

Future of the Geological Society - 3
Geological Society Chief Executive
19 April 2023 at the University Women's Club, Audley Sq.

The Discussion was introduced by Chief Executive, Simon Thompson

Simon joined the Society in November 2022, prior to which he had worked in the private sector, in online information and publishing for 20 years, both in marketing and general management roles, then ran his own marketing research agency for five years, and was Chief Executive of a medical society before joining the GSL.

It is often useful to be aware of historical stories which relate to an organisation, and one that will relate to the Discussion Group perhaps, concerns William Henry Fitton (1780-1861), an Irish physician and amateur geologist who became President of the Society from 1827 to 1829. In 1820, having married a lady of means, Fitton settled in London, and devoted himself to geology, studying the Upper and Lower Greensand succession. Famously, his house then became a meeting place for scientific workers, and during his presidency he held a *conversazione* on Sunday evenings which was open to all fellows of the Society. His house must have been an impressive size!

The founders came primarily from medical and chemical backgrounds and one of Simon's priorities is to invest in cutting edge database technology and digital communications to be able to communicate with members on a more individual basis, and to signpost members to information of more specific interest; he hopes to apply a more useful service and help members make more informed decisions.

One of the most significant metrics is that 1.2 million papers are downloaded by our journal users, 70,000 papers are downloaded from the online library, and the Society facilitate over 100 scientific meetings every year. People want information that is easy to find and navigate, and for it to be engaging and interesting.

According to a recent survey, not yet considered by Council, the most important member benefits are online to the journals, library information service, and the book collection and conferences. Geoscientist magazine is actually the top of the list which indicates that members prefer information that is curated for them. Making all this easy information to navigate is a key priority and last year we moved our online access to a new platform, and perhaps artificial intelligence (AI) will make all this more useful still – although there is rightly considerable scepticism on this topic at present!

The Lyell Collection is one of the largest collections of online scientific material in the world with highly respected information, and there will be a paper discussed by Council soon for a digital conference to discuss a number of new technologies potentially useful to organisations like the Society and develop a genuine geoscience community. We are also expecting online training income will replace that lost from traditional publishing as it moves towards more open access journals.

Academics value fellowship but tend not to need chartership nearly as much as practitioners. They have access to journals through their university of course, so they are not so dependent on their GSL login. A membership strategy review is underway to learn how we can provide more value to academic members; one idea being considered is to have an annual conference for researchers which will be free to those with GSL membership. We are also considering major conferences on each of our strategic science themes and activating a fund which we once deployed to support early career researchers.

Making the Society easily accessible to everyone, irrespective of location and circumstances will be a running theme and it looks as though online conferences are here to stay, although in person conferences will still remain. Online removes the need for travel, accommodation and childcare etc. In a recent survey, members rates online conferences valuable to 70% of members, which was higher than in person or hybrid conferences. In addition, recording lectures will enable the Society to build an online library of video content which will be accessible on demand. Online conferences also allow us to build international audience, supporting colleagues in low-income countries.

The number of applicants to study university has declined in recent years, which is entirely at odds with the strategic demands for metals in the world, yet study of geology has a romance to it which few other subjects can compete with and tells an epic story. It drove the industrial age, sparked innovation, and provided solutions for sustainability and energy. We need to grow the Society but also to inspire young people to pursue geoscience as a career, and this requires more support for secondary teachers.

Fortunately, there is a large number of people willing to help out to support and develop the Society, and it would be useful to learn more from this meeting about how we can discuss how it can develop.

Discussion

A member recalled that after starting work in the N Sea in the early 1980s, through mudlogging, pore pressure engineering, wellsite geology and monitoring geological operations in many different countries, he had met not a single member of this practitioner community who was a GSL Fellow.

The majority of the oil & gas industry appeared never to have had a requirement for professional recognition at all, selection for roles depended solely on a CV and he wondered if this situation still existed today? As far as members present were concerned, only one international oil & gas company had applied any encouragement on its geoscientists to gain professional recognition, and hence did have some form of internal regulation.

The geotechnical / engineering geology members, however, had found that throughout their careers, becoming chartered was vital for promotion and career development. Whether this support was based on the concept of professional ethics or solely on the status of Chartered staff was not clear, but at least that sector had a clear definition of internal professional regulation. The mining sector was even more tightly regulated, as recent chartership reviews had shown.

Outside of the geotechnical sector, the question of what did spark interest in joining the Society in the first instance?

By contrast, it used to be common for a London lecturer at least to ensure that his students came along to Society meetings, but clearly this trend had long ago disappeared! It was the place to go to listen to some of the great names in the science at the time. Bernard Leake was a great supporter of the Society in this respect!

One member had joined the hydrocarbon sector about 20 yrs ago, long after graduating, but afterwards realised that she had a need for an extensive library service.

Another member had joined the Society while still an A-level student because he felt that was the best way forward and was clearly an organisation that was of value to thousands of members.

