

Obituary

John Bartholomew

A member of the Bartholomew family of eminent cartographers

- Robin A Orr
- [The Guardian](#),
- Saturday February 16 2008

John Bartholomew, who has died aged 85, was probably the most patient perfectionist one could meet. His family's Edinburgh-based company has been synonymous with high-quality cartography for more than 170 years, producing maps and atlases of world renown, and remaining independent until 1980, when the Reader's Digest Association took it over. Like his grandfather John George Bartholomew, the "Prince of Cartographers", John was passionate about maps.

The Times Survey Atlas of the World was first published in 1922, and by the 1960s various editions of the Times atlases, with Bartholomew mapping, were established as standard works. The company also provided the maps for the Reader's Digest Great World Atlas (1962), eventually published throughout western Europe, the US, Canada, Mexico and Brazil.

However, as technology advanced, investment was needed to convert the huge archive into digital form and maintain Bartholomew's reputation - hence the takeover. This would ensure the future of the Times atlases and enable the company to produce different designs for other publishers. While plans for the development of a digital database were still on the drawing board, Reader's Digest sold the company in 1985 to News International - which approved the plans. In 1989 Bartholomews became part of HarperCollins. One of the early projects produced from this archive was complete sets of maps for Le Petit Larousse encyclopaedic dictionaries, considered standard reference works in France.

Once the archive was completed, in the 1990s, both the comprehensive and concise editions of the Times atlases were republished entirely from the digital archive. John was initially dubious about the new technology's ability

to produce the traditional quality of mapping, but in the end, perfectionist that he was, he admitted the results were comparable. Any lingering doubts were dispelled when he requested a world map on a specific projection that was delivered to him the same day.

The oldest of six children, he was educated at St Trinneans school, Edinburgh academy and Gordonstoun school. He began reading geography during the war at Edinburgh University, but after a year he was commissioned into the Royal Engineers. He served in Egypt and Palestine and commanded a survey unit in Persia.

Postwar, he finished his degree and was apprenticed under his father before taking over as cartographic director in 1953. His brother Robbie became production director in 1954, and his brother Peter took over as managing director in 1956.

John followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, becoming president of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. He was also president of the British Cartographic Society and a vice-president of the International Cartographic Association (ICA).

We first met at an International Geographical Union-ICA conference in Delhi in 1968. An inveterate traveller, for John, like many of his contemporaries, this was an emotional visit, as it was the first time since partition in 1947 that many of those who had been closely involved with the survey of India had been able to return. Welcomed with open arms, we had a wonderful visit to the survey headquarters in the Himalayan foothills.

Sixteen years later I moved my family to Edinburgh to assume John's role as cartographic director on his retirement, but he still took an active interest in the company. He was also then able to play a greater role in the Scottish Rights of Way Society (now ScotWays) and was busy developing suitable mapping on which to plot the routes. ScotWays made him its president in 2004.

He also cooperated with George Russell to produce a full-colour 360° view indicator, positioned on a large piece of local sandstone on the Braid hills above his Edinburgh home. This is one of two such indicators that John created; the other stands on the summit of North Berwick Law in East Lothian. His last project was to create a bronze sundial for the Hermitage of

Braid, bearing the inscriptions "Time waits for no man" and "Improve the shining hour".

Of strong faith - he was accepted into the Catholic church in 1954 - and a devoted family man, his interests included geology, oceanography and astronomy. He was also well versed in meteorology, with a particular interest in noctilucent clouds.

He is survived by his wife Ginette, sons John Eric (Riki), Philip, Christopher, Patrick and Ivon, and 11 grandchildren.

· John Christopher Bartholomew, geographer and cartographer, born January 15 1923; died January 16 2008