

# Down to earth - one hundred and fifty years of the British Geological Survey

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## Down to earth: one hundred and fifty years of the British Geological Survey

By H. E. Wilson

Commemorating The one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Geological Survey

The British Geological Survey has been part of the national infrastructure for a century and a half, since it sprang from its better-known parent, the Ordnance Survey. This is the story of its evolution and its problems — many common to other British scientific organizations — liberally spiced with anecdotes about many of the characters who have helped and hindered its progress.

In no sense an official history, this book is a record of an organization which has given valuable service and of the hundreds of men and women who have tried to maintain its reputation as 'the prototype of every other Geological Survey operating anywhere on the surface of the globe'.

Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1985. ISBN 7073 0473 3.

## Introduction

The Geological Survey of Great Britain has often been regarded as the first national geological organization, though this claim has been shown by Victor Eyles to be doubtful, as there was state-financed geological work in France and the United States before 1835. Even in the United Kingdom the geological branch of the Ordnance Survey in Ireland was active in 1825 and must contest the claim to be first with the French Corps des Mines.

Nevertheless the Geological Survey of Great Britain, dating from the appointment of the first geologist in 1835, is certainly the only geological organisation which can offer a documented and unbroken history of one hundred and fifty years and its sesquicentennial in 1985 offers an opportunity for an update of the official centenary volume, *The First Hundred Years of the Geological Survey of Great Britain* by Sir John Flett, and the more idiosyncratic account by Sir Edward Bailey published in 1952.

This volume attempts to bring the record up to 1984, without repeating the details given in the earlier histories but giving some account of the first hundred years — and some of the background hitherto considered not fit for publication. The events of the last half century are recorded with, I hope, due regard for historical accuracy but are viewed with the eye of one who has always been regarded, like William Whitaker a century ago, as a 'sort of mutineer'. The author must, therefore, emphasise that this is a personal account and, though he acknowledges the help and co-operation of a host of his ex-colleagues, the views and opinions expressed are his own and in no sense those of the present Director or his staff.

I am greatly indebted to Robert Geary for his subtle chapter-head sketches.

Among those who have given me their time and memories I must especially mention Dr S Buchan, Sir Kingsley Dunham, Mrs Joan Eyles, Dr R C B Jones, Dr A G MacGregor, Mrs V M Mitchell, Dr A E Mourant, Mr J Pallister, Dr James Phemister, Mrs D Salmon, Sir James Stubblefield, Mr E Tallis and Dr A W Woodland.

I hope they will forgive me.

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## **Directors of the Geological Survey**

|                                     |                            |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Sir Henry De la Beche               | 1835-1855                  |
| Sir Roderick Impey Murchison        | 1855-1871 Director General |
| Sir Andrew Crombie Ramsay           | 1871-1881 Director General |
| Sir Archibald Geikie                | 1882-1901 Director General |
| Sir Jethro Justinian Harris Teall   | 1901-1914                  |
| Sir Aubrey Strahan                  | 1914-1920                  |
| Sir John Smith Flett                | 1920-1935                  |
| Bernard Smith                       | 1935-1936                  |
| Sir Edward Battersby Bailey         | 1937-1945                  |
| Dr William Francis Porter McLintock | 1945-1950                  |
| Sir William John Pugh               | 1950-1960                  |
| Sir Cyril James Stubblefield        | 1960-1966                  |
| Sir Kingsley Charles Dunham         | 1967-1976                  |
| Dr Austin William Woodland          | 1976-1979                  |
| Dr George Malcolm Brown             | 1979-1985                  |

## **Superintendents of the Magnetic Observatory**

|                                    |           |
|------------------------------------|-----------|
| James Glaisher                     | 1838-1874 |
| William Ellis                      | 1875-1893 |
| William Nash                       | 1894-1903 |
| William Bryant                     | 1904-1923 |
| William Witchell                   | 1923-1948 |
| Walter Jackson                     | 1948-1950 |
| Herbert Finch                      | 1950-1964 |
| Richard Leaton                     | 1964-1970 |
| — and head, Geomagnetism Unit, IGS | 1970-1980 |

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