

DISTANT THUNDER

Equal opportunities

As geologist and science writer Nina Morgan discovers, when it comes to a universal welcome, the Geologists' Association were pioneers in the field

Right from its foundation in 1858, any and all with an interest in geology—whether professional or amateur—were welcome to join the ranks of the Geologists' Association (GA), irrespective of age, gender or social class. Women and children both featured among the early membership. The youngest to join, one W. Pye, was just 7 when his father gave him a GA Life Membership in 1862.

Along with lectures, or 'indoor meetings', field trips have always been an important GA activity. The first GA field meetings, or 'excursions to places of geological interest', took place in 1860. Three were held in that year, to Folkstone, Maidstone and Charlton, and the GA annual report for 1860 recorded that: "These excursions gave great satisfaction to members." Buoyed up by their success, the GA General Committee then decided to continue organising more.

In his presidential address in 1909, the GA President from 1908 to 1910, Professor William Whitehead Watts [1860-1947] noted that "It is the excursions which mark off the Association from other bodies, attract to it its large membership, form the link between town and country, and knit together its members in closer friendship than is the case in any other institution."

Females in the field

Although the first GA excursions seem to have been attended only by men, they were open to women too. As Professor Thomas Rupert Jones [1819-1911], President of the GA from 1879 to 1881 noted in his opening address to the 1880-1881 session, "Women,

as well as men, can be Geologists as far as their strength for travel, and opportunities among domestic affairs will allow... Doubtless for many ladies it is hard to tramp about on Geological Excursions over rough roads, hillsides, hedges, ditches and seaside rocks wand shingle."

But this, he emphasized was no reason to exclude women from field trips. To accommodate their needs, he suggested: "Let special Excursion-lines be planned so that we may have the pleasure and advantage of female society."

While there is no evidence that the special excursions suggested by Professor Jones were ever carried out, women in the GA soon joined the field trips nevertheless. The first few female GA members were spotted on field excursions as early as 1861. However, women were not commonly seen as participants on GA field trips until 1870. But, said Jones: "Since then they have often graced the outings with their presence."

The GA Carreck archive, a photographic archive coordinated and curated by GA member Marjorie Carreck [1928-2017; GA Archivist from 1955-2010] that documents GA field activities from the 1890s to the present, shows many women—often very fashionably dressed!—examining rocks alongside their male colleagues.

An adornment

Women also played an important role in the GA indoor meetings. "In the Meetings of the Association," Jones noted, "the female element is an adornment and a social pleasure. As in Universities (now-a-days) and Colleges, as in the British Association, and the Archaeological and Social-Science Congresses, so in our Association, how greatly would the scientific meetings and outings lose if the ladies were absent! ...Who requires to be reminded of the intellectual powers and persistent

energy of the well-educated woman? We can readily speak of the Lady Members of the Association as types of good thinking women, able and willing to know about the Earth as the Earth, and to learn from other persons, as well as from books, what has been gathered of such knowledge, and what is being thought of old and new notions thereon. The pleasant influence of ladies at the Meetings is universally felt. Women can attend Geological Meetings without hurt to their sensitiveness. Geology, though one of the most comprehensive, is one of the most plain of Sciences."

Although expressed in language that may seem patronising to modern ears—the GA's early welcome to women was clearly genuine, and as evidenced by its membership profile today, is clearly ongoing.

End notes: Sources for this vignette include: Address at the opening of the session, 1880-81 by Prof. T. Rupert Jones *Proc. Geol. Assoc.* 7 pp 1 & 43-44; G.S. Sweeting, *The Geologists Association – 1858-1958*, Benham and Company Ltd, 1958; Norman Carreck, Marjorie Carreck, *GA Magazine*, 16, no 4, 2017, pp. 30-31; The Carreck Archive is available at <https://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/geologyOfBritain/archives/GeologistsAssociation/>



Photograph digitised from the Geologists' Association Carreck Archive, reproduced with permission of the British Geological Survey

* **Nina Morgan** is a geologist and science writer based near Oxford. Her latest book, *The Geology of Oxford Gravestones*, is available via www.gravestonegeology.uk