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

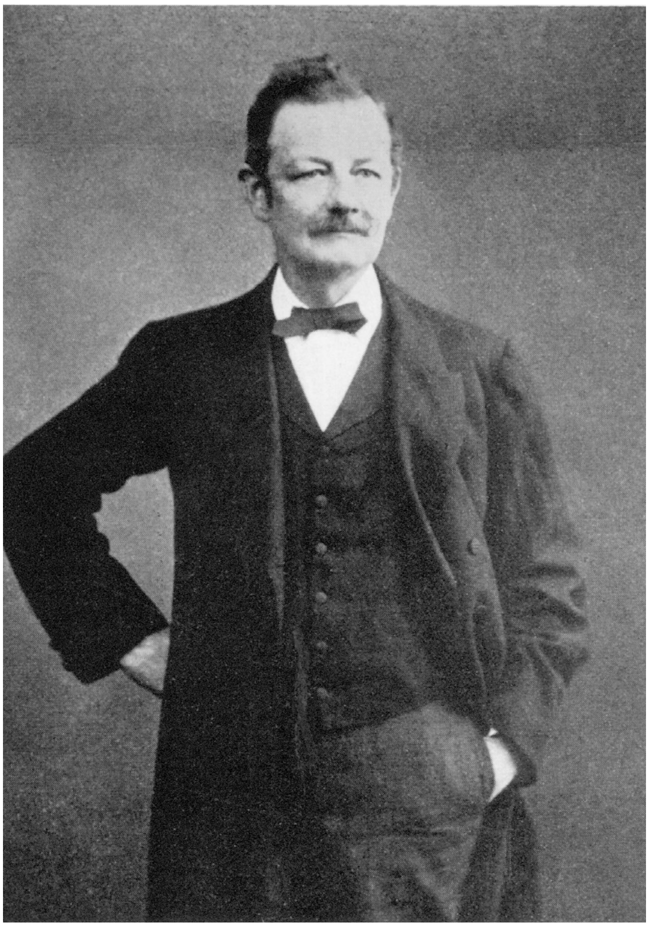

***Figure 1**. Portrait of J. F. Blake (from Nottingham Naturalists' Society Annual Report 1905–6).*

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).

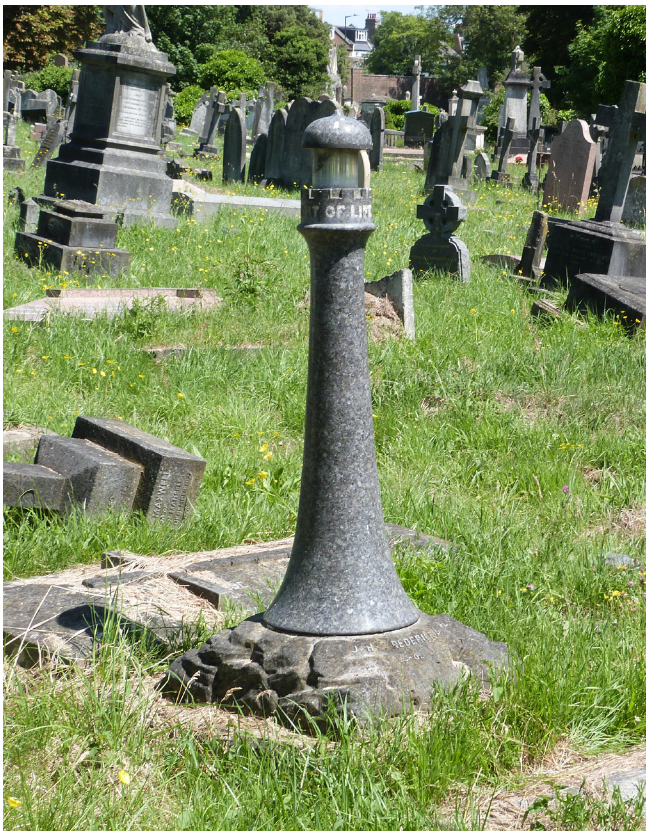

Figure 2*. The 1.4 m high model lighthouse made of larvikite on Blake's grave in Kensal Green Cemetery. The ravages of time have largely removed the former lettering at ground level, so that prior knowledge is required to identify the grave as Blake's.*

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