

Anniversaries

BAAS 1st female members 170 years ago



“What is strange, there is generally almost as many ladies as gentlemen present”

Martina Kölbl-Ebert (GERMANY)

In the early nineteenth century, geology was a fashionable science in Britain, widely discussed in polite society, and flourishing as a private interest in the leisured classes. In this not-yet-professionalised scientific community, women were welcomed – within the restrictions of the social order – as fellow enthusiasts and often encouraged by leading scientists. Very few of these women geologists, however, aspired to public recognition. The prevailing pattern consisted of women who acted as amanuenses to husbands and brothers or to unrelated male geologists. British women were especially important as collectors of fossils and as field geologists, as taxonomic palaeontologists, as scientific draughtswomen and landscape painters, and as popularisers of science (Kölbl-Ebert 2002, 2007, 2012, Larsen 2017).

During the early nineteenth century up to the 1840s, female participation in geology was favoured for several reasons: a comparatively late professionalisation of geology required an informal workforce to help the typical gentleman geologist, and British women were able to address this demand because a relatively liberal gender model in Britain, in combination with an uncomplicated fashion in clothes, met with the early onset of industrialisation that freed women of a higher social standing from their former, traditional household duties. Thus, a unique window of opportunity, framed by a singular combination of gender relations, social status, science politics, general economy and female fashion, allowed British women a certain measure of participation in the new and exciting science (Kölbl-Ebert 2007).

Informal geological education for these women was available through private tuition, books or public lectures at the Royal Institution in London. Access to a full geological education via universities, public libraries or membership in scientific societies, however, was largely denied to women.

Women interested in geology were also able to attend the annual meetings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), founded in 1831, although in the 1830s not without obstacles as the organizers feared that the presence of women would degrade the scientific level of the conferences (Patterson 1983: 92). The purpose of the BAAS was to aid in the promotion and development of science, thus it scheduled its annual meetings all over the UK and included social events to the scientific sessions to increase the popularity of the endeavour.

Already at the first BAAS meeting 1831 in York, geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1875) counted: “A hundred and fifty ladies, and many of rank, at the evening discussions, [which] must also have ‘popularised’ scientific pursuits” (Lyell 1881, vol. 1: 350–351).

At the second meeting in Oxford 1832, palaeontologist Rev. William Buckland (1784–1856) worried that women attending scientific sessions might “at once turn the thing into a sort of Albemarle-dilettanti-meeting [i.e. like the Royal Institution], instead of a serious philosophical union of working men (letter by William Buckland to Roderick Murchison,

March 1832; quoted after Patterson 1983: 92). But after the Oxford meeting, it was agreed “that the presence of the ladies had probably contributed significantly to the high tone and dignified respectability which had distinguished the proceedings” (Phillips 1990: 202). And notwithstanding his initial repulse, William Buckland liberally included women in his activities at the meeting, taking them on fieldtrips as well.

The meetings became ever more attractive for women, who still, of course, needed a chaperone in the person of their husband, brother or father if they wanted to attend.

In Cambridge (1833), women were so numerous that the space reserved for ladies was completely insufficient, and so men (true gentlemen) were required to give up their seats (Phillips 1990: 202). Initially, it was planned to restrict women to more popular evening lectures, fieldtrips and exhibitions. Business meetings, however, and specialist scientific sections were deemed out of bounds. Nevertheless, quite a number of the men organizing or simply attending the meetings sympathized with the women’s wish to savour it all, and so the occasional lady was smuggled clandestinely into the sessions (Phillips 1990: 202–203; Higgitt & Withers 2008: 7).

In 1834, in Edinburgh, the organizers tried to distract female curiosity with social gatherings and evening parties. The ladies however, preferred the lecture theatres – actually outnumbering the men and forcing them to stand along the walls and in corridors (Phillips 1990: 203–204).

In 1836, in Bristol, an attempt was made to sell seats in advance and the ladies were dismissed under the pretext that all seats were already taken. But as Caroline Fox (1819–1871) reported in her Diary with considerable satisfaction: “the ladies, dear creatures, would not hear of that, so by most extraordinary muscular exertions, we succeeded in gaining admittance” (quoted after Phillips 1990: 204).

But still they were at the mercy of male arrogance: Roderick Murchison (1792–1871) before the seventh BAAS meeting in 1837 at Liverpool grumbled: “Men of intellect can employ themselves better than teaching women how to begin science” (Geikie 1875, vol. 2: 174). Nevertheless, this was exactly what he did (Fig. 1):

