Local Studies Case Study

Introduction

Local studies rely on the bringing together of a huge variety of resources, so that specific places and wider landscapes can be better understood. Learning more about the present and the recent past usually involves researching sources on the web and elsewhere, reviewing the wealth of images and documents, films and sound recordings, maps and newspapers that is available. HLamap can be very useful too. It reveals how the land is used today and can inform decisions about fieldwork.

For those who are interested in the ways in which livelihoods have changed over a much longer period of time, various sources, both historical and archaeological, exist. HLAmap is extremely relevant to these studies. It reveals where there is visual evidence today of previous land uses from across the centuries. The digital map shows changes as layers through time, just as they are on the ground. This information can be particularly useful when out-and-about for geographical, archaeological, historical and environmental studies.

Using HLA data

This case study provides easy to follow guidance on how to use HLAmap in local studies, by focusing on the landscape around Meigle in Angus. The potential is clear:

- Modern land uses are immediately apparent, with distinct details revealed as the map is investigated
- Areas where there is evidence for past land uses are highlighted, some of which are multi-layered
- Summary information about the numerous land uses is available at a click of the mouse
- Additional archaeological site data can be viewed and interrogated, providing links to other resources that might be useful

A fundamental aspect of local studies is understanding the geography and history of a place or area. HLA provides a very useful foundation for studies relating both to local sites and broad landscapes. It can give an insight into particular avenues of research, including historic, cultural, economic and present-day aspects of urban and rural Scotland.

The view north-westwards over Meigle.
HLAmap notes the extent of the medieval centre of today's village as well as the modern recreational facilities that are around its edges. The rectilinear fields and farms that characterise this agricultural landscape are clear, but past land uses also survive. HLAmap reveals the areas where parts of the late-18th / 19th century designed landscape can still be seen. It was established on the south side of the village around the 18th century mansion house, Belmont Castle, which is located at the bottom left of this aerial photograph.
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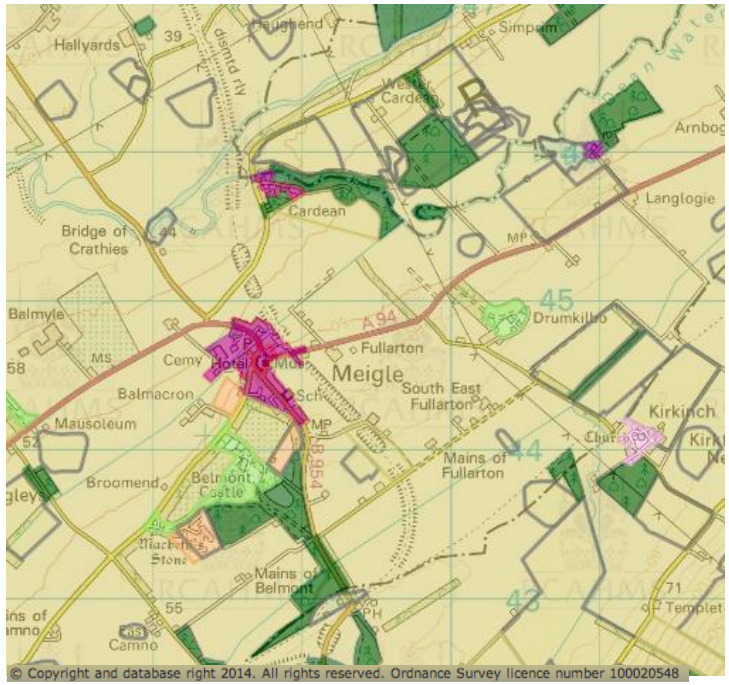
Using HLAmap

