

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

### THE SOCIETY AND THE MUSEUM

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After considering whether a talk should be given on an archaeological subject or about ancient monuments in the County which are in the charge of the Ministry of Public Building and Works, I decided to give a short resumé of the history of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society with the formation and growth of the County Museum.

The published volumes of the *Proceedings* of the Society show the high standard in archaeology and natural history set by the past presidents — such names as Sir William Boyd Dawkins, Professor Haverfield, Sir Charles Peers, among other leading antiquaries of their day — and I do not feel that I can attain such eminence!

The Society is not of great antiquity, but resulted from the upsurge of antiquarian interest in the middle of the 19th century, which saw the birth of many county archaeological societies. In 1849 several gentlemen of Taunton and neighbourhood decided to form a society to study the antiquities and natural history of the area, and it was also agreed that this proposed society should cover the whole county and not only West Somerset. A meeting was convened of those interested and was held at the Market House, Taunton, on the 20th September, 1849. Three hundred and fifty persons attended — a large number considering the difficulties of transport. Sir Walter Trevelyan was elected the first president and, in his address, he stated that among the first objects in the formation of this Society would be the setting up of a library and a museum; for as yet there was no regular meeting place, nor did the Society have any official headquarters.

This was an unsatisfactory position, but in the following year, 1850, arrangements were made whereby the new Society rented a large room in the premises of the Somerset and Taunton Literary Institution in the New Market Place (later the Victoria Rooms) in Fore Street. In this room meetings could be held and the nucleus of the museum housed. For this accommodation the Society contributed the sum of £50 per annum. The membership soon rose in number to three hundred. The first curator was an official of the Literary Institution named Baker. His salary even for the middle of the 19th century was poor, about £20 per annum, and he soon got into financial difficulties. He borrowed from the subscriptions, and, this being quickly discovered, he was asked to resign. There was a small natural history collection owned by him and this was sold to cover the deficiency.

Somerset is a long county of considerable size having its two major towns at the north-east corner (Bath and Bristol) and the County Town (Taunton) in the west. Wells, the cathedral city, though situated in the centre of the county, has always been difficult

of access. Lest any part of the county should seem to be neglected, it was first of all decided to hold four meetings a year each in a different locality but this was soon found to be impracticable and two meetings a year were called, one being the anniversary meeting, the other connected with the summer excursion, both of these being held within the area of the county.

After the departure of Mr. Baker it was found difficult to obtain a successor, but in 1862 Mr. William Bidgood was appointed. He was a natural historian; and it can be said that he was the true founder of the Museum and Library, being secretary of the Society from 1862 until his death in 1900.

It is evident that in 1862 the Society was not in a healthy state; no volume was published and there were fewer people attending the conversazione. The question of accommodation in the museum was a difficulty and it was ruled that only local finds could be accepted. The Committee of the Society were searching for premises, which could be bought both to house the museum and library and to be the headquarters for the administration of the Society. The Castle, then in a derelict condition, was up for sale. At the Annual General Meeting in 1872 held in the Great Hall here, Mr. G. T. Clark gave a paper on the history of the Castle and its buildings and afterwards members were shown round the site. This was a shrewd move as it enabled the Committee to stimulate enthusiasm for the purchase of the property. The site, including Castle Lodge, was offered to the Committee for £3,000, which by modern standards was a more than reasonable price even taking into account the depreciation in the value of the pound. (Within recent years it has cost £4,000 to keep the roof of the Great Hall watertight). It was decided to raise part of this sum by public subscription and to cover the remainder by a loan from Stuckeys Bank, now the Westminster Bank. Mr. Clark's description of the site is of interest and the drawings of the standing remains made by Mr. Bidgood to illustrate it are of particular importance; but historically this description contains major errors, such as the statement that the castle was found by King Ina, which is now known to be incorrect. Furthermore, Mr. Clark was concerned by the fact that there was no visible castle mound or motte, but since that time excavations carried out by Mr. St. George Gray within the bailey of the castle have revealed a rectangular mound, defended by a stone revetted wall, which was presumably surmounted by a timber structure. This site was not utilized before the late 12th century and this would seem to be the site of the Keep or Tower. The 18th-century Gothick windows are a feature of the Castle and were inserted when the Castle was converted for use as Judges' Lodging during the Assizes to give adequate accommodation for the High Court judges.

In order to save expense the Committee of the Society at first decided to carry out the alterations without the supervision of an

architect; but this proved to be quite impracticable and a local architect, Mr. Ferrey, and a small advisory committee were appointed. The next step, but only a small one, was to raise the annual subscription from ten shillings to ten shillings and sixpence per annum.

Meanwhile the Society itself was flourishing and some of the minutes of the Council meetings provided light relief. It is recorded, for instance, that Dulverton was once considered as a headquarters for a Summer Meeting. Even now it is an area which cannot provide adequate accommodation for a large party. It was in those days more difficult of access and it was suggested that tents might be used to house members of both sexes. This meant that Dulverton was not chosen — in the late 19th century ‘camping’ under canvas was not the usual method of enjoyment!

