

# Mapping Magic for the Family Historian

Dr. Sophie Kay is a professional family history researcher at [Khronicle](#) and writes about genealogy methods at her blog [The Parchment Rustler](#).

*Maps.* The only medium which can combine the **comforting security** of the familiar with **the thrilling promise** of the yet-to-be-explored. At their most functional, maps preserve and convey information about our knowledge of a place, but they're more than just a physical representation of the space. They reflect the political or social influences of their time, and they're a window of connection into the past. If we're willing to observe closely, historic maps can show us what our communities valued in times gone by.



John Goghe's map of Ireland, dated 1587 and with modifications by Sir William Cecil. [UK National Archives, MPF1/68](#)

## Maps Turn Genealogy into Family History

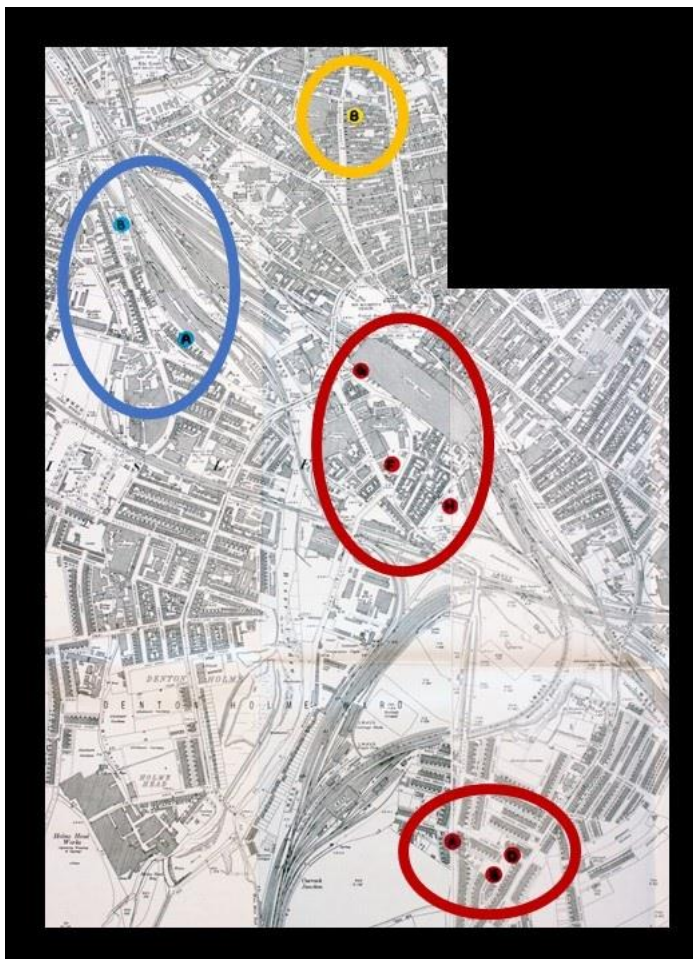
Any map aficionado knows that maps can be decorative wonders in their own right – as the [British Library's amazing map collection](#) shows. Today though, I'm interested in their **practical value** – and why you should make maps an integral part of your genealogy research. Used well, they can **enhance your critical reasoning skills** and provide a **gateway into your ancestors' world**.

In family history research it's all too easy to get caught up in trying to locate *records*, but forget that we're actually researching *people*. Maps make us confront the context of the person we're researching – their surroundings, their community and the times they lived in. Creative use of maps can provide a **springboard to new record sets** and provide **ideas for new research routes** when the current ones have failed.

*Try the following mapping techniques for breaking down your genealogical brick walls. For me, paper maps are the best way to get hands-on with locations, although you could use digital resources if you prefer – there are [lots of amazing map repositories available online](#).*

## Try the Outlier Method

Have namesakes invaded your tree? This is where the **Outlier Method** can assist, by helping you to assess the quality of record matches and guiding you to ask the right research questions.



