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# The Making of the Geological Society of London

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## Preface: in the Footsteps of the Founding Fathers

Davy asserted at our first dinner at the Freemasons Tavern, that he never knew anything prosper that was begun upon a Friday [the 13th], and our little band, besides, was of the bad omened number 13, at it's start; well may we laugh at the prejudices of mankind.

James Laird, 1834  
The Geological Society's first Secretary

It was inevitable that in the Geological Society's Bicentenary year, the History of Geology Group (fondly known as HOGG) would hold an event to mark this historic occasion. HOGG is affiliated to the Geological Society and meets, free of charge, in its rooms in Burlington House. Ties to the Society are therefore strong, although many HOGG members are not Society Fellows. As the Society itself had chosen to look forward to the future during its Bicentenary year, it was fitting that HOGG should look back and celebrate the events, 200 years ago, that led to the Society being where it is today. Accordingly, HOGG planned a five-day celebratory event (9–13 November 2007) entitled 'In the Footsteps of the Founding Fathers'.

The occasion commenced with a field trip to the Isle of Wight – Walk with the Founding Fathers – that followed in the footsteps of Thomas Webster, the Society's first paid officer, as he tried to unravel the island's geological history in 1814. Martin Rudwick's text and the beautiful illustrations from the trip's field notes are reproduced in the Bicentenary section of this volume, in case others would like to follow in our footsteps. On returning to London from the Isle of Wight, I convened a two-day international conference in Burlington House – Talk with the Founding Fathers – that explored the status of geology around 1807. The first day looked at the geological context into which the Geological Society was born – geology in Europe around 1800, and that was followed by talks on the contributions made to the Society by each of the Founding Fathers. The second day covered some of the people and significant geological events of the following decades. On the evening of 12 November, a fabulous dinner in period costume – Dine with the Founding Fathers – was held in the New Connaught Rooms, the site of the Freemasons' Tavern where the Society was founded. During the evening a plaque was unveiled by the Society's President, Richard Fortey, to commemorate the day 200 years ago when it all began. The year's events culminated on 13 November 2007 – the Bicentenary date – with another dinner for all Society Fellows, underneath the dinosaurs in the Natural History Museum.

With no Society archivist in place – there hasn't been one for some years, a rather lamentable situation in its Bicentenary year – I was concerned that a record of these events would be lost. This book therefore attempts to document them as William Watts did for the Society's Centenary, although his 1909 account did a much more thorough job for that event than we have space for here. So while the majority of these pages are taken up with papers presented at the conference – although substantially rewritten for publication – and others that were subsequently commissioned, the 'Bicentenary' section provides an account of HOGG's field trip and dinner, as well as a summary of all the Society's Bicentenary events held during 2007. The volume also includes, in the Appendix, the text of the Society's first two publications, both of which are now rare documents that are hard to come by.

Within weeks of setting up the Society, the founders sent out a small booklet entitled *Geological Inquiries* (Appendix I) to the 42 Honorary Members around the country that it had appointed at its first meeting, with the intention of gathering information for the geological maps of Britain they were to make. This fascinating document provides a valuable insight into the way the founders were thinking about geology at that time. Appendix II is a translation of Comte de Bournon's *Discours préliminaire*, prefixed to his treatise on calcite and aragonite. As it refers specifically to events preceding the foundation of the Geological Society, and since publication of de Bournon's treatise is considered by many to be the event that triggered the founding of the Society, we felt it was particularly relevant to include it here. This is the first time it has been translated into English and I am extremely grateful to Margaret Morgan, Royal Cornwall Museum, who generously responded to my plea to HOGG members – at a very late stage in this book's progress – for someone to do the translation. The section covering de Bournon's ideas on crystallography and geology has been omitted owing to lack of space and time, but I hope it will become available in due course. I am indebted to the Geological Society of London for allowing us to reproduce these important documents here.

In the same way that many of the Founding Fathers enabled the publication of Comte de Bournon's treatise on mineralogy by subscribing to it beforehand, all who attended the Founding Father's conference were offered the opportunity of subscribing to this volume at a subsidized rate. By the end of the conference we had enough subscribers to proceed and HOGG made up the financial difference. I am

therefore very grateful to the HOGG committee for making this possible. In true nineteenth-century style, the names of those who subscribed are printed on the pages following this Preface.

Simon Knell and I were particularly keen that this volume would look in more depth at the Founding Fathers and the contributions each made to the Society, as well as the context of the Society's birth and the various developments that caused it to come into being. We hoped to draw our readers away from the conventional narrative about how the Society was inaugurated and to challenge some of the myths that have grown up over the past 200 years. The story so far has relied heavily on the account written by the first President, George Bellas Greenough, at least 25 years after the event, but I felt certain there were other voices to be heard.

Greenough's recollections were first interpreted by the Society's historian, Horace B. Woodward, in his history of the Society (1908), written for the Centenary celebrations in 1907, but Woodward had not discovered the fantastic Greenough archive, now at University College London, which Martin Rudwick first used in 1963 when writing his version of the Society's origins. These two accounts, along with the less well-known but equally important papers by Paul Weindling (1979 and 1983) on the prehistory of the Society, have become essential reading for anyone seriously interested in piecing together the Society's early history, and many in this volume refer to them. All of these works, and now this volume, will become, or continue to be, the starting point for anyone looking back to these events during the next 100 years. As a consequence, Simon and I could not help feeling, at times, somewhat conscious of the responsibility imposed on us from the future.

