The Geological Society and its official recognition, 1824–1828

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Abstract: Under the 1824–1826 presidency of William Buckland, the still young Geological Society negotiated with the Government a very important advance in terms of the official recognition of the Society and the emerging science of geology that the Society represented, by obtaining a prestigious new legal status in the form of a Royal Charter of Incorporation. Then, under William Fitton's presidency, in 1828 the government granted the Society rent-free accommodation for both its meetings and its rapidly growing library and museum in the government offices in Somerset House, London. The objectives behind these two related moves are considered, although it is unfortunate that little of the detailed background documentation to these developments seem to have been preserved within either Society or government records. A brief account of what might have been – the possibility of seeking a Coat of Arms for the newly Chartered Society – concludes the story.

In 1824 only five national learned societies had the official recognition and benefits of a Royal Charter. Three of these had been created by Royal Charter – the Royal Society in 1660, the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1783 and the Royal Irish Academy in 1785. The remaining two had been founded as unincorporated private members' societies (like the Geological Society), but had subsequently been granted a Royal Charter – The Society of Antiquaries, founded in 1707 and chartered in 1751, and the Linnean Society, founded in 1778 and similarly chartered in 1802.

While it remained unincorporated, the Geological Society had no legal identity or status and so could not enter into any contract such as the lease on its rented apartments or have a bank account in its own right. It could not even be recognized as the legal owner of the Society's rapidly growing collections. Instead, individual members had to act as trustees on behalf of the other members of the Society. A Royal Charter would thus give the Geological Society a legal personality in its own right, allowing it to own or lease property, to have bank accounts, to enter into contracts and to employ staff, all in its own name.

The direct and indirect advantages to a society that flow from chartered status in terms of both administrative convenience and public recognition were summarized in an authoritative mid-nineteenth century study of learned societies, quoted by Woodward in his centenary history of the Geological Society:

> a society that is "incorporated by Royal Charter" is an official body publicly and legally recognised; it has perpetual succession and a common seal; and the statutes or bye-laws, which are framed for the ordinary guidance of the members, must be in perfect accordance with the stipulations or principles of the Charter. Societies of this kind naturally take precedence of all others, and where several are in other respects (or are assumed to be) of equal importance, priority of incorporation is a reasonable ground of distinction.
>
> (Woodward 1907, pp. 70–71)

For many such as William Buckland (1784–1856) (Fig. 1), a strongly monarchist Tory and Anglican clergyman (Gordon 1894), a Royal Charter would be seen to carry with it very considerable status within the prevailing social system of the day, which was still very much based on the Court. It could perhaps be compared to the granting of a peerage to an individual in terms of advancement within 'society'. Being only the sixth learned society to achieve such distinction, incorporation would guarantee the Society, and, by implication, the science of geology it represented, a very high status in terms of the recognized order of national and social precedence. More radical members, who perhaps cared little for such considerations in relation to a Court that was widely held in low esteem because of the excesses of the Prince Regent (by then George IV), would nevertheless at least recognize the practical advantages of gaining Chartered status.

Seeking and obtaining a Royal Charter of Incorporation

In 1824 Buckland was elected to the first of his two terms as President of the Geological Society (1824–1826 and 1839–1841). Immediately afterwards, the Society set out to advance its status and, through this, official recognition of geology as a science.

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Fig. 1. William Buckland lecturing. Lithograph by George Rowe, 1823 (from Boylan 1970).

From the very limited documentation that survives, it is not clear exactly when, or by whom, this process was initiated. However, in his Anniversary Address to the Society at the end of the first year of his second presidency in 1840, Buckland seemed to claim much of the credit for this, saying: 'fifteen years have passed since I was placed, by your kindness, in the honourable position of filling this chair, at that important period in our history when we received the national recognition of a Royal Charter. I shall never cease to consider it one of the brightest rewards of my labours in geology [. . .]' (Buckland 1840, p. 211). One of the senior Council members involved, or at least consulted, was Henry Warburton (1784–1858). One of the earliest members of the Society, joining in 1808, and an early Secretary (1814–1816), Warburton was a wealthy and very influential amateur, who was already active in radical politics and had a powerful network of metropolitan connections. He was to

serve as an MP between 1826 and 1847. In politics at least he was well known as a 'fixer' (Matthews 2004). The last part of a long letter of 12 March 1824 from Warburton to Buckland, which was mainly about urgent matters relating to illustrations for papers in the forthcoming volume of the *Transactions*, concludes with urgent advice to the Oxford-based Buckland on tactics and timing in relation to soundings about a Charter application, particularly with regard to what he terms the '*Dei majores*' (literally, the Great Gods) of the Society:

> I am desired to remind you of the subject of the charter. That from the present time to the middle of May is the season when persons of consequence are to be in town, and are to be consulted; And that if any thing at all is to be attempted, you had better take the opportunity of your visit to town, next Friday fortnight, to talk over the matter with the grand men of your acquaintance. Could you be in town a few days before Friday, you would be able to give the Council some information at its meeting on that day. – Or if you could stay in town some days after Friday, a special Council meeting might be summoned to receive your report. The best way will be to request the favour of an interview with the Dei majores expressly for the purpose of opening to them the subject.[1]