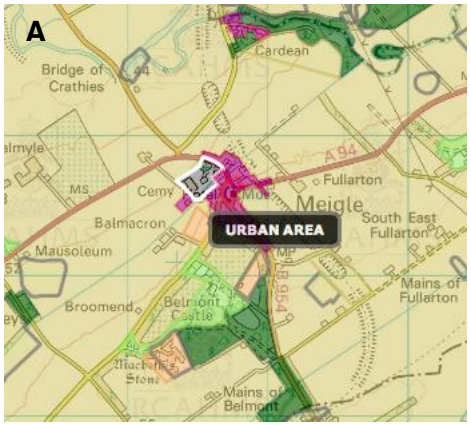
Find your area of study by zooming into the map. The scale needs to be 1:27,000 (noted at the bottom right of the screen). It is at this scale that the website reveals HLA data. You can zoom in further to see a smaller area more clearly, but the data doesn't change. As shown opposite, the whole dataset is revealed giving a general picture of today's land uses.

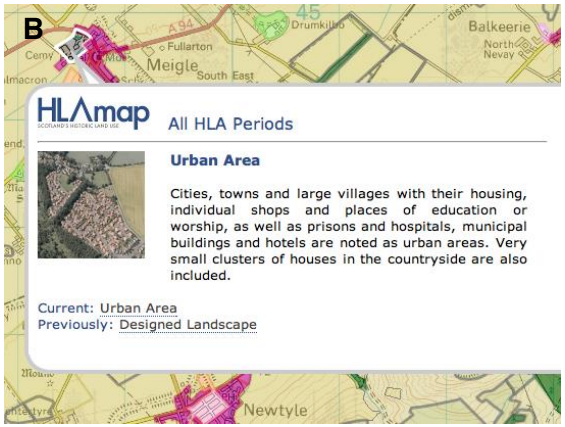
If you wish to see a wider area, use the zoom-out function in your browser's menu bar, (usually across the top of the screen). It may enable you to zoom-out several times, without affecting the HLA data view.

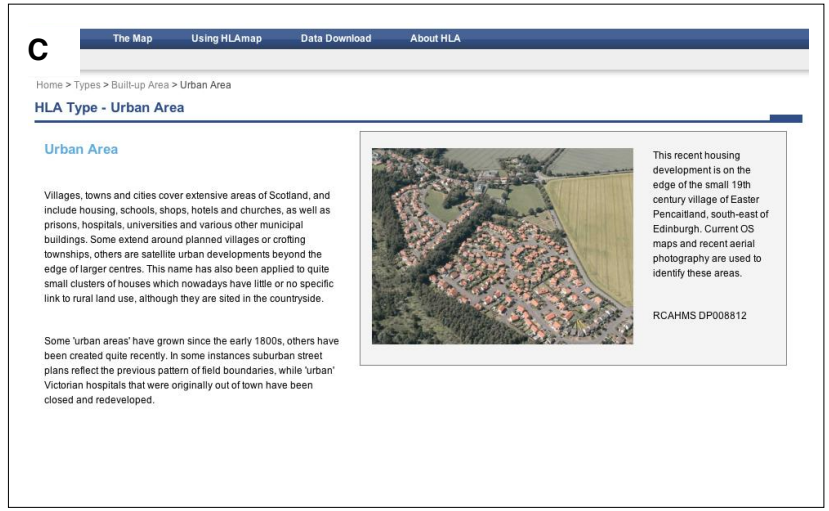


HLAmap extract for Meigle, showing 'All HLA Periods' of land use

- The different colours reflect the twelve categories of land use that have been applied to the whole country.
- Pop-up boxes appear as the mouse is moved over the map [A]. Each box names the land use type that lies under the cursor. There are over 80 different types.
- Click on a highlighted type area and a brief description appears [B], or single click if the name pop-up box doesn't initially appear.
- Further detail about the land uses can be found by clicking on the titles below the image in the description boxes [C].





