

THE MAPS THAT HELPED TO DEFEAT HITLER

The maps that helped to save Britain from war-time starvation can be viewed in detail online now, with the launch of a new-look website charting how the country has changed in the past 250-plus years.

One of the most exciting aspects of the www.visionofbritain.org.uk website is its e-publication, after 70 years in obscurity, of all surviving one-inch-to-the-mile sheets of what was to prove a crucial Land Utilisation Survey carried out in the 1930s by a quarter of a million volunteers.

The survey was the idea of pioneering geographer Professor Sir L. (Laurence) Dudley Stamp and was the first ever attempt to systematically plot how all the land in Britain was being used and, so, provide a framework for planning.

It was a huge undertaking - mostly underfunded, often misunderstood and only made possible by mobilising children from 10,000 schools and hundreds of teachers, students and young graduates - virtually all of them volunteers.

But without their work, it's possible that the outcome of the Second World War might have been very different. When Britain was struggling to feed itself in the face of the German U-Boat blockade, the country used Stamp's land use maps to manage agriculture and food production as efficiently as possible - averting defeat by starvation.

L. Dudley Stamp joined the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1926 as an expert in the then-newfangled field of Economic Geography. He became convinced that Britain needed a "field-to-field survey of the whole country, covering every acre and recording its use" as the basis for future planning.

He realised that schoolchildren were the solution to his problem. Not only could they do the job for him, but it would be useful educationally for them and "a training in citizenship".

Schools proved enthusiastic but there were suspicions of the project in other places. Questions were asked in the Commons as to why schoolchildren were being employed on government work, even though the project was not being carried out for the government. In the letters pages of *The Times*, some people wondered if it wasn't a cover for a new taxation exercise.

Money was a much bigger problem. Until the outbreak of the War the project received almost no government funding and it continued hand-to-mouth, thanks only to small grants from charitable and educational foundations with occasional help in kind from the LSE and the Ordnance Survey.

The Survey was managed at county level, with Stamp appointing a County Organiser for each.

As the serious work got under way in 1931 and 1932, Stamp said, "I was constantly touring to watch the progress of events and to encourage the slower workers. Whenever the visits were made by car, my wife was my chauffeur and constant companion and at the height of our activities we were covering nearly 2,000 miles a month."

Most of the actual surveying work was carried out between 1932 and 1934. Each group surveyed its parish, using six-inch Ordnance Survey base maps (which showed field boundaries) and a standard code or colour to denote the use of each land parcel.

Stamp and his team had decided on seven classes for use across the country - forest & woodland; meadowland & pasture; arable land; heath & common land; gardens, allotments & nurseries, water and "unproductive land", meaning urban and industrial areas.

The results were sent to Stamp and his team, who transferred them to one-inch maps for publication. But it took a skilled, expensive, cartographer eight weeks to prepare each map and there were to be 235 sheets in all and the finances just didn't add up.

By 1936, the project was in crisis. Although the first maps published were greeted with huge enthusiasm by the press, business and the public, the lack of money was stalling progress.

The outbreak of war changed all that. Suddenly, Stamp was inundated with telegrams from county authorities urgently requesting copies of the original field maps so they could plan food production more efficiently.

The Ministry of Agriculture stepped in with funds to complete the mapping exercise and give Britain a blueprint for its Dig for Victory campaign.

Later, the Land Utilisation Survey was called on again to play a central role in post-war planning.

L. Dudley Stamp remained at the LSE until his retirement in 1958. He was knighted in 1965, two years before his death.

"When you think of what Stamp achieved with vision, persistence and sheer energy, you can't help admiring him, How many people can claim that they used coloured pieces of paper to help win a war and plan a better world?" says Dr Humphrey Southall, director of the www.visionofbritain.org.uk project.

He adds: "The maps are also important because they tell us what the land around us used to be like - information that still has resonance as our crowded little island continues to debate how to approach planning and conservation. We're thrilled we are making Stamp's work available online at last. It's an overdue tribute to a far-sighted man and to all those schoolchildren who went out 70 years ago to learn all about the places where they lived."

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