The move to seek a Charter was potentially both controversial and risky. Warburton's letter implies that there could be opposition within the Society, at least among the most senior members, hence the suggestion that Buckland should consider calling on at least some of these personally in advance of raising the matter more formally with the whole Council. Perhaps more significantly, in order to obtain a Charter it was first necessary to prepare and submit a formal Petition to the Privy Council, seeking the grant of a Charter. This would require the expenditure of an estimated £300[2] (nearly half the Society's liquid assets) on legal and ther expenses at a time when the Society was struggling under the financial burden of a heavy publications programme and other commitments. Since one of the Privy Council's own tests in relation to the granting or refusing of a Charter was to ensure that the organization was financially secure, this aspect of the Geological Society would have to be taken into account. Also, the Petition would be a public document available for public consultation and any interested organization could object to the granting of a Charter. In this respect there was particular concern about the attitude of the Royal Society.

When the Geological Society had been formed in 1807, a few founders such as Humphry Davy (1778–1829) believed that they were forming nothing more than a small geological dining club and several of the most senior members of the Royal Society had been happy to join on that basis (Knight 2009). However, a year later the Royal Society became alarmed to find the Geological Society rapidly becoming a respected learned society, developing library and museum collections, and leasing its own accommodation. It was argued within the Royal Society that as such, the Geological Society could become a potential competitor; the Royal therefore confronted the geologists. In the event, Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), President of the Royal Society, failed to get the Geological Society to agree to restrict its activities and become an 'Assistant Association', wholly subordinate to the Royal Society (Lewis 2009), so urged Royal Society Fellows to resign from the Geological Society. Accordingly, Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820), Humphry Davy and Sir Charles Greville (1749–1809), respectively, President, Secretary and Vice-President of the Royal Society, immediately resigned from the Geological Society, along with Charles Hatchett, a wealthy mineralogist.

Thus in 1824 it was clearly felt there was a serious risk of further confrontation with the Royal Society over the ambition to obtain a Royal Charter. This time a fight-back could have been much more serious than a call for its Fellows to resign from the Geological Society: the Royal Society had the right to petition the Privy Council, either objecting to the granting of any Charter to the geologists, or at least demanding major restrictions on the powers requested by the Geological Society, if a Charter was granted. The legal costs of responding to either kind of counter-petition from the Royal Society would have added greatly to the Geological Society's expenses. Furthermore, there was a risk that they would still come away empty-handed in the end, with the reputation of the Society seriously damaged. Alternatively, they might be granted a Charter, but one incorporating conditions that would have the effect of restricting rather than enhancing the Society's activities. In either case, the Society could end up much worse off than before. As the new President, Buckland was embarking on a high-risk strategy.

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[1] Buckland (Oke/Gordon) Archive formerly deposited in the Devon Record Office, catalogue ref. DRO 138M/F71. Henry Warburton to William Buckland 12 March 1824.

[2] Professor Arthur Lucas has pointed out to me that at least some of the geologists probably knew that more than 20 years earlier the Linnean Society's Royal Charter had cost it much more than this (£450 5s 6d), even though two lawyer members had given their services free of charge.

In addition to the published accounts of the Geological Society's negotiations and lobbying for the grant of a Royal Charter reported by Woodward (1907, pp. 68–73), the Society's archives include a series of both official files and more ephemeral items relating to the Society's Charter and Byelaws.[3] This includes a series of formal notices of Council meetings of 1824–1825 addressed to William Clift (1771–1849), anatomist, palaeontologist and illustrator, and Curator of the Royal College of Surgeons. At that time, Clift was an active member of the Society's Council and a Fellow of the Royal Society. These notices are in the form of pre-printed pro formas in which the details of the meeting had been added by hand by one of the Society's Secretaries.[4] Beyond these and the formal Minutes of meetings, almost nothing of the detailed documentation and working papers that might be expected survive in the Society's own records, and no other records generated and held by the Society's lawyers have been traced, despite extensive searching.[5] The indications are that much of the consultation and discussion that must have been necessary took place in informal meetings.

The first of these printed notices relating to the Royal Charter proposal, addressed to 'William Clift Esq. College of Surgeons Lincoln's Inn Fields' and with postal frankings for 20 April 1824, was for the first meeting of the new Council, that had been elected at the annual meeting at which Buckland had been elected President. The young lawyer and recent Oxford student of Buckland's, Charles Lyell (1797–1875) had become one of the two Honorary Secretaries in 1823 with the long-serving Thomas Webster (1773–1844) continuing as the permanent Secretary, Librarian and Curator. This notice suggested that Buckland had followed the strategy recommended by Warburton, and that it was the President who was initiating consideration of seeking a Royal Charter:

> A meeting of the Council of the Geological Society will be held on Friday the 23rd instant at Three o'Clock, at which the favour of your company is requested.
>
> The President will submit to the Council the propriety of applying to the Government for a Charter for the Geological Society.
>
> House of the Geological Society
> 20, Bedford Street, Covent Garden
> the 20th day of April 1824.[6]

At that meeting, on 23 April, the Council accepted Buckland's proposal and appointed nine of its members as a Special Committee to prepare the draft of a Charter for submission to the Crown. The members were: Buckland as President; the joint Secretaries Thomas Webster and Charles Lyell; the Treasurer John Taylor (1779–1863), a civil and mining engineer and entrepreneur; together with Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837); Henry Warburton; William Henry Fitton (1780–1861); Daniel Moore (*c*. 1760–1828), a well-known Lincoln's Inn solicitor and very active in most London scientific societies; and William Babington (1756–1833), a founder member of the Society (Lewis 2009), and as such no doubt one of the *Dei majores* that Warburton was referring to in his 13 March letter to Buckland.