In more recent times, those coming into university were entering in an era where geology has changed into earth sciences, and attracts people from a much wider background than in the past. The

challenge for the Society, therefore, is to make itself more relevant to this wider spectrum and perhaps provide more collaborative events with other organisations, say the Royal Society of Chemistry, to cater for a much wider range of subdisciplines within traditional earth science?

Making our information much more available and searchable is a key need going forward to encourage membership from the materials and biological science sectors. We need to make our information much more easily available AND searchable.

The idea of supporting school teachers more was welcomed, schools more specifically seemed appropriate as well as providing more cross-disciplinary topics, particularly in-person meetings.

One member had joined the GA as a 16-year-old because it welcomed amateurs, and only subsequently joined the Society after employment for career advancement, because as an engineering geologist, one did not progress unless one was chartered. The same thing happened in Hong Kong.

There is no single solution for the GSL to attract members, but we should be able to promote learning from one another through networking environments.

The question of the detailed membership census data was raised because many people present would have filled in forms in the past providing such background data on their interests, sector etc. Will this be a relevant guide for the future? There had been about a 20% response rate in previous surveys and this was considered very satisfactory, but this data was not in a customer relationship management (CRM) system - the technology used to manage interactions with members/ customers; it allows much more specific interaction with members. It is planned to introduce a CRM system next year. It was already known that many of the contact information about the Society's Specialist Groups is long out of date.

A much wider sliding scale of fees was felt to be much more relevant today than it has been in the past, particularly for those taking career breaks and those on lower incomes who would no doubt find it impossible to come to Discussion Group dinners! It was interesting to reflect on the Society's past where one was almost guaranteed to meet the 'movers and shakers' at its events. It would be enormously enjoyable to getting back to direct conversation within our subject would be very attractive, outside the main conferences.

The question of what the Society was doing on policy engagement arose - are we active or responsive? It is somewhat reactive at present with no dominant policy strategy to pursue, but frequent Government changes of responsibility have not helped (The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has now split into separate Business, Energy and Science ministries).

The past Institution of Civil Engineers technique of discussing key issues under Chatham House rules at a private dinner with senior civil servants and Ministers of State, was felt to be highly effective. It was noted that the Critical Minerals Association group regularly used the GSL for its meetings.

Is there any form of strategy to say we are the GSL and wish to talk to the mineral industries. We do have memoranda of understanding with a number of international groups, although with larger mining industries in Canada and Australia, policy is dictated by each State, not federally.

Simon mentioned that in his past roles, he had in fact been involved in setting up some worldwide collaborative networks, invited peer organisations around the globe to form an information network

which distributed information to solidify the relationship, and provided joint publications, as part of a 3-year strategy. The key thing is to work out what one actually wants from an international relationship. The obvious question was whether the Society can define a possible relationship group based on our own Council defined strategic themes?

The important point about this type of network was that it was possible to create partnerships by virtual networking, without travelling. A recent example in the geotechnical sector where over 800 people across Europe attended a virtual seminar organised by the BGA.

There has been a very significant change over the past 4 years, pre and post Covid, for those applying for geology degrees; students that were once interesting in heading for jobs in oil & gas or mining, are now overwhelmingly focussed on climate change. How do we attract this cadre? This is a serious point as far as the future of the Society is concerned. Attitudes have indeed change radically in a short time as reflected in change of name of 'geology' Departments.

And that leads on to how well the GSL's Specialist Groups relate to this change of focus. Which Specialist Group will they be attracted to? The outlook and expectations of the next generation will be totally different. Will they see the GSL as still relevant? How do we ask what 'space' they need and how do we provide that space? We have a new Director of Science Engagement who will be picking up these themes. Our major conferences define our dominant themes and if run online, with no catering or accommodation required, these can be run quite cheaply. But young people need face-to-face as well to demonstrate their projects at the end of an MSc for example.

The other topic, not so far discussed, is Burlington House. Within the next 18 months a decision needs to be made whether we stay or go, so a twin track approach is being pursued; being more active lobbying Government along with the other Courtyard societies and the Parliamentary supporters' group which met in December, and also become more actively considering what leaving BH would mean. BH is owned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), headed up my Michael Gove - formerly the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Baroness Scott is the Minister responsible for BH met with the GSL President (Ruth Allington), Simon Thompson and the Society's Archivist, and the presidents or CEOs of the other Courtyard societies, including tours of the Antiquarians and Linnaean societies, both full of treasures. The meeting concluded with the statement that the Govt. would come back with a substantially different proposal and a further meeting with Baroness Scott is planned very soon, on 3 May.

This news was gratifying but the point was made that if this situation occurred in any other country in Europe, it would be vigorously defended at all costs, not discarded. Italy, for example, has nothing like these societies and much is the same for the rest of Europe, they are intellectual gems with Royal Charters, and this point has been made vigorously. Was there any likelihood of Royal support for out efforts? Who might we contact?

In addition, the Society will be looking in more detail about its actual requirements, for example, how strong the floor of the map room will have to be, the temperature control for our archives, to fully cost it to more, with a team of heritage specialists. If we have to move outside central London next year, we would be committed for about another 7 years.

John Bennett