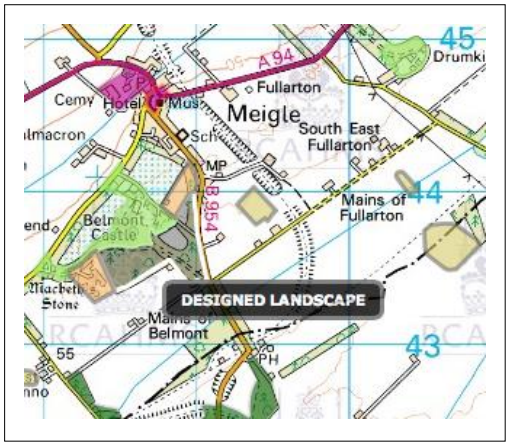


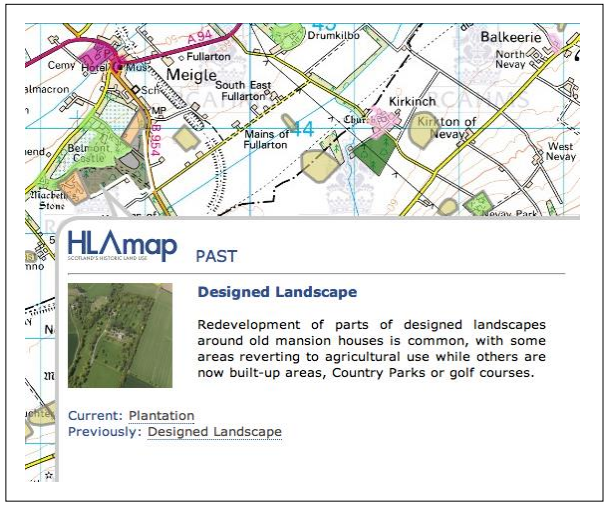
Another view using HLAmap

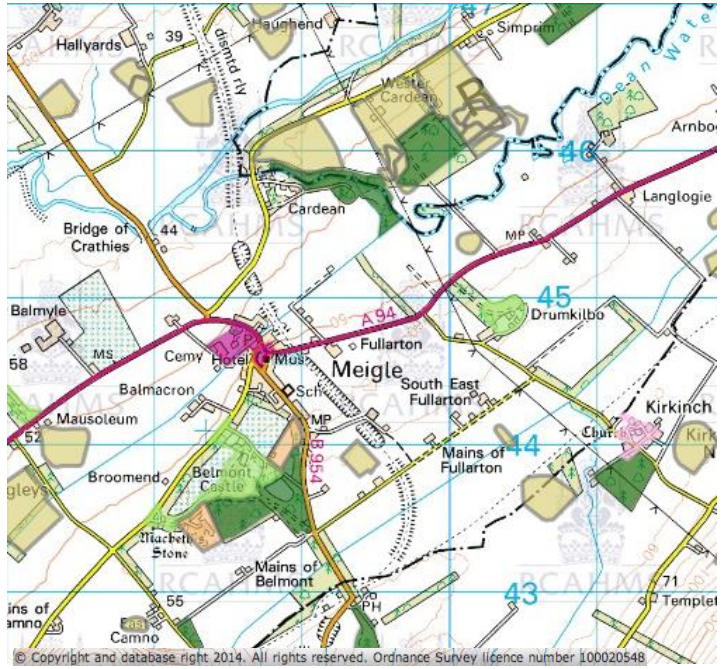
The different layers that are visible in the landscape around Meigle are shown in this initial view, but there is more to HLAmap than this. Choose another view from the drop-down menu at the top right of the map screen and an alternative historic landscape is revealed.

The extract opposite shows the view 'By Land Use' Past and highlights where pre-18th century land uses have survived. They date to before the agricultural improvements of the late-18th/19th centuries; some are from medieval or even prehistoric times.

Designed landscapes are shown because that type of land use was introduced as early as the 17th century, although many actually date to the later-18th or 19th centuries.