Soon afterwards, Joseph Fitzwilliam Vandercom (*c*. 1754–1850), a member of the Society who was a leading London solicitor, experienced in Chancery and Privy Council work, was added to the Special Committee. He was to play a leading role in both the drafting of the Charter and the necessary consultations and negotiations with Government and the Privy Council, without any payment for his own professional services. However, the Council was advised that even with this very generous offer from Vandercom in relation to his own work and advice, the cost of drafting and petitioning the Crown for a Royal Charter would still be an estimated £300 for legal charges and administrative and printing expenses. The stamp duty payable on the Charter Deed alone would be £50. With only £643 2s 9d available in cash at the bank, plus £378 10s in investments, the Society had little by way of working capital in relation to its current commitments, let alone significant reserve funds. In the circumstances, applying for a Charter (with no certainty of success) would represent a very substantial financial risk and burden to the Society (Woodward 1907, p. 68).

The following week the Council deputed Henry Warburton, as a member of the Councils of both the Royal Society and the Geological Society, to inform the Council of the Royal Society what was being proposed. Behind the scenes, Buckland

[3] GSL: Business Papers. GS 1–22: Charter and Byelaws 1810–1993.

[4] GSL: GS 4: Bound volume of documents covering Regulations, printed reports of Council, Charter, and notices of Council and Special General Meetings, 1810–1836.

[5] The Society's solicitors for the Charter application, Vandercom & Co., remained independent until 1978 when they merged with Fladgate & Co. However, enquiries of the Archivist of the current firm, Fladgate LLP of London, have failed to produce any relevant records.

[6] GSL: GS 4/6.

was actively seeking support in both scientific and political circles, particularly within Lord Liverpool's (1770–1828) Government where Robert Peel (1788–1850), a personal friend of Buckland's, had recently been appointed Home Secretary.[7] A General Meeting of the Geological Society, held on 21 May 1824 and attended by 39 members, supported the proposal and empowered the Council 'to take such measures as shall appear to them to be the most efficient for obtaining a Charter of Incorporation for the Society'. A first draft of a Charter was quickly prepared and the responses from the informal consultations with the Council of the Royal Society were positive, so a special meeting of the whole membership of the Society was called for 2 July 1824. William Clift's copy of the notice of the meeting reads:

> A Special General Meeting of the Geological Society will be held at the House of the Society, on Friday, the 2nd July, at Eight o'Clock in the Evening, for the purpose of considering the Draft of a Charter of Incorporation for the Geological Society.
>
> By Order of the Council
> T. Webster, Sec.
>
> House of the Geological Society
> 20, Bedford Street, Covent Garden
> the 25th Day of June, 1824.[8]

This meeting endorsed the proposed text, although the series of drafts and notes of amendments[9] shows that consultations and negotiations with the Privy Council had been protracted and very detailed, much of the detailed work apparently being carried out by a Charles Batley of Lincoln's Inn.[10] Changes and additions proposed in the course of the negotiations were then marked in red ink by Batley on a draft dated 10 June 1824. For example, the original draft gave the Objects of the Society as forming 'a Society for investigating the Mineral Structure of the Earth'. At some (apparently unrecorded) point in the negotiations, the Society had decided that it wanted to broaden this by the addition of the words 'and for promoting such investigation',[11] and this was inserted in the draft in red ink, but this small and apparently innocuous addition was not included in the final text as approved by the Privy Council. There does not seem to be any evidence as to when or why this proposed addition was rejected. It seems most likely that during the face to face negotiations that Vandercom and/or Batley had with representatives of the Government, some concern was expressed by these individuals who did not want the Geological Society to have an explicit power in its Royal Charter that would permit it to campaign and lobby Government in support of its science. While it was acceptable for the Society and its members to carry out such investigations themselves, they did not wish the already high-profile young Geological Society to be given free rein to campaign actively in support of geological research.

The final version of the Society's formal Petition seeking a Charter and the draft text for the requested Charter[12] were printed by the Society's printer (and one of its founder members), William Phillips (1773–1828) (Torrens 2009). These were then lodged with the Home Office on 14 January 1825 and are preserved in the National Archives at Kew.[13] It is known that Vandercom and Warburton then had a meeting with the Attorney General in person, as they reported on this at the 18 March 1825 Council meeting. The only recorded reservation was a technical point about the permitted limit on the power of the proposed Chartered Society to possess real estate. As the Attorney General was reported to have stated that he had no objection to any of the other clauses of the submitted draft (Woodward 1907, p. 69), the request to have the power also to 'promote' geological investigation had presumably been dropped at some date between June 1824 and March 1825.

