

First hundred years of the Geological Survey of Great Britain

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Prefatory note

The formation in 1835 of the Geological Survey, which was the first official or Government Geological Survey of any country, took place at a time which followed upon that known as the 'Heroic Age of Geology,' when the foundations of the Science were laid by Hutton, Werner and William Smith and consolidated by Cuvier and Lamarck. Its early days coincided with the 'Golden Age of Geology,' when such Masters as Lyell, Sedgwick, Murchison, Buckland and De la Beche accomplished wonders in strenuous pioneering field-work and made many great discoveries.

It was the universal approval of De la Beche's work in affixing geological colours to the ordnance maps of the County of Devon and adjacent districts that—with the enthusiastic backing of the Geological Society of London—led to his appointment as Director of the Ordnance Geological Survey, then established as a branch of the Trigonometrical Survey of Britain.

This Memorial Volume records the history of the Survey up to the end of its first hundred years. By a happy chance the Celebration of the Centenary fell in the Silver Jubilee Year of His Majesty King George V, and coincided with the opening of the new Museum in Exhibition Road, South Kensington. The volume is, in brief, a compendium of the activities of the men who ruled the destinies of the Survey and contributed to its life blood. It describes its many vicissitudes; the birth and subsequent separation of its daughter institutions, The Royal School of Mines and the Mining Record Office, and the passing of the old Museum of Practical Geology in Jermyn Street.

No one is better fitted or has better right to tell the story of this hundred years of progress than Sir John Smith Flett, whose experience as Petrographer, Assistant Director in Scotland and Director for Britain covers the 35 years of the present century. It has been his crowning achievement not only to have brought the Survey to its present high pitch of efficiency, but also to have transferred it and its collections to South Kensington, and there arranged offices, laboratories and a new and spacious Museum, which are thoroughly up-to-date and have earned the warm approval of experts at home and from abroad.

Sir John's narrative brings out two points in particular— first the progressive spirit which, despite individual conservatism that has operated at times, has permeated the Survey from its beginning; and secondly the educative as distinct from the well recognized practical value of the Service.

No established public department of this maturity can escape tradition, and if I interpret it rightly, the tradition in this case is one of service to the public and of desire to keep abreast of, or in the forefront of, a rapidly advancing and expanding science. The Survey is organized as a team or, more correctly, a group of teams, the individual members of which are called upon to contribute their quota of special knowledge and experience to the general pool for the common good. At the same time, although team work leads to an essential measure of uniformity in methods and presentation of results, it does not stifle individuality or shift responsibility, since each member has his own field of work in which to become a specialist. No one, indeed, is more jealous of his right to be consulted about, or of being considered an expert upon, 'his ground' than a Survey man. In these two factors, team work and individual keenness, lie the strength and vigour of the Geological Survey.

Of the educative value of the Survey and Museum there is little real need of emphasis. The old Museum in Jermyn Street was designed as a centre of research and a school of science. The Survey by its very nature has always been a research department, and has contributed from its personnel many who have taken a lead in founding or directing Geological Surveys in other countries, or have occupied Professorial Chairs in Universities. At the present day no less than seven Chairs in Geology (one Emeritus) in Great Britain are filled by former Survey men. The layout of the new Museum is designed on educative lines, and lectures are frequently given by members of the staff.

Although the improvements in road transport during the last forty years have made the country more generally accessible to the geologist, it is still necessary to do the systematic survey of the ground on foot. Hence modern roads and transport have had little real effect upon accelerating the speed with which reliable maps can be produced, although they have proved their usefulness for flying visits of inspection, in visiting wells and borings, taking photographs and in other minor ways.

Comparatively few people stop to think of the benefits they derive from the work of Government Departments, and still fewer are conscious of any need for gratitude to the Geological Survey; yet the latter touches the lives of the general public at all times far more closely than they realize, through its value to mining, industry, civil engineering, housing, water-supply, agriculture and forestry, and education.

This volume will naturally be read most widely by geological surveyors and others interested in one or other aspect of geology; but it is hoped that it will also appeal to, or at least not be overlooked by, those of the public less directly concerned.

It is the first official history of the Survey to be written, and is long overdue. We are the more grateful, therefore, to Sir John Flett for his most interesting and authentic contribution to geological literature.

The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mr. Hallissy of the Geological Survey, Ireland, for reading the proofs and to Dr. F. J. North for many interesting notes on De la Beche and the early history of the Survey. Many of his colleagues on the staff of the Geological Survey and Museum have given valuable assistance and criticism. Miss E. M. Guppy has prepared the Staff List (Appendix H) and the Index and (with Mr. C. H. Dinham) the lists of those who were present at the Centenary celebrations.

Bernard Smith, Director.

Geological Survey and Museum, Exhibition Road, South Kensington, S.W.7. July, 1936.

Appendix III Bibliography

The sources of information regarding the history of the Geological Survey of Great Britain during the past 100 years are numerous and rather widely scattered. The most authentic, of course, are the official papers preserved by the various Departments under which the Geological Survey has acted. These are in the files of the Ordnance Survey, H.M. Office of Works, Science and Art Department, Board of Education and Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. In the offices of the Geological Survey there is also a considerable collection of letters and official papers (often duplicates) which goes back over many years and often contains very interesting personal memoranda, though many of them are not suitable for publication. The general course of business is best reflected in the Annual Reports of the Director (since 1853) and Summaries of Progress (since 1897), which may be accepted as thoroughly trustworthy. Much additional information may be gleaned from periodicals such as *Nature*, *The Geological Magazine*, *The Mining Journal*, *The Proceedings*, *Transactions* and *The Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society of London*. Many particulars of interest have also been found in the prefaces to the memoirs and other publications of the Geological Survey of Great Britain. A full list of the maps and memoirs of the Geological Survey is published by H.M. Stationery Office at intervals of a few years, and these lists have yielded valuable information regarding the staffs and state of progress of publication at various dates.

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