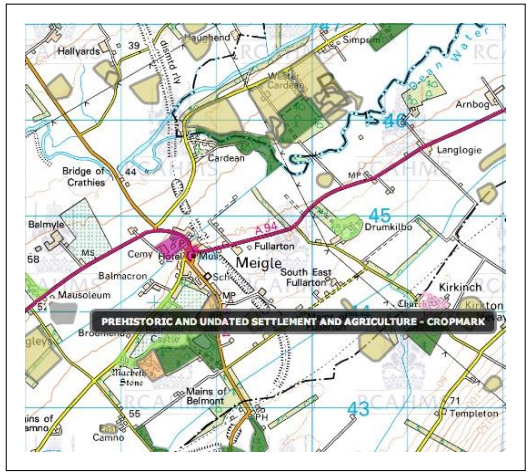






HLAmap extract for Meigle, showing "Past' land uses

A few land uses are at least a couple of thousand years old, ploughed flat by years of farming. They may still be visible during the summer as marks in crops because they survive under the soil.

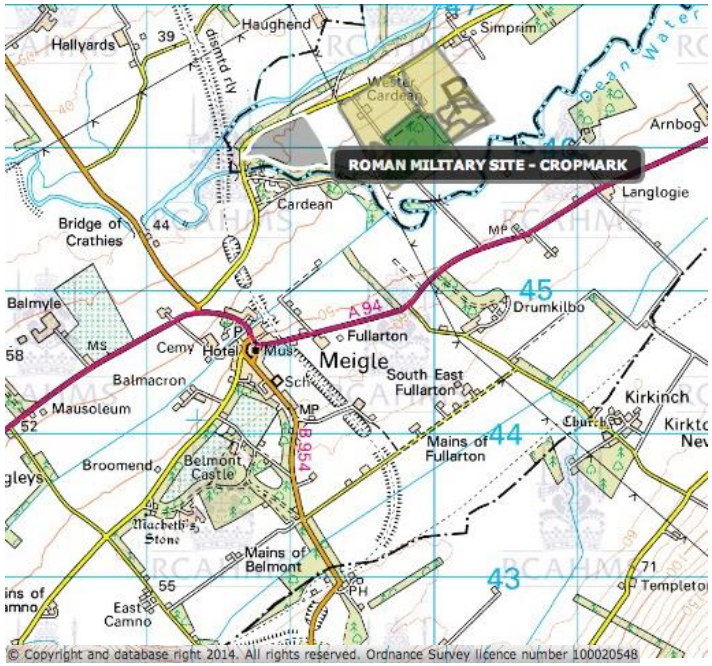


Further views using HLAmap

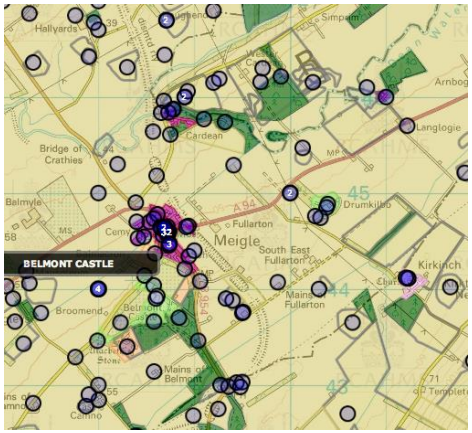
- You can view the information about the landscape by period, once again by using the drop-down menu at the top right of the map screen.
- There is also the option to compare and contrast two views at once by choosing the 'Dual Map View' option.
- And you can move (pan) the map at any time to see areas adjacent to your study zone.