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[7] Peel quickly became Buckland's most important patron, first supporting Buckland's nomination as a Canon of Christ Church in 1826, and then, as Prime Minister, Peel finally persuaded a very reluctant Queen Victoria to appoint the notoriously eccentric Buckland to the Westminster Deanery in 1845 when Peel nominated him to the office. The Peel Papers in the British Library, Add. MS. 40355–40555, include over 150 communications from Buckland, many of then soliciting Peel's support for various scientific causes. For correspondence, regarding the proposed Charter see BL Add. MS. 40363 f. 259 (March 1824).

[8] GSL: GS 4/7.

[9] GSL: GS 3, 4, 5 and 6.

[10] It has not been possible to find any biographical information on Batley.

[11] GSL: GS 18. This manuscript version is marked 'Finally settled in Committee 5 June. I have perused and settled and approved this draft [signed] Chas. Batley, Lin. Inn 10 June 1824'. However, at least two versions of this draft were later printed by William Phillips.

[12] GSL: GS 6/8. Headed 'Petition for Charter by the Geological Society' and dated 1824.

[13] National Archives, PRO: HO 72/1/24 (Home Office Records: Charters and Related Papers, Geological Society of London).

Fig. 2. The original sealed copy of the Royal Charter, dated 23 April 1825 (GSL: Business Records GS/1).

The Special General Meeting of the full Society on 21 May 1824 that first considered the Royal Charter proposal of the Council had learned that at the Royal Society's Council meeting its President, Sir Humphry Davy (himself a member of the Geological Society), had expressed his opinion in favour of 'the propriety of such an application'.[14] However, Lyell reported a potential setback to Council in November, in that Davy had tendered his resignation from the Geological Society. No explanation was given and there must have been concern that this was a sign that the Royal Society had reversed its position and might in due course petition against the granting of a Royal Charter.

The Society was under considerable financial pressure. It had recently taken over the financing of the *Transactions* – which were running several years in arrears – from the printer William Phillips, and the cost of renting its Covent Garden premises and maintaining its growing Library and Museum was stretching its resources. At worst, it could easily waste half or even two-thirds of its limited funds for nothing. In the face of such a gamble it was probably a good thing that some of the key players, including Buckland and Warburton, were not against the odd bet, according to the records of the Geological Society Club (Woodward, 1907, pp. 66–67). But whatever may have been said behind the scenes, the Geological Society was in no mood for debate or compromise and the Council accepted the resignation of the President of the Royal Society without comment. Fortunately, although Davy's resignation may have been an indication of some hostility within the Royal Society to the granting of a Royal Charter to the Geological Society, if this was the case its reservations were not carried forward as a formal objection to the granting of a Charter. Accordingly, on 23 April 1825, the King in Privy Council approved and sealed with the Great Seal a Royal Charter creating the Geological Society of London as a Body Corporate. It now had its own seal and, among other things, the right to own property and to grant Fellowships (Fig. 2). On 6 May 1825 Vandercom wrote officially to the Council saying that the Charter was in his possession, and detailing the legal and other costs incurred in obtaining it.[15] A payment of £385 14s 6d was made to Vandercom, not as a fee but in repayment of his disbursements of expenses in connection with the Charter application.

[14] GSL: Council Meeting Minutes 21 May 1824, Min. 9, CM 1/1.

[15] The original sealed copy of the Royal Charter, dated 23 April 1825, is on display in the Society's Apartments in Burlington House, but is registered as the Geological Society Archives Business Records GS/1. There are further printed copies in the Charter and Byelaws series in the Archives, the first being an edition printed by William Phillips in 1827 (GSL: GS 6/9). The full text was published by Woodward (1907, pp. 263–267).

Under the terms of the Charter, William Buckland and the four Vice-Presidents on the existing Council – Arthur Aiken (1773–1854), John Bostock (1773–1846), George Bellas Greenough (1778–1855) and Henry Warburton – were appointed the first five Fellows of the Society. It was, no doubt, significant that they included the founder President, Greenough, and another founder member, Aiken, confirming the active support of what Warburton had termed the Society's *Dei majores*. Buckland was appointed President to serve until not later than February 1826, and any three of the five designated founder members were authorized to serve as a quorum for the purposes of electing members of the unincorporated predecessor body (the existing Society members) and others worthy of membership, as either Fellows or Foreign Members.

Buckland, Warburton and Greenough held the first formal meeting of the interim 'Council of Five' under the Charter, and appointed as Fellows the remaining 14 members of the existing Council and the five Trustees of the Society who had not been named in the Charter. Of the original founders, only William Hasledine Peyps (1775–1856) and William Babington were among this group, although all the founders were still alive (Lewis 2009, table 4), except James Parkinson (1755–1824) who had died the previous year. Further appointments of members under the Charter quickly followed and by the end of a meeting of the new Council, held on 20 May 1825, 338 Fellows and 48 Foreign Members had been formally elected.

