

The Manchester Geographical Society 1884—1979

An Historical Summary

Myee D. Leigh

The Society was founded on 15 October 1884 in a period of colonial and commercial expansion by a group of Manchester businessmen who hoped it would benefit the trading interests of the city. They chose the date carefully to take advantage of the publicity caused by H.M. Stanley's lecture on Central Africa and the Congo on 21 October in the Free Trade Hall. They elected Officers and Council and appointed Eli Sowerbutts as Secretary.

1884—1904 The Eli Sowerbutts era

Lectures were immediately organised and attracted large audiences. They were given by explorers, travellers and missionaries. At first most of the lectures were about Africa and the Far East but by 1899 the programme had become more balanced and subjects of a scientific nature were included. A 68-page Journal was produced in under three months. Thereafter it was published quarterly until after the 1914-18 war when it was reduced to a single annual volume. It maintained a high standard with, like the lectures, considerable emphasis on Africa and the Far East and provides a useful source of information for research. Indeed, the Society still receives occasional requests from African and other institutions for photocopies of specific articles in these early volumes.

Immediately after his appointment Sowerbutts arranged the exchange of Journals with foreign Geographical Societies and appointed Corresponding Members all over the world. Material from these sources was used to form the basis for discussion meetings which were much less formal than the lectures and the regular attenders became an inner circle within the Society, called the 'Victorians'. They compiled and published summaries of the many magazines that poured into the Society's Office; they prepared charts and lantern slides. They formed themselves into a lecture panel