Heritage Lottery Fund putting Wales on the digital map

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The £486,000 grant to the Archives and Records Council Wales will mean that what many regard as the earliest large-scale maps of Wales will continue to be an important historical resource for future generations.

The grant has been awarded to the project ‘Cynefin: Mapping Wales’ Sense of Place’ which is led by Archives and Records Council Wales working in partnership with the NLW and local authority record offices throughout Wales. The three year project aims to encourage more people to get involved with their archival heritage. Working in conjunction with local heritage groups, six community based projects across Wales will take the tithe maps as a starting point to develop their own local projects based on the changing landscape of their area. The different groups have been chosen to reflect the broad range of communities in modern Wales including English and Welsh speaking communities, urban centres, Communities First areas and isolated rural areas.

Welcoming the announcement, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Wales, Jennifer Stewart said, “The tithe maps are a key resource that provides an insight into Wales’ past. This grant will remove many of the past barriers to accessing the maps and as digitisation is a key way of ensuring our heritage is safeguarded for the future, it is excellent that this project will now ensure that these maps will be available online for all to access, use and enjoy.”

Geographical snapshots

There are 1,091 tithe maps covering the whole of Wales by parish. The maps provide a record of the landscape of Wales around 1840, when it was still largely rural in nature; acting as a geographical snapshot of pre-industrial Wales. They were produced under the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 as part of the process to change or 'commute' the system of tithes that were originally payments made in kind through such things as wool, milk and crops, to a monetary payment system.

Stressing the importance of ensuring the safekeeping of these maps that are regularly used by researchers for investigating archaeology, family history, land use and Welsh place and field names, Avril Jones, Director of Collection Services, National Library of Wales, said, “These maps are a vital tool in educating ourselves and future generations about our past. They have been extensively used over time to discover and explore so many different elements of urban and rural Wales in the 19th century. This funding by the Heritage Lottery Fund will ensure that the original tithe maps are protected and maintained by expert conservators and their digitisation will make them more accessible than ever before.”

Innovative crowd-sourcing

The Cynefin project hopes that the digitisation of these maps will create opportunities for more people in Wales to get involved with their archival heritage and an innovative element of the project will be the use of crowd-sourcing to engage with a diverse range of audiences. It will be the first cultural heritage crowd-sourcing project in Wales with up to 500 volunteers being recruited to undertake online work and research.

Wider digitisation plans include geo-referencing of the maps, transcribing the accompanying tithe apportionments and geo-locating the apportionment data which will then be searchable on the National Library of Wales website. The intention is to also link the resource with the People's Collection Wales website so that the maps can be viewed alongside modern and historic Ordnance Survey maps.

Referring to the project's aims, Kim Collis, from Archives and Records Council Wales said, "The project grew out of the need for the archive sector to engage a broader spectrum of people with their archival heritage and we hope that with the exciting online plans we have for the tithe maps, more people will be able to access this unique heritage digitally."

Project Aims
The three year project has the following main aims:

- to digitise a set of all existing tithe maps of Wales and present them as a geo-referenced map of Wales circa 1840 on the NLW website. The resource will be linked to the Peoples Collection Wales mapping layer so that the tithe maps can be viewed alongside modern and historic Ordnance Survey maps.
- to recruit volunteers to geo-reference the tithe maps, to transcribe the tithe apportionments and to geo-locate the apportionment data. The linked dataset will be searchable on the NLW website.
- project staff working with the project will support six community based projects who will take the tithe maps as a starting point to develop local projects based on the changing landscape. The projects represent a good spread across both the geography of Wales as well as different types of communities including urban centres, isolated rural areas and Communities First populations.
- The six community projects across Wales are based in Dwygyfylchi and Hiraethog, Conwy; Newport, Gwent; Gower, Swansea; Ceredigion; and Garw and Llynfi Valleys, Bridgend.

Further information
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