*(Above) Map of Carlisle (1924 version) with family residences over a decade marked as dots, one colour per family. Constructed from Godfrey Edition OS Maps - Cumberland Sheets 23.03, 23.07, 23.08.*

Choose a family group (or even a couple of generations) in your own family tree – perhaps one that stays in a particular town over many years – and map all their birth, death, marriage and census locations on a contemporary map. This will show you the **physical network** where your ancestors lived their lives. Can you spot any patterns?

If you have quite an itinerant family, the dots might be dispersed. Often you'll see clusters, where a family remains within a small area. Clusters are apparent in the map of Carlisle (left) where each dot represents a residence and each colour a different family. The family shown in red moved many times, but often only a short distance: their residences form two separate clusters – one near Citadel Station, and a later group further to the south.

Prior to mapping these data, all I had was a list of locations. After mapping, all sorts of patterns emerged which weren't immediately apparent from the census or civil registration records.

Consequently, I'm now investigating the underlying reason for the family shown in red moving further south, and suspect an occupational accident on the railways may be the culprit.

You may have a cluster in one district of your map and then a lone dot – called an *outlier* – in a completely different part of town. *Not every outlier is wrong*; but whatever their cause, outliers always highlight points for investigation. Behind every outlier is a *reason* for its separation.

- Either **there's another part of your ancestor's story you haven't found out about yet**: investigating the lives of their friends and family, their occupational transit and local/social history may hold the answer. Perhaps they died away from home, visited a friend on census night, or had a specific reason for moving away from their family?
- Alternatively, **you've found your ancestor's namesake** and have accidentally been researching someone else's forebears! Non-ancestral outliers still serve a useful purpose. Being aware of their existence means that you know to eliminate them when running future searches for your ancestor.

The Outlier Method helps you to develop new research questions and can identify cases of mistaken identity before they derail your research.

## Try Context Embedding

**Context Embedding** provides a fresh perspective on your research findings. *Context* transforms us from genealogists seeking only a lineage, into family historians able to appreciate the community of our forebears' daily existence and the sensory experiences which dominated their world.

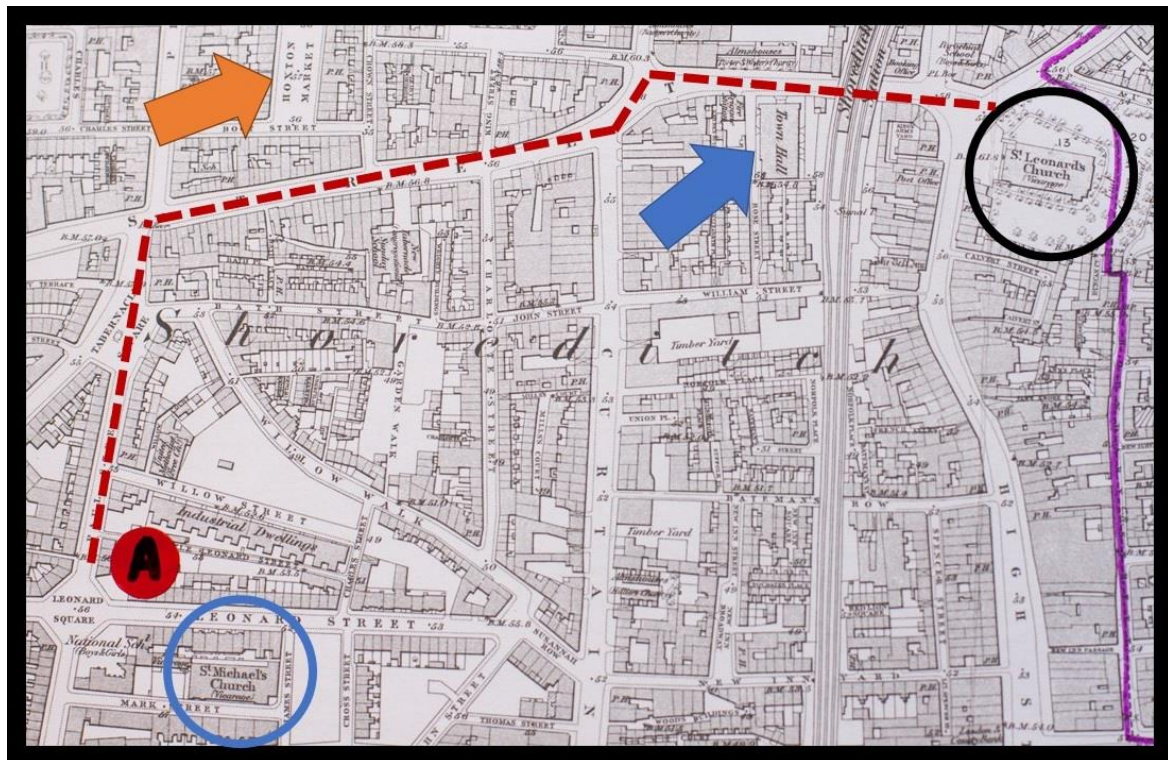
The map on the right – again of Carlisle – is for a family of highly observant Methodists. This cluster of residences makes sense when you notice that their local Methodist chapel (ringed in blue) is right at the end of the road. Maps are great for identifying nonconformist places of worship nearby, which may be worth investigating further if your ancestors don't seem to be appearing in records of the established Church.



