REPORT

John Frederick Blake, the University of Nottingham's first professorial geologist

Normally the accolade of being the **first** professor of Geology within University College Nottingham is bestowed on Henry Hurd Swinnerton (1875–1966). Since the University of Nottingham achieved its Royal Charter in 1948, Swinnerton's entire departmental career was in the University College per se. He was first appointed as demonstrator in Natural Science in 1902 and subsequently to a new chair of Geology in 1910, a position he held until he retired in 1946. Thereafter, he had an honorary position as curator of the University Museum to 1956.

This belief concerning Swinnerton overlooks the appointment in 1880 of the Reverend J. F. Blake (1839–1906) by the newly founded University College, Nottingham, to a chair of Natural Sciences. Unearthing this circumstance was prompted by the report of a recent Geologists' Association field meeting led by John Henry and Diana Clements (Henry 2022). This event focused on Kensal Green Cemetery in west London. Apart from viewing the graves of Greenough (a founding member of the Geological Society of London and map maker) and De la Beche (the founder of the British Geological Survey), Blake's intriguing tombstone was demonstrated by Diana.

Blake was born near Guildford into an affluent ecclesiastical family and educated at Christ's Hospital School in London where he excelled in mathematics. Later at Cambridge he read for the Natural Sciences Tripos and was taught by Adam Sedgwick. After graduation, he was ordinated twice, first as a deacon in 1862 and second in 1863 as a priest, on both occasions in Lincoln Cathedral. He was a curate of Holy Trinity church in New Lenton, Nottingham but in 1864 he left Lenton to become mathematics master and assistant chaplain at St Peter's School in York. During his time in Yorkshire, he commenced geological research and published a number of papers relating to that county. He was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society of London in 1868 and joined the Geologists' Association in 1875. Upon leaving York in 1874, he decided to devote himself to science and ceased being an active priest. He moved to London where his main income came from giving lectures in comparative anatomy. Concurrently he further developed his geological expertise and in 1877 the Geological Society awarded him the Murchison Fund in recognition of his work in palaeontology and stratigraphy (he was later to receive the Lyell Medal in 1895). Additionally, he was awarded several grants from HM Government to aid his palaeontological work on Cephalopoda. Being proficient in both biological and physical science, at that stage he had become an accomplished well-rounded geologist.

By 1880, Nottingham City Council had completed the building of a new civic University College on Shakespeare Street in the city centre (now part of Nottingham Trent University). Four foundation professorships were created in English/Literature, Mathematics and Mechanics, Chemistry, and Natural Sciences. Blake (Fig. 1) was appointed to the last chair, to which was attached the curatorship of the college Natural History Museum. His teaching load was onerous in comparison with the other three professors as he was expected to cover a wide spectrum of subjects including geology, biology, geography and physiology. Unlike the other professors, Blake's £400 annual salary was split between lecturing (£250) and museum curation (£150). He lobbied the college for an assistant but in 1886, against his wishes, the college decided to employ an independent museum curator and pay the latter with part of his salary! (Cox 1998). Inevitably, relations between the new curator and Blake became stormy to say the least. Another issue arose in 1887 following the decision of the Mayor and Corporation to assume absolute control of the college, and a board of professors was obliged to report to it (Beckett 2016). Finally, alleged financial problems led the college to dismiss him, whereas the other three professors remained in post (Cox 1998). These developments account for

