

## DISTANT THUNDER

## Soldiering on

### Geologist and science writer Nina Morgan considers the advantages of a daily commute

For those of us ‘wage slaves’, the commute to work can seem like just another part of the daily grind. But for the geologist William Lonsdale [1794-1971] a daily commute offered an ideal opportunity for fossil hunting and a chance to advance his geological studies.

Born in Bath, at the age of 16, Lonsdale obtained a commission in 1810 as an ensign in the 4<sup>th</sup> King’s Own Regiment and went on to serve in the battles of Salamanca and Waterloo. In around 1815, after his battalion was reduced, Lonsdale found himself unexpectedly placed on half-pay. So, he left the army and went to live with his mother at Batheaston, a village east of Bath.

While visiting the library in Bath, he overheard a conversation between two ladies who were discussing a fossil that had been found in the neighbourhood. For Lonsdale, geologically speaking, the rest is

history. Intrigued by what he had overheard, he decided to become a geologist.

### Hammer

In 1825, Roderick Murchison [1792-1871] was so impressed on meeting Lonsdale, who he described as an “all grave man, with a huge hammer on his shoulder”, that he interrupted a 9-week geological tour along the south coast to “stay some days in Bath under his [Lonsdale’s] guidance”.

That same year, Lonsdale was appointed as the first honorary curator of the newly formed Bath Literary and Scientific Institution. He travelled daily to his new job from Batheaston on foot, a round trip of around 6 miles, and took advantage of the commute to collect fossils and study the local geology.

As W. S. Mitchell, writing about Bath Geologists in 1873 in the Proceedings of the Bath Natural History Club revealed:

“I have been told by three or four people who knew him that he used to walk in from Batheaston to the Institution quite early in the morning, when light permitted, often as early as six o’clock, and that he would steadily work the whole day through with no voluntary interruption whatever, not even for refreshment, a few biscuits

while at work being all that he required till he returned to his home in the evening.”

Lonsdale turned out to be a prolific fossil collector, donating over 1,000 specimens to the Bath Museum, and, Mitchell continues,

his curatorial work also received accolades:

“His catalogues of our Museum, apart from their scientific value, are well worth of inspection as probably unrivalled specimens of neat and methodical work. Of all the catalogues of different museums which I have seen I do not recollect one which could be in any way considered superior in these respects”.

### Headhunted

Lonsdale was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society in 1829 and, reports Mitchell, was soon lured away:

“Unfortunately for Bath, he was so well known as an energetic and painstaking curator that he was appointed curator and librarian of the Geological Society of London...”

While at the Geological Society, Lonsdale became known both for his editorial skills and his geological studies. As well as presenting papers and mapping boundaries of various formations on the new one-inch ordnance maps, he became an authority on corals. His work on the fossils of the South Devon limestones led him to suggest, in 1837, that they must be of an age intermediate between the Carboniferous and Silurian systems. This suggestion was adopted by Adam Sedgwick [1785 – 1873] and Murchison in 1839, and played an important role in the founding of the Devonian system.

### Going to ground

After 13 years in London, Lonsdale resigned this post in 1842 due to ill health, and returned to continue his

geological studies in the west of England—with apparently no fixed address. After his retirement, notes Mitchell:

“It was frequently impossible without great difficulty for his Geological friends to know how to communicate with him. For many years previous to his death his name appeared in the list of the Geological Society without any address attached to it, and he frequently changed his place of abode.”

The last recorded ‘geological’ sighting of Lonsdale took place at the time of the British Association meeting held in 1864, when Murchison reported visiting Lonsdale in Bristol. Lonsdale died in Bristol in 1871, described by one of his relatives as one who “worked hard for Geology, but with us was the old soldier to the last.”

### ► Acknowledgement

Sources include: The 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica entry for William Lonsdale by Henry Woodward; the DNB Entry for Lonsdale by Stella Whyberd Pierce; The Life of R.I. Murchison by Archibald Geikie; Notes on early geologists connected with the neighbourhood of Bath by W.W. Mitchell, *Proceedings of the Bath Natural History And Antiquarian Field Club*, 2, (1872), pp. 303-341. Lonsdale will feature in a meeting highlighting the geology of south west Britain taking place at BRLSI on 18/19 September 2018. For more information see: [www.geocurator.org](http://www.geocurator.org)

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