(Above) Godfrey Edition OS Map – Carlisle (SE), 1924 - Cumberland Sheet 23.08.

By thinking about how our ancestors moved through their local streets or fields, we provoke questions about what influenced their lives. Plot your ancestors' physical network, including

residences, places of worship, and occupational sites. Note down any gaps in your knowledge of your ancestor; consider how you might seek out such details and add this to your genealogical to-do list. Now it's time to explore...



(Above) Adapted from the Godfrey Edition OS Map – Shoreditch (1872), London Sheet 51. This family travelled from Paul Street (A) to St. Leonard's Church (black circle) for their wedding, not to the much nearer St Michael's Church (blue circle).

**Try going on a walk with your ancestors.** A classic example involves working out how your forebears might have travelled to church on their wedding day, as I've shown for a Shoreditch family in the map above. Find the relevant locations and plot a route through local streets. Observe the buildings along the route – would your ancestor have passed houses, pubs, bustling markets or factories? The wedding day route shown above would have taken in the hive of activity around Hoxton Market (orange arrow) and the grandeur of the Town Hall (blue arrow), along with at least ten pubs. It probably wasn't a calm journey there or back!

Once we start to see our ancestors' surroundings on maps, we really do begin to walk in their footsteps and to embrace a more immersive understanding of their history.

## Top Tips

**Be colourful:** Colour enhances visuals and quickly highlights patterns. Use different colours for births, marriages and deaths, or to distinguish between family groups. Find colour rules that work for you: be bold and reap the benefits!

**Observe local topography:** Physical geography can influence people's life decisions. Look out for features such as rivers or hills dominating the landscape; consider these alongside your forebears' occupations to determine if a record match is a likely candidate. Migration along a river when you're a boatman is surprisingly likely; movement to a different village over the other side of a steep mountain less so.

**Be careful with names & numbers:** Street names and numbering may have changed over time. Indexes of historic street names are invaluable (I recommend [The Hunthouse for London streets](#) and the [Victoria County Histories](#) more generally) and [local directories such as Kelly's](#). If you use Godfrey OS Maps, then make the most of the brilliant street information and history on the reverse.

## The Last Word

Maps offer a rare unity of beauty and function. Making mapping a core part of your genealogy process will allow you to shape your decision-making on the go, and should leave you revitalised with enthusiasm and ideas for exploring the past.

And if I've persuaded you to try the **Outlier Method** or **Context Embedding**, then I'd love to hear how you get on. Send your map photos and thoughts to me on Twitter at [@ScientistSoph](#) and let's share how these methods can help us!