In writing our own papers, we found such contradictory accounts of various events in those works mentioned above that we were enticed into the archives to take a look for ourselves at what the records really said. What we found was revealing. A quick cross-reference of Greenough's history of the Society with the Society's minutes showed that his memory could not always be relied on; dates and events had become confused, committee members' names misremembered, places forgotten. So if his memory couldn't be depended on for the things we could check, what reliance could we place on those we couldn't check? Even at the time Greenough wrote his recollections, James Laird, the Society's first Secretary and Greenough's right-hand man for the first four years of his Presidency, disagreed with Greenough's version of how the Society had formed. Laird apparently wrote his own account, now sadly lost – what a gem that will be for future historians to find. But none of this was very surprising – who does

remember things perfectly the next day, let alone 25 years later? And when do two people ever remember the same event exactly the same way? Furthermore, facts become confounded in the retelling. So although there is no such thing as a 'right' or 'wrong' account of what happened, we do need to be aware of what Greenough's motives might have been in writing his recollections, so carefully left in the Society's archives for posterity to find.

Like the other historians before us, Simon and I have put our own interpretation on what we found in the Greenough archives. While we both read some of the same material, we also read different letters, according to what we were seeking for our own papers, and the writers of those had their own things to say about what happened, which inevitably influenced our separate interpretations. Furthermore, there was material we didn't have time to look at, including two large cardboard boxes of letters, bills, lists, etc., each torn into four neat pieces, held together with a paper clip. So did Greenough tear up material not of 'historical' interest, but then never throw it away, or did someone else do that after his death? And who clipped all the pieces together? There's still plenty of scope for future research.

And so history is written. By individuals with their own agendas, in their own times, interpreting what little material is available according to their own belief systems and prejudices. And we are not the only ones to cover the 'founding' in our essays. In compiling a book of this nature where many authors must refer to the same event, there is bound to be some duplication, particularly as these papers need to stand alone as individual pieces of work outside the context of this book. However, I feel these different accounts of how the Society formed only add to the book's richness, allowing future readers a selection of interpretations. Who knows, perhaps like us, it will even entice a few to go back into the archives and take a look for themselves.

When I first asked Simon, about a year ago, if he would co-edit this volume with me, I don't think either of us had the first idea about the monster we were taking on. We had successfully worked together on a previous volume, *The Age of the Earth: From 4004 BC to AD 2002* (Lewis & Knell 2001), seven years ago, which, through the mists of time, had seemed a relatively straightforward task. Not that this volume was particularly complicated – just immensely time-consuming. Or perhaps it was now harder to fit it in around our daily responsibilities, which undoubtedly had grown in those seven years. So it is just as well that it rained all year and I wasn't tempted into the garden.

Despite, or perhaps because of, only meeting face-to-face twice during the year, we finished on time and I think it would have been hard to find anyone other than Simon so in tune with my hopes for this book. As he said, we shared ‘a capacity for irony and laughing in the face of, well, just about everything, were efficient and yet self-indulgent, obsessive, ridiculously ambitious and broke more rules than all the other authors put together’ – just looking at the length of our papers says how long they took us. Throughout it all, Simon was immensely supportive and I thank him profoundly for everything he has put into this project. I also thank Sarah Gibbs, our very patient and understanding editor, as well as all the authors who helped us realize our ambitions for this volume and for their immensely interesting papers. I am sure you will enjoy them too.

DR CHERRY LEWIS  
*HOGG Chairman, 2004–2007*  
*8 September 2008*

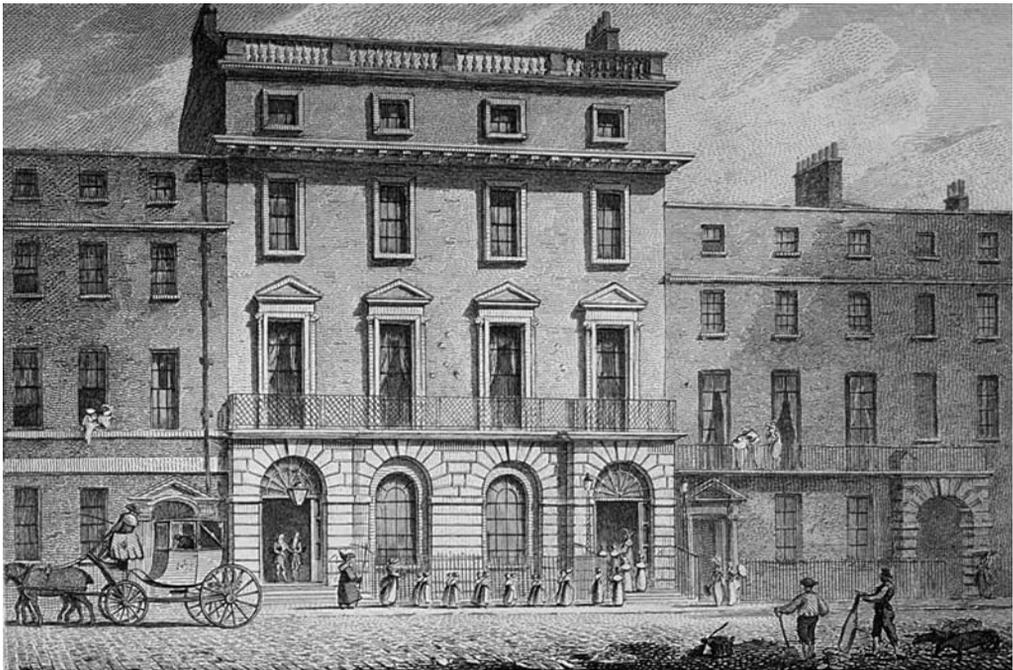
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Freemason's Tavern as it looked on 13 November 1807, when the Geological Society was founded there.  
Source: Guildhall Library.