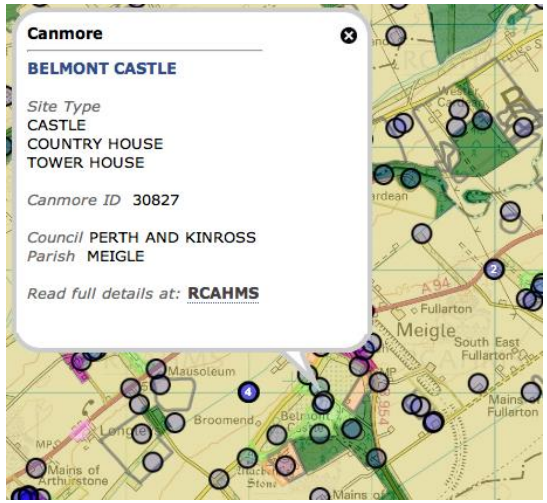
HLAmap reveals the variety of land uses still surviving in and around Meigle. It provides an impressive view of the time-depth of settlement in the immediate vicinity. But this is not the only data that can be called upon. Sites less than a hectare in extent can't feature in HLA – they are just too small. So click on 'Additional Layers Menu' at the top right of the map screen, choose Canmore, and all of the site records held in the national database pop-up.

If you are particularly interested in any of the individual sites click on a spot for information and click again to see the details held in RCAHMS' Canmore.



HLAmap extract for Meigle, showing 'Roman' land use
Although Roman military sites aren't normally visible above ground, they do survive under the plough soil and can be recorded by aerial photography.





Meigle's historic landscapes

An initial understanding of the landscape around Meigle is immediately apparent using HLA and its associated records.

Meigle itself has grown around a medieval core, with its church and stronghold, the 15th century tower house of Kirkhill, now known as Belmont Castle. The late-18th century building works at Kirkhill enveloped the tower house, creating a large, new mansion surrounded by an extensive designed landscape of parkland and clumps of trees. Parts of these formal estate grounds have changed dramatically during the last century, some areas are now farmed, some have become commercial plantations, others are used as sports fields.

Beyond these lands the farms changed too. The farmlands were improved, creating today's rectilinear fields, the main layer of HLA in the study area. Nevertheless, areas of medieval or post-medieval ridge and furrow do survive as cropmarks; they are evidence for the old way of farming open fields. There are also the remains of medieval or post-medieval settlement and agriculture – the farms associated with the open fields – surviving in areas used nowadays as rough grazing. The landscape has clearly always been productive, for there are also medieval villages scattered across the map; Kirkinch is just one.

HLAmap reveals evidence for land use before the medieval period as well. There is a large Roman military site just north of Meigle on the north side of the Dean Water, only just above its flood plain. It is 'overlooked' by potentially contemporary, later prehistoric fortified sites on the other side of the river, such as Kinpurney. Other evidence for prehistoric settlement and agriculture is extensive across the landscape. These lands must have supported a vibrant population 2–3,000 years ago.

Adding other information

The researchers who created HLAmap used certain maps, aerial photographs, books and documents. However, to understand the landscape in even more detail other sources of information are needed.

Users will need to look at other resources to find out how and why different land uses might have been introduced and then abandoned. But HLAmap is a very useful tool when starting to investigate the local history or geography of an area.

For example, geology and soil maps might prove useful (http://www.scottishgeology.com or http://www.soils-scotland.gov.uk/data/soil-survey), while looking at estate and other early maps and documents could throw light on why changes took place (http://www.nls.uk/collections/maps). Looking at census data (http://www.nas.gov.uk) and finding out what is known locally will bring the area alive. And if it is the archaeology of the area that is of interest, then take a look at the other data layers available via the map on this website. There are also other websites which can be very useful, particularly Pastmap (http://pastmap.org.uk).

All of these facets have their own stories to tell, and they can be further investigated using other websites or libraries and by doing some fieldwork. Discovering more about the recent and more distant past can prove fascinating.

Summary

HLAmap is a great tool for introducing historic information at a landscape scale. It brings together broad information about the wider landscape that is not readily available elsewhere. HLAmap provides an overview of the historic landscape and a more detailed view of a specific area. It is also possible to add in other sources of archaeological information to add even more detail. Viewed together this creates a picture of the landscape today and during periods in the past.

HLAmap gives easy access to aspects of the story of Scotland's changing landscapes. It shows where there is visual evidence today of many centuries of land use. It reveals the changes as layers through time, just as they are on the ground. The information can be extremely useful in geographical, archaeological, historical and environmental studies.

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