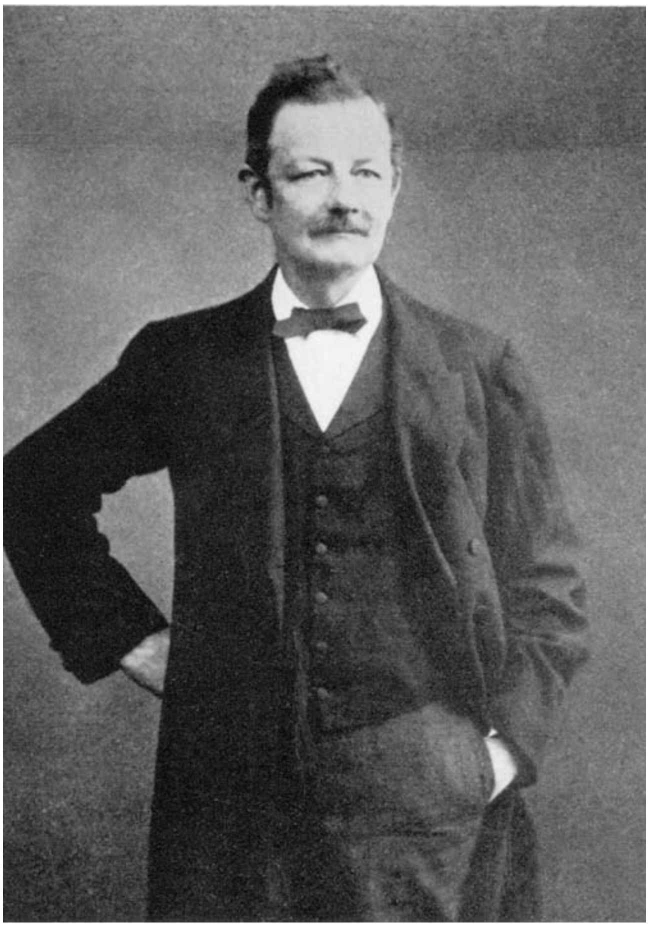

***Figure 1**. Portrait of J. F. Blake (from Nottingham Naturalists' Society Annual Report 1905–6).*

Geikie's (1908 p lxi) comment 'circumstances arose which made the [Nottingham] post no longer agreeable to him'. Thus, Blake moved again back to London (shades of the collegiate-managerial conundrum which arose in British universities in the late 1980s).

Blake returned briefly to Nottingham in 1893, when as President of the Geologists' Association he led a long field meeting based on the city. Blake's final contribution to the county was his substantial Victoria County History synthesis of Nottinghamshire geology (Blake 1906).

In recalling Blake's contributions to Geological Society meetings, Geikie (1908) declared, 'he fought, and fought strongly for the opinions he held on questions of keen controversy'. Another obituarist observed 'Blake was not averse to geological battles, and he entered into sundry controversial matters with characteristic energy, but occasionally with more zeal than discretion' (Anon 1909).

Blake's grave is distinguished by a column of larvikite 1.3 m high replicating Eddystone lighthouse with an inset rounded clear glass for the light. An allied inscription reads 'Jesus light of life'. It rests on a slab of Carrara marble. So unique is the memorial that it has been listed by Historic England as a Grade II funerary monument (Fig. 2).

Figure 2*. The 1.4 m high model lighthouse made of larvikite on Blake's grave in Kensal Green Cemetery. The ravages of time have largely removed the former lettering at ground level, so that prior knowledge is required to identify the grave as Blake's.*

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THE RECORD

Secretary's Report 2021/2

Our individual membership now stands at 194 together with 39 joint members, 1 student member and 33 institutional members and we give a formal welcome to new members who have joined the Society during the year.

Although Covid restrictions continued to affect our programme of events, we were able to run a few field trips. In September it was to Tideswell to observe the relationship between the Carboniferous limestones and contemporaneous volcanic rocks. This was held in conjunction with the North Staffs group and led by Albert Benghiat. It was followed later in the same month by a visit to the limestones, grits and tuffs of a very wet Ashover, led by Tim Colman. As part of the GA's Festival of Geology in November, Tony Waltham led a visit to Park Tunnel and Castle Rock in Nottingham.

Thankfully, we were able to resume our lecture programme in October with Dr Michael Oates' lecture *Ammonites – Myth to Reality*, which ranged from the early beliefs attached to them through to the most recent interpretations of how they evolved as molluscs and functioned as a part of Jurassic and Cretaceous ecosystems.

In November, Professor Chris Jackson's lecture on *Salt Tectonics* was essentially a celebration of salt (sodium chloride), highlighting its unique physical properties, its role in the generation of complex geological structures, and its importance in terms of hydrocarbon exploration.

The *Moine Thrust Controversy* of NW Scotland was the subject of Dr Peter Gutteridge's lecture in December. Here are the oldest rocks in the British Isles, the first evidence of life, ancient landscapes carved out by Precambrian rivers and exposed Lower Palaeozoic clastic and carbonate sediments. These later formed part of a major fold and thrust belt on which the metamorphosed Moine schists were emplaced. Roderick Impy Murchison saw this however as a conformable succession. The lecture addressed the question of why Victorian geologists so completely missed evidence that is so obvious to geologists today. It was suggested that the answer lies in the state of geological science at the time, geopolitics and social climbing. Resolution of this controversy gave us the foundations of the science of geology as we now know it.