At this period the country as a whole was starting to realise that it was losing its archaeological heritage and preparations were being made for implementing the Ancient Monuments Act of 1882. This Act contains lists of prehistoric sites whose preservation is essential. This went further than the later scheduling powers; the sites chosen were mainly of first-class importance, access was not granted but charge of the sites was placed in the hands of the First Commissioner of Works. General Pitt Rivers, who was Inspector of Ancient Monuments, was responsible for drawing up these lists and he asked the local county societies to supply him with names of sites in the county which were considered to be of sufficient importance. Also, a body called the Archaeological Societies of Great Britain (now succeeded by the Council for British Archaeology) suggested that models should be made of prehistoric sites and financial grants made for that purpose. This, however, was never accomplished; the staff was too small and fully occupied with the museum to take any outside work.

In 1893 the purchase of the Castle site was nearly completed, the debt standing at only five guineas.

Mr. Bidgood died in 1900, after a long illness, and the Society was faced once again with choosing a worthy successor, while only being able to offer a very inadequate salary. At the time one of the assistants at the Pitt Rivers Museum was a young man called Harold St. George Gray. Fortunately for the Society he accepted the post at Taunton, when it was offered to him in 1901, and became a well-known, if not famous, provincial curator and archaeologist.

The Castle building at the time was rather different in its layout from that of the present day. The entry to the Inner Bailey was the same, though at the beginning the pleasant house on the right-hand side was privately occupied. The entrance to the Museum was through the “Norman” door on the left and the present entrance block in front of the Great Hall and the William Wyndham Gallery, which now houses the archaeological collection and the laboratory, did not exist. The buildings which were available for the use of museum and library were indeed circumscribed. While the museum

collection was being reorganized, work was proceeding on adapting the Castle buildings for museum purposes. When the restoration of the great Hall was completed, the geological section, which was large and important, was housed there.

Mr. Gray came to the post full of youth and energy, determined to make the museum of outstanding importance in the south-west of Britain, a task in which he succeeded. His first undertaking was to catalogue and classify the objects and in 1902 it is recorded that all specimens in the museum were cleaned, preservatives being applied and repairs effected where necessary. A large proportion of the objects were ticketed in white oil paint; others were written on in indelible ink; neatly printed labels were glued on to all fragments of pottery, while other specimens were found better adapted for tie-on labels. Later curators will remember these markings.

Staff salaries were still quite inadequate but slowly improving. In 1900 the Curator's salary was improved by an annual increment of £30, which continued up to the first World War, but this could not be called exorbitant as it only started at a figure of £105.

As St. George Gray had worked with the foremost field archaeologist and excavator of the 19th century (General Pitt Rivers), he embarked on a series of important excavations on sites in the south-west and one of his earliest excavations was at Castle Neroche in the south-west of the County. Although Mr. Davison, who excavated this site recently, does not absolutely agree with Mr. Gray's conclusions, yet he found the previous excavator's accurate plans and sections of the greatest assistance. During the years before the first World War there is scarcely a volume of *Proceedings* published without a report on work carried out on a site by the Curator, and this activity in the field was followed up by an increase in objects designated for the Museum. Mr. Gray was also co-excavator with Dr. Bulleid of the late Iron Age village settlement near Glastonbury. In 1913 he carried out trial excavations at Cadbury Castle, South Cadbury, a site which is now the subject of research. These are among many important sites in Somerset which prior to the first World War St. George Gray excavated and on which, furthermore, he published reports in our *Proceedings*. It may well be that archaeologists were not so tied down by paper work in that generation; for it would appear that he and others kept up-to-date with publications better than we do nowadays. At that time, in the early years of the century, with Castle House still privately occupied, it was necessary to house the Curator within the Museum buildings, a flat being formed by using the rooms which are now the Library on the 1st floor and the rooms on the ground floor as kitchen and other offices. The Grays had the services of one maid. It was not long before there were complaints that the accommodation was inconvenient, cramped and insanitary. However, fortunately the occupation of Castle House lapsed and the Grays took up residence and lived there until his retirement.

The war itself was remote and had little effect on the Society or the Museum, except that the number of members dropped slightly, but the economic effects after the war were a different matter. In 1920 the membership of the Society had risen to over a thousand, but costs increased correspondingly and the subscription per annum was increased for new members to twenty-one shillings.

In 1921 the Wyndham Trust was formed by the munificence of the late William Wyndham for lectures on archaeology and anthropology to be delivered to schools in Taunton, but it was not until 1927 that the lecture hall was erected in the Castle grounds, which could be used not only for these lectures, but also by the Society and other bodies. This hall has been of great use especially as the only available room up to that period was the Somerset Room, on the first floor, which houses part of the Museum collection. Excavations in the twenties were mainly under the guidance of Mr. St. George Gray; Mr. Bligh Bond carried out further work at Glastonbury Abbey, but otherwise research was covered by bodies outside the County archaeological society.

In 1931, again through the munificence of Mr. William Wyndham, the first modern addition was made to the Museum buildings. This consisted of a small block on the courtyard elevation of the Great Hall, and was designed to house a new entrance hall on the ground floor with a museum of by-gones on the floor above. Within the next few years the Wyndham Galleries were added at the east end of the Great Hall.

The second World War made more of an impact on the life of the Museum especially when the staff were taken for National Service and fuel became rationed.

In 1949 Mr. St. George Gray retired, his place being taken by Mr. W. H. Seaby (now Director of the Ulster Museum) who in turn was succeeded by Mr. R. C. Sansome, the present Keeper. The Wyndham Gallery was extended during the 1950's but, although this temporarily relieved the pressure on museum accommodation, further additions are now urgently required in order that the Museum may be kept up to first class standards.