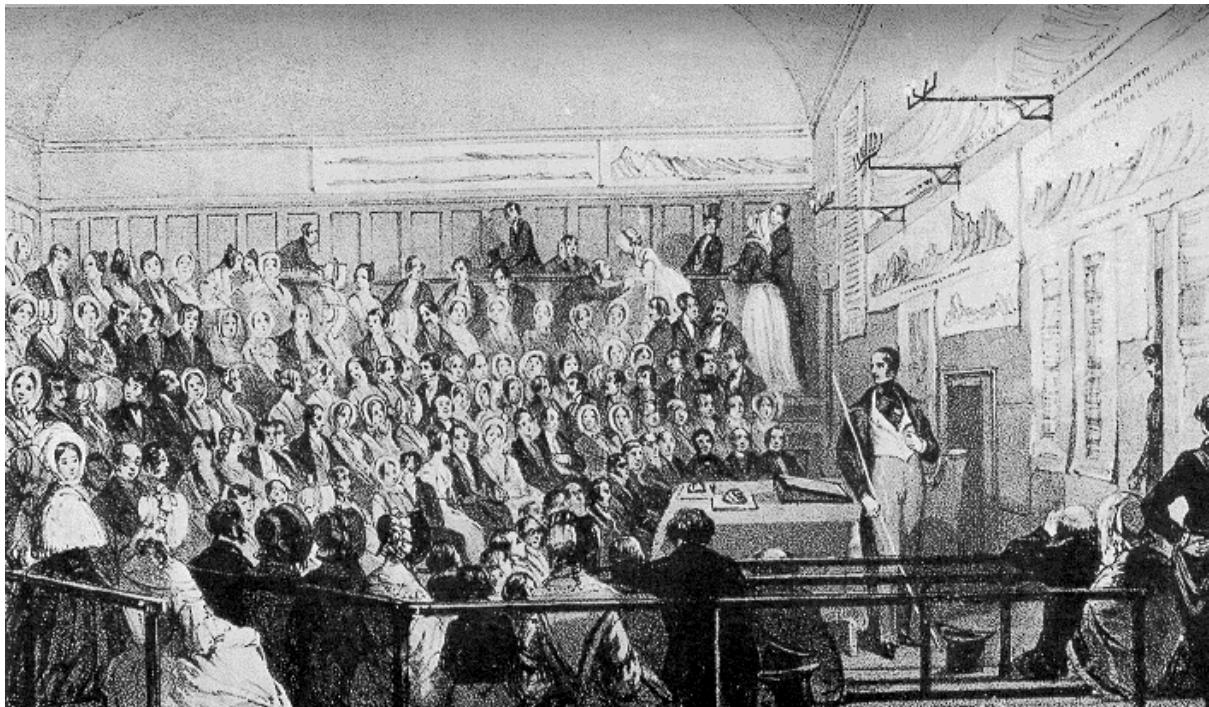


Fig. 1: Lecture by Roderick Murchison at the 1842 BAAS meeting in Manchester with 44% women in the audience (image from Heywood 1843).

The Chambers' Edinburgh Journal reported that at the 1844 BAAS meeting in York, the geology section was the most popular: "The great writers in the science are always present; hence curiosity: then the comparative intelligibility and popular interest of the subject is attractive. What is strange, there is generally almost as many ladies as gentlemen present" (quoted after Gillispie 1959: 187).

The presence of women at the BAAS meetings was also of great financial interest. Whereas at the beginnings it was feared that the women might eat more than their male hosts had actually paid for them, from the 1840s onwards Ladies' Tickets at £1 each became an important source of the BAAS' annual income (Higgitt & Withers 2008: 7–8).

Around 1846–47, palaeontologist and stratigrapher Barbara Marchioness of Hastings (1810–58), her high social position ensuring a reasonable reception among her male colleagues, first tried to insert her geological description of the Eocene Hordle Cliff (near Milford, UK), where her spectacular fossil vertebrate finds came from, into presentations by her co-worker Richard Owen (1804–1892): "Are you going to lecture at Oxford on our Hordle cliff – for I thought of draw[ing] up a short acc[oun]t of the section of the cliff. & the position in wh. the crocodile & tortoise were found, wh. is very remarkable, & wh. you would embody – in your lecture" (letter by Barbara Hastings to Richard Owen, undated, NHM, OC62/vol.14/394–5).

But she was then able to present a short paper under her own name in the geology session at the 1847 Oxford meeting of the BAAS. However, the paper had to be read by the session's (male) secretary on her behalf, since it was considered inappropriate for a lady to exhibit herself in such a manner (Kölbl-Ebert 2004). She subsequently published the paper independently (Hastings 1853).

Finally, in September 1853, the first female members were admitted to the BAAS, causing Barbara Hastings to report in a letter to Richard Owen with notable triumph and two exclamation marks: "I hope you know I am one of you now, being elected a Life member!!" (letter by Barbara Hastings to Richard Owen, undated, NHM, OC62/vol.14/390–1).

Whereas Hastings was now finally able to attend the meetings of the BAAS in her own right and not just as a guest brought on site by a male chaperone, she was, however, continuously excluded from the Geological Society of London or from Owen's lectures held at the Royal College of Surgeons. She therefore had to ask Owen for notes to his lectures and consequently felt excluded from the palaeontological community: "I do so sadly want to know my dear Mr Owen how the introduction of my Hyopotamus went off – what Buckland said &c.... &.... Do try & find a spare moment in wh. to tell me" (letter by Barbara Hastings to Richard Owen, undated, NHM, OC62/vol.14/352).

By the 1850s, science in Britain became increasingly professionalised and women, who were still confined to the realm of the scientific amateur, were finding it harder to get their research noticed and published (Gates 1998: 3). Pervasive professionalisation of geology in the second half of the nineteenth century rendered the female amanuensis of previous decades obsolete, and it took some time before the first professional female geologists became available after university education was opened to women (for the "Red Brick" universities in 1876). By then, women often were regarded as unwelcome competitors, and it needed the suffragette movement, World War I and the ensuing anti-discrimination laws to force, e.g. the Geological Society in London to finally admit women as Fellows in 1919 (Kölbl-Ebert 2020).

Further Reading

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