaces in which they are installed and exhibited. Display maps of various kinds, sizes, styles and materials have been made and refabricated for the rooms and passageways of a range of buildings – palaces, churches, counting houses, libraries, offices, studies, taverns and schools – as part of the interface between the world of interiors and the wider worlds on which the occupants of these buildings make a claim. Graphically complex, display maps are designed to be viewed from different perspectives, to be focussed on close up, discerned in detail for emblems, vignettes and tables of information, and contemplated at a distance as synoptic, sometimes monumental, wholes, configuring a spectacular image of a territory. Many display maps survey time as well as space, commemorating the sites of momentous events, including victorious battles, estate improvement, city planning, national unification, the colonization of continents or the Creation of the World. And they do so by situating such eventful sites in more extensive histories and geographies, or rather by framing and focussing wider worlds through the view of a particular period and place.¹

Topographical Survey of the Borough of St Marylebone as

Incorporated and Defined by Act of Parliament 1832, to give it its full title, is such a momentous display map, commemorating Marylebone in north London as the most famous of the capital's new metropolitan boroughs, brought into being by the Representation of the People Act, or Great Reform Act as it became known (Fig. 1).² The most significant and contentious political legislation in Britain in the early nineteenth century, the Reform Act extended the franchise to male householders in properties rated over £10 and effectively reshaped the geography of political representation, abolishing so called 'rotten boroughs' – sparsely populated constituencies, many in the pocket of aristocratic landowners – and redistributing power to expanding urban and industrial regions. More than a detailed local map of a new political constituency, *Topographical Survey of Marylebone* is, this article demonstrates, a projection of manifold, overlapping movements of reform in the metropolis, in a range of spheres of public life, notably religion, commerce, recreation and knowledge, including geographical knowledge. The work was designed for domestic as well as commercial spaces, to be displayed on the walls of hallways and offices, as well as to be unfolded from folios on library tables in the kind of villas, terraced houses and business premises shown on the map, and typifying the empowered middle-class territory envisaged in

E-mail address: stephen.daniels@nottingham.ac.uk.

¹ On display maps, see P. Barber and T. Harper (Eds), *Magnificent Maps: Power, Propaganda and Art*, London, 2010; S. Daniels, Putting maps in place, *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010) 473–480.

² For a brief informative entry on the work see P. Barber, *London: A History in Maps*, London, 2012, 210–211.



Fig. 1. B.R. Davies, F.A. Bartlett and J. Britton, *Topographical Survey of the Borough of St Marylebone as Incorporated and Defined by Act of Parliament 1832*, second edition, London, 1837. © British Library Board. Maps Crace Port. 1.

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