

LAYERS OF LONDON

During the lockdown, one of the things I have occupied myself with has been as one of a number of online volunteer force · on 'Layers of London' (LoL) · www.layersoflondon.org/about - a map based history website developed by the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London. Users can access free historic maps of London and contribute stories, memories and histories to create a social history resource about their area.

The work involved volunteers plotting between four and ten 'Contact Points' on over 7000 vertical aerial photographs of London, supplied to LoL by Historic England, taken by the RAF 1945-1945 as part of a national project (The RAF Aerial Reconnaissance units basically having nothing better to do after WW2...), and a matching set on a modern, accurate base map (e.g. Google Maps). As a geography graduate, a lifetime aviation enthusiast, and with an interest in local and social history, this was a project made in heaven for me!

Currently, software isn't intelligent enough to correlate exactly the photos to the ground - the RAF data of the time knew roughly the grid reference where the photo was taken, but not exactly (no GPS in those days), so it needs 'Eyeball Mk 1' to make the connection. Points like building roof lines which hadn't changed were very useful references.

One day, Artificial Intelligence (AI) may be able to do it all automatically, but until then the system takes you to approximately the right place, and you make the links - if you can.

The system software then 'rubbersheets' the photographs - basically, bends them to match the accurate basemap - aircraft may not have been flying exactly straight and level, or may have been drifting off heading and photos may be distorted - and add them to a 'Photomosaic' (i.e. a giant composite of overlapping photos) of London in that period.

After some georeferencing I was promoted to a Reviewer, checking other georeferencers' work (you will appreciate, as a volunteer project, the professionals were desperate - I hope my georeferencing and reviewing is better than my bowling...) before they were released onto the site.

Some photos - even open country - were very easy to plot absolutely precisely, even after 75 years (surprising how the hedges and woodlands are much bigger these days - no-one using firewood?), and the number of extensions to houses is huge, but many areas were difficult - some were left for the system professionals to finalise.

The areas under the modern Heathrow Airport, around the Thames Marshes, and the Lea Valley reservoirs and industrial areas were very hard. Redeveloped areas - especially Docklands, north and south of the Thames - were also hard, the scale of bomb devastation being apparent. Nothing much left to fix on - pubs and churches were good points to use. Don't talk to me about golf courses...

This particular project has now basically finished (pending adjustment by the professionals) and is available online - go to:

www.layersoflondon.org/maps

And select the RAF photo 'Layer'

As it pulls up a vast amount of images, it can be a bit slow to load and navigate around, but it is a wonderful tool, for researchers and the public alike, so do take a look if this sort of thing interests you.

But that's not all · LoL also has another volunteer project to enhance the 'Booth Poverty Map' of the London of the 1880s. This is already available online at the London School of Economics (LSE) - <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/map/14/-0.1174/51.5064/100/0> but, like the RAF photos, the LSE have realised that current software cannot draw out the spatial relationship of the social classes held visually in the map to enable further analysis.

As a result, they are using online volunteers to draw 'polygons' (not plot points this time) online around the residential buildings and relate them to the types of occupants classified by Booth (my ancestors were probably amongst those classified as 'Viscious, Semi Criminal' - no surprise there, then! - from Somers Town, around St Pancras Station).

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