

Geography Report

by Jane Harrison

Our speaker in March was cartographic artist, Dr Kevin Sheehan, of Manuscript Maps. Kevin is a graduate of Durham University with three degrees – none of which are in Geography! Since his childhood in Colorado, Kevin has always loved cartography and for his doctorate he researched portolan charts. These charts date from the 13th century, the earliest being Venetian, Genoese, and Catalan charts of the Mediterranean, which were hand-drawn on vellum. Later charts covered the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa. They are very distinctive with their networks of rhumb lines, prominent portrayal of natural hazards and labelling of place names at right angle to the coast. Later, these charts were produced by the Portuguese, English and the Dutch as well and continued to be produced until the 17th century.

Using experimental archaeology techniques that he encountered as an undergraduate, Kevin reproduced three portolan charts, two of which were drawn using materials available in medieval times. This allowed him to establish the probable methods used by the cartographers, as well as giving insight into the time required. Over the centuries portolan charts became less and less accurate suggesting that they were copied and re-copied. Kevin questioned whether the maps were used as navigational tools at all or were merely for display in the houses of well-to-do merchants.

Whilst at Durham Kevin was drawing maps for pleasure. A commission to draw a black and white, antique-inspired map of the city and its colleges was soon followed by a map of the pubs. Kevin now works full time as a cartographer, producing maps of Roman Britain, the shipping forecast areas, and Paris, to name but a few. The whisky map of Scotland has been so popular it's on its eleventh edition. All maps must be researched and planned out in detail. They are then painstakingly drawn in pencil, starting with the calligraphy, before being inked using a nibbed dip pen. Fortunately, errors – whether spelling mistakes or ink blobs – can be rectified! His largest and most detailed map is a double-hemisphere map of the moon to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing. This took months to draw. We were all astounded by the detail. Kevin has offered 20% off maps for u3a members using discount code: U3AMAPS: www.manuscriptmaps.com

Next meeting: Thursday 16th May, at 2pm, in The Witham. Professor Chris Greenwell (Durham) "A time of waste: geoscience and the circular economy". The talk will explore, through case studies, the promise, and challenges of re-using mineral wastes.