From its early days, the Geological Society had appointed a wide range of Honorary Members who were exempt from paying membership dues (Woodward 1907, pp. 268–291; Herries Davies 2007, pp. 16–17). At the end of the first year, 1807, the Society, then less than two months old, still had just the 13 founder members, but 42 Honorary Members had been appointed at the first formal meeting on 4 December. By the end of 1808 the Ordinary Members totalled 48, compared with 87 Honorary Members. Some of these were distinguished scientists or academics, others men of influence in politics and society, but the list seems to be predominantly drawn from the growing number of non-member provincial correspondents providing British and foreign 'geological intelligence' to the Society, particularly in relation to the geological map project being led by Greenough (Knell 2009; Kölbl-Ebert 2009). The last Honorary Member appointments were made in 1810, by which time 120 had been elected. By May 1825 the Society still had 48 of these original Honorary Members on the books. Each was given the option of becoming Fellows without ballot on application and payment of the standard admission fee, but, in the event, only six of these applied to become subscription-paying Fellows. These included the engineer James Watt (1736–1819) and two of those elected as local correspondents almost two decades earlier: Edward Mammat of Leicestershire and Thomas Meade of Somerset (Woodward 1907, pp. 70 and 285).[16]

Finally, on 3 June 1825, the new Royal Charter was formally presented to Buckland as President at a special meeting of the Society in the 20 Bedford Street apartments, after which Buckland hosted a symbolic and celebratory dinner at the nearby Freemasons' Tavern in Covent Garden, where the inaugural meeting of the Society had been held on 13 November 1807.

On 17 February 1826 Buckland, on behalf of the 'Committee of Five' appointed in the Charter, reported formally to the first annual general meeting on the measures taken to implement the transitional provisions of the Charter, including their appointment of Fellows and Foreign Members, and the accounts of the expenses incurred. The annual meeting passed two resolutions of thanks, one to Vandercom for his 'liberal conduct in gratuitously bestowing his attention to [...] the progress of the Charter', and the second to the Committee of Five:

> for the zeal and judgement with which they have discharged the important duties entrusted to them for their prudence in adhering, as far as possible, to the system according to which the proceedings of the Geological Society have hitherto been conducted.[17]

At the end of his two years in office, Buckland handed over the presidency to the first elected President and Council of the new Geological Society of London Incorporated by Royal Charter, John Bostock FRS. He did so in the knowledge that the very considerable expense, efforts and risk involved in both the formal submissions and behind-the-scenes lobbying (in which Buckland himself had taken the leading role and excelled) had paid off, and that the public standing and influence of the Society, and through it English geology, had never been higher.

[16] The others were Lieutenant General Sir James Affleck, Sir Richard John Griffith and Professor Thomas Thomson, MD, FRS.

[17] GSL: GS 6.

The Somerset House Apartments, 1828

In 1874 the Society moved into its present apartments in Burlington House. In greatly welcoming this move, the then President, John Evans (1823–1908), summarized the history of the Society's accommodation in his 1875 Anniversary Address, the first to be given in the new Burlington House Meeting Room. Early in 1809 the Society had rented accommodation at No. 4 Garden Court, Temple, moving the next year to 3 Holborn Row, Lincoln's Inn Fields, which they shared for five years with the Medical and Chirurgical Society (Lewis 2009). From 1816 the Society rented a fairly substantial building in Covent Garden at 20 Bedford Street (Evans 1875, pp. lvii–lx).[18] However, apart from the cost, the Bedford Street Apartments were less than ideal in terms of the accommodation offered. For example, when William Conybeare (1787–1857) demonstrated and reported on the almost complete Plesiosaur found by Mary Anning (1799–1847) at Lyme Regis (Conybeare 1824; North 1956), the specimen proved too large to get much beyond the front door.

As Buckland had recognized, obtaining a Royal Charter was very important in terms of public recognition and the growing status of the Society and its science, but it did not pay the bills. Even with an increasing membership, the Society had an increasing gap between its income and its expenditure, and the substantial costs of obtaining the Charter had depleted the already limited reserves. The accounts submitted to the 20 May 1825 annual meeting showed that the Society's invested capital was down to just £188 5s 7d. The Society would have been very well aware that three of the older chartered bodies – the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Academy – had been provided by the Government with free accommodation in Somerset House when it was built in 1780. The original Somerset House, an old Tudor palace, had been demolished in 1775 so the new building could house many of the Government's offices and the principal learned societies under one roof in order to promote greater efficiency among the Government bureaucracies – large parts were occupied by the Inland Revenue, for example. Having gained the Charter, could the Geological Society at the same time both ease its financial situation and enhance its status even further, by obtaining Government accommodation as well?

Buckland's successor as President, the elderly retired physiologist John Bostock, held office for only one year rather than the usual two years, and was followed in February 1827 by William H. Fitton, also a medical man until he married a wealthy heiress and was able to devote all his time to his scientific interests, particularly geology. Like Buckland, Fitton was a progressive and reforming President, introducing, for example, the publication of the Society's *Proceedings* and the tradition of the President's annual Anniversary Addresses, which quickly became a highlight of the English scientific calendar.