The *Value Chain of Minerals for the Green Transition* was the subject chosen by Dr Karen Hanghoj, the current Director of the British Geological Survey, for her lecture in January 2022. She stressed that metals and minerals are key for achieving the goals set out in COP21 and several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and for achieving the overall UK goal of net-zero in 2050. Emerging energy and mobility technologies create a strong demand for raw materials, and for some critical raw materials. This demand will dramatically exceed current production in the next 10–15 years. Limited access to these materials might negatively impact the transition, thus reducing the competitiveness of European actors downstream. She spoke of the need to design smarter solutions for the sustainable extraction, processing and use/repairing/recycling of raw materials from both primary and secondary sources.

In February, Dr Andy Howard's lecture entitled *Yorkshire's (...and the East Midlands'...) Ancient Storms* began with a quote from Derek Ager's well-known textbook *The nature of the stratigraphical record*, in which he famously wrote that 'the history of any part of the earth, like the life of a soldier, consists of long periods of boredom and short periods of terror'. In this context, Andy's talk focused on the impact of major storms that 'terrorised' the distant geological past of northern England and the East Midlands. Deposits of these extreme events came to dominate many parts of the Carboniferous to Jurassic succession, and examples are preserved in a range of marine, coastal and terrestrial sedimentary environments. Comparisons were made with modern storms including some of the more notorious events in recent history.

This year's March Presidential Address (from Tony Waltham) focused on *Landforms of the Yorkshire Dales* and posed a number of questions. Known for their spectacular geology and their glaciated and karst landscapes, the Yorkshire Dales remain enigmatic in parts of their geomorphology. Are the benches erosion surfaces or stratimorphs? Why are the pavements so well rounded? Do the erratics indicate erosion rates? What broke up Brimham Rocks? What did sulphuric acid do for early cave development? Is Malham Cove fluvial or glacial? What did the pre-Anglian terrain look like? What happened to the caves beneath the icecaps? Questions, thoughts and maybe some partial answers. For the published account see herein.

We are grateful that throughout these difficult times the preparation and publication of the Mercian Geologist has continued thanks to the efforts of David Bate and his editorial board.

At last, in July, Council was able to begin meeting in person, all be it in the President's garden. As usual, lectures, field trips and financial matters formed the major part of the discussions.

With the announcements that Colin Bagshaw was to stand down as Treasurer this year and myself as Secretary next year, Council has been reviewing the roles and responsibilities of Council members in an attempt to broaden the work load. With this is in mind Mike Allen has agreed to become a Membership Secretary and Peter Jones will take responsibility for the Beryl Whittaker Award to students. The roles of Editor, Indoor & Field Meeting secretaries and Circular editor will remain the same.

We must regretfully record the passing of a former President of the Society, Tony Morris, who died 13 April 2022. Tony was a long-standing member and had served on the Editorial Board, but for some years past had been in poor health. For a profile on his becoming President, see *Mercian Geologist*, July 2000. Also we learn with regret the passing of Dr Alfred Whittaker, who died 23 December 2021. Alf had a long and distinguished career with the Geological Survey, from 1963 until his retirement in about 1998, although he continued there some years further in an honorary capacity. As well as publishing extensively on aspects of the deep geology of Britain, he was also something of an authority on the music of Mozart. As a member of the Society he was in regular attendance at our lectures, and indeed presented a lecture himself on the deep geology of Britain in 2002. On a lighter note, we were pleased to learn that a new mineral, bridgesite, a rare earth element sulphate from Cumbria, has been named in honour of our late member Trevor Bridges (1935–2015), who collected the samples used in the study which formally identified the new mineral (M. S. Rumsey *et al.* 2022, *Mineralogical Magazine*, **86**, 570–576).

Finally, we would like to thank all members of Council for their contribution to the running of the Society during these ever-changing times and sincerely hope the coming year will bring the full restoration of our activities and events.

Janet Slatter