

Woolhope Club Field Meeting to Bath 10 July 2018: Presidential trip 'In the Footsteps of William Smith'

With the narrow lanes of North Somerset to be negotiated, a minibus was the necessary transport for our tour. Prof. Hugh Torrens, who ably played Roderick Murchison in the Club's DVD about one of its first field meetings, led our tour to some of the key sites in the early career of William Smith, the 'Father of English Geology'



Carefully avoiding both Bath and Bristol, we started our tour at Rugbourn Farm, Smith's earliest base as a land, mineral and canal surveyor from 1791 – 1795 and where the local Jurassic and Triassic geology and the nearby underground coal mines of the North Somerset coalfield first allowed him to formulate his ideas on stratification and the importance of contained fossils.

Excavations for two parallel branches of the Somerset Coal Canal allowed Smith to examine the rock strata from the Triassic to the Middle Jurassic in some detail. From this work, he was able to first write down his 'Law of Strata' on 5th January 1795 at the former Swan Inn at Dunkerton, our final location before lunch at the Wheatsheaf in Combe Hay.

Plate 4: The portrait of William Smith by Hugues Fourau, 1837 was reproduced in the printed Newsletter by courtesy of the Geological Society of London. For reproduction right cost reasons it has been substituted with this silhouette by Samuel Woodward - William "Strata" Smith, Hugh Torrens, Norfolk Museum.

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After lunch under sunny skies we took a short walk to Somerset Coal Canal (SCC) and the site of the Smith's ill-fated work on a hydraulic lift (or caisson). Making this innovative engineering structure water tight was a major problem for Smith and led to his dismissal by SCC in mid 1799. Whilst in the employ of SCC, Smith bought Tucking Mill House in 1797, our next location.

Smith did not live in the pretty cottage down on the Milford road to which a commemorative plaque is attached but in the right hand half of the larger building just up towards the hill (see photo). The group examined the remains of the tramway in the woods on the eastern side of the house. These tracks led down to the canal construction site from the quarries of the Great Oolite (Bath stone) on Combe Down. The soft sandstones with clay layers, the Milford Sands, seen by the party in the woods were the source of the spring water at Tucking Mill. Smith's investment at Tucking Mill was directly responsible; after a series of poor financial

decisions, for him being sent to a debtor's prison in 1819. However, it was in these years that the ideas and fieldwork behind his celebrated geological map took place and it was here in 1815 that he published his first major work "Delineation of the Strata of England".



Plate 5: Tucking Mill House, Smith's residence from 1797- 1819. Photograph taken by Cherry Lewis.

Our final location was in Bath itself at 29 Great Pulteney Street, the residence of a major Smith supporter, Rev. Joseph Townsend. Here Smith dictated to a scribe his "Natural Order of Strata" by now fully developed from his first ideas at Dunkerton. In a day of incorrect plaques, the plaque on this house has the wrong date – it should read June 11 1799!!

Our visit allowed us to see the key sites in Smith's early career. Despite his initial problems with academic recognition and financial straits, he eventually achieved the accolade for his first geological maps and became known as "the Father of English Geology". I would personally like to thank Prof. Torrens for introducing us so well to the man, his works and his achievements.

Dr Paul Olver