One immediate issue of concern for Fitton was the adequacy and cost of the Bedford Street accommodation, thus the newly chartered Society began to look at the possibility of obtaining free accommodation in Somerset House. Although the building had been fully occupied, things changed in October 1826, the date laid down by Parliament for the final draw of the scandal-ridden National Lottery, under the Lottery Abolition Act of Parliament of 1823.[19] The Lottery Office had occupied part of the eastern wing of Somerset House, but these rooms were now vacant.[20]

The Society began enquiring, or probably more accurately lobbying, about the possibility of the Geological Society moving into this accommodation rent free on the same basis as the Royal Society.[21] It seems clear from the, again, very limited surviving documentation, that the Royal Society and Robert Peel, then the Home Secretary, were mobilized in support. The Lords

[18] Although 3 Holborn Row, Lincoln's Inn Fields, survives (in the same block on the north side of Lincoln's Inn Fields as the Sir John Soane Museum), the other two do not. Garden Court, Temple, was rebuilt in 1884–1885 (Bradley & Pevsner 1997, p. 347), and 20 Bedford Street was rebuilt *c*. 1879: the rebuilding plans and specification are in the London Metropolitan Archives, Duke of Bedford Papers, catalogue ref. E/BER/CG/05/05/004.

[19] Parliamentary Acts, 1 and 2 Geo 4 *c*.120.

[20] In their research for the Society's 2007 bicentenary celebrations, Professor Gordon Herries Davies and Wendy Cawthorne, the Society's Assistant Librarian, identified the location of the former Lottery Office and later the Society's Somerset House Apartments on the east side of the quadrangle (Herries Davies 2007, pp. 58–61).

[21] The 'Solicitors' Bundle' of files of documents prepared by the Society for the recent High Court action against the Deputy Prime Minister over the terms of the occupation of the Burlington House Apartments brings together copies of potentially relevant documents going back to this original allocation of free accommodation in Somerset House, including Peel's March 1828 letter. However, these files have not yet been catalogued and added to the Society's Archives. See also Woodward (1907, pp. 73–75) and Herries Davies (2007, pp. 58–61) for more details of the negotiations relating to the move to Somerset House.

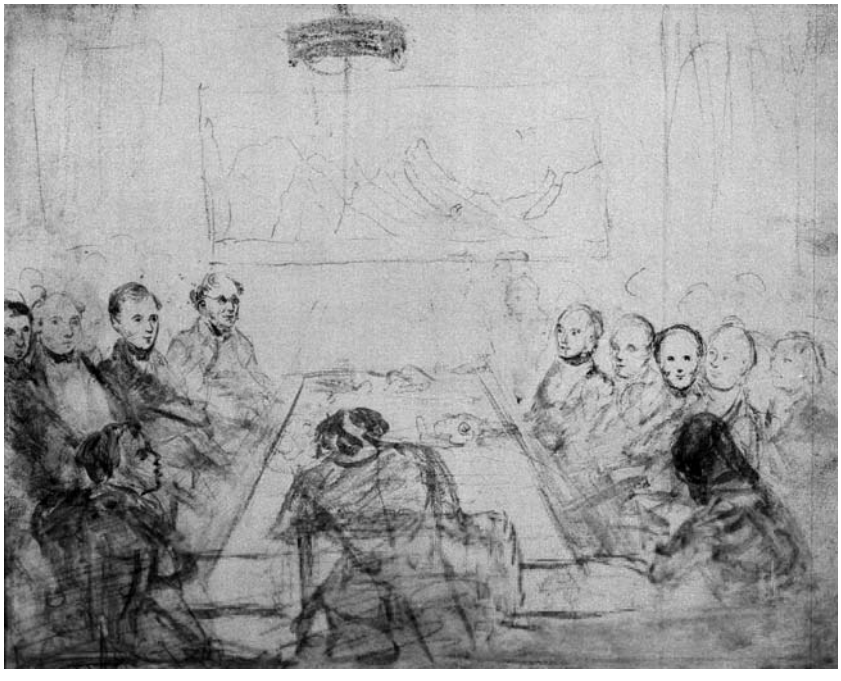

Fig. 3. The Geological Society in session in the first Somerset House meeting room with its 'parliamentary' layout, *c.* 1830. (GSL: GSL/312).

Commissioners of the Treasury appear to have been unwilling to grant a lease or occupation licence to the Geological Society as such (perhaps as they were afraid of establishing a precedent), but an ingenious compromise was reached. The former Lottery Office at Somerset House was allocated by Treasury Minute to the Royal Society as an addition to its own accommodation and occupation agreement, but on the understanding that this would then be made available to the Geological Society for its use. This decision was communicated to both the Royal Society and the Geological Society by Robert Peel in a letter dated 19 March 1828.[22]

The distinguished neo-classical architect Decimus Burton (1800–1881), a Fellow of the Geological Society, was engaged to design and supervise the adaptations of the premises (and later of additional rooms allocated in 1834), and a subscription was opened to raise the £1500 cost of the works. The Bedford Street lease was surrendered from 12 August 1828 and the Society met officially for the first time in Somerset House the same day. However, it was some months before the works were fully completed and the Society could start using the new Meeting Room. The first meeting of the 1828–1829 winter session, on 7 November 1828, had to be held at the Harley Street house of the President, William Fitton.

But it had all been worth the effort. The Geological Society was one of the few scientific organizations singled out for praise by Charles Babbage (a frequent guest at the Society's meetings) in his notorious 1830 *Reflections on the Decline of Science in England and on some of its Causes*. Babbage particularly praised the open debates on the papers presented in the Society's potentially confrontational 'parliamentary' room layout (Fig. 3), one of Buckland's innovations during his presidency (discussed by, among others, Thackray 2003, pp. v–ix). Babbage commented:

> [The Geological Society] possesses all the freshness, the vigour, and the ardour of youth in the pursuit of a youthful science, and has succeeded in a most difficult experiment, that of having an oral discussion on the subject of each paper read at its meetings. To say of these discussions that they are very entertaining is the least part of the praise which is due to them.
>
> (Babbage 1830, p. 45).

Conclusion

By the end of 1828 the Geological Society of London, still only 21 years old, had in less than

[22] A copy of Peel's letter is now in the 'Solicitor's Bundle' referred to previously.

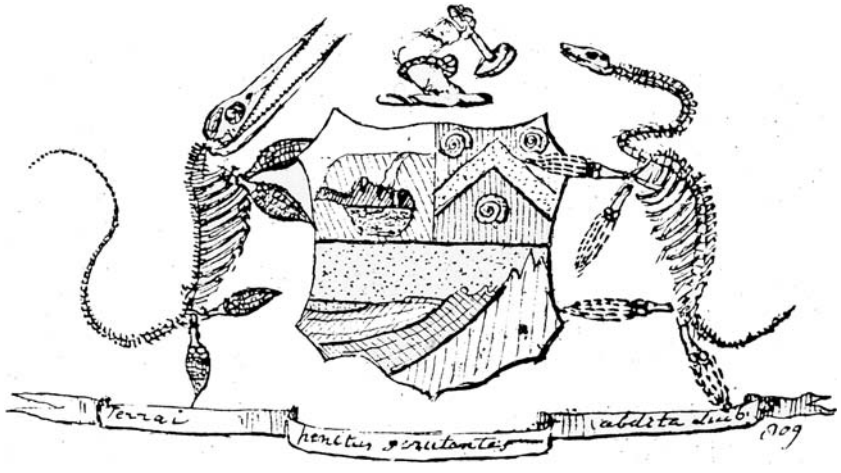

Fig. 4. Henry De La Beche's proposal for a coat of arms for the Geological Society, 13 June 1825. (Buckland (Oke/Gordon) Archive, collection of Roderick Gordon and Diana Harman, formerly Devon Record Office DRO 138M/F73.)

five years achieved two major advances in official recognition and support for itself and for the science of geology more widely, despite the traditional laissez-faire hostility to any form of public support for science (or, indeed, the arts). The Society had obtained the Royal Charter of Incorporation and all that this signified in terms of official and social status and recognition in the prevailing social and political systems and values of the early nineteenth century. It had also been granted highly prestigious and rent-free accommodation in Somerset House, albeit indirectly through the device of allocating this through the Royal Society. The Geological Society was henceforth to be found alongside the country's leading cultural and scientific bodies: the Royal Society (founded in 1660), the Society of Antiquaries (founded exactly 100 years before the Geological Society in 1707) and the Royal Academy of Arts (founded in 1768).

However, one of the other ambitions Buckland had for the Society during his 1824–1826 Presidency was not fulfilled. As noted earlier, the Royal Charter gave the Society a legal identity or personality of its own and one of the perhaps lesser-known privileges that came with this was the right to a Coat of Arms. It is clear that Buckland carried out, privately at least, soundings about applying to the College of Heralds for a Grant of Arms to the Society in 1825. A letter to Henry De La Beche (1796–1855) dated 7 July 1825 shows that Buckland had been consulting about this possibility, no doubt among others, with three of the leading Royal Academicians of the day: Sir Francis Chantrey (1781–1841), the most fashionable and successful British sculptor of the first half of the nineteenth century; Sir David Wilkie (1785–1841), genre painter; and Sir Robert Ker Porter (1777–1842), who was Painter-in-Ordinary to the King and then the Queen from 1830 to his death (McCartney 1977, pp. 57–59 and 70). This letter to De La Beche was apparently in response to one in which De La Beche, a noted geological illustrator and caricaturist, had offered sketch designs for a Coat of Arms for the Society, as well as two different designs (plus one variant) for a Seal for the Society.[23] The Coat of Arms proposal had been 'admired exceedingly by Chantrey, Wilkie and Sir R. K. Porter', according to Buckland (McCartney 1977, p. 58). De La Beche proposed that the coat of arms (Fig. 4) should include in the main shield a simplified section through a bone cave, apparently based on one of the plates in Buckland's *Reliquiae Diluvianae* (1823), in the upper left-hand quarter.[24] The other upper quarter would have included three ammonites, beneath which would be a full-width idealized geological section of the northern flanks of the Alps. Rampant skeletons of an ichthyosaur (on the left) and a plesiosaur (on the right) would serve as heraldic supporters of the shield. De La Beche proposed that the crest above the shield should be the commonly found heraldic device of the *bras armé* – an arm wielding a

[23] Buckland (Oke/Gordon) Archive formerly deposited in the Devon Record Office, catalogue ref. DRO 138M/F73. Henry De La Beche to William Buckland 13 June 1825.

[24] Contrary to the interpretation of McCartney (1977), the cave section does not seem to be of Paviland Cave (Goat Hole): it seems to match more closely *Reliquiae Diluvianae* plate 14, which shows Scharzfeld, one of the German caves studied by Buckland.

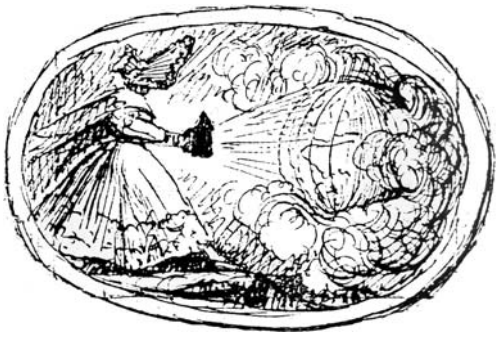

Fig. 5. Henry De La Beche's proposal for a seal for the Geological Society, 13 June 1825: 'Science dispelling the darkness that covered the Earth'. (Buckland (Oke/Gordon) Archive, collection of Roderick Gordon and Diana Harman, formerly Devon Record Office DRO 138M/F73.)

weapon, although in this case the 'weapon' would be a geological hammer rather than the usual dagger or arrow. In the same letter De La Beche had also proposed a sketch of a female figure shining a light on all the Earth as a design for an official seal for the Society (Fig. 5). In his own words, this aimed to show 'Science dispelling the darkness that covered the Earth!!'

It seems that Buckland was himself exploring the possibilities for a coat of arms, as there is a small undated sheet of paper in his distinctive hand filed with the 15 June 1825 letter from De La Beche with another possible design (Fig. 6). In this, the upper half of the shield has sketches of six fossils including a large ammonite. A key to the lower half of the shield indicates that the left-hand side would include four images representing geological surveying – '1 Quadrant', '2 bottle of acid', '3 Barometer', '4 Specific gravity balance', while the fifth image opposite these, '5 crystals', would represent mineralogy. The supporters of the shield would be two ichthyosaurs, but represented here by life reconstructions rather than De La Beche's ichthyosaur and plesiosaur skeletons, while a quill pen crossed with a miner's or geologist's hammer would be displayed above the shield.

In the event, no further progress was made with what would have been the ultimate public expression of the Society's newly attained status as a Chartered Society. However, in 1849, at a time when there seems to have been some discussion about seeking a 'Royal' title for the Society,

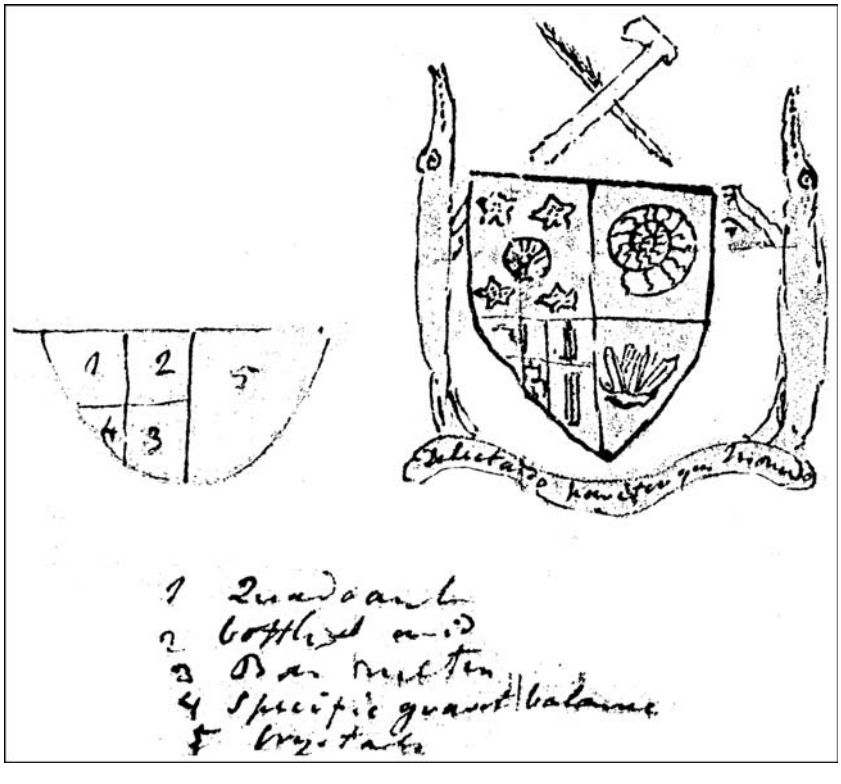

Fig. 6. William Buckland's own sketch of a coat of arms for the Geological Society (undated, but presumably June 1825, since it was filed with the De La Beche letter of 13 June 1825). (Buckland (Oke/Gordon) Archive, collection of Roderick Gordon and Diana Harman, formerly Devon Record Office DRO 138M/F73.)

Fig. 7. The Geological Society's historic logo, based on William Phillips' typography for the Society's 1811 *Transactions*, still in use as its corporate identity today.

William Hellier Baily (1819–1888), a draughtsman and later a geologist with the Geological Survey, returned to the subject with a proposed coat of arms for the 'Royal Hammerers', which adapted some elements of De La Beche's 1825 design, but again no progress was made in seeking a Grant of Arms (McCartney 1977, p. 59). Consequently, in its bicentenary year the Geological Society of London continues to rely on the plain 'GS' black lettering monograph (Fig. 7) used by William Phillips in 1811 on the original copy of the Society's *Transactions*, for its logo and visual identity.

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Archives

GSL: Archives of the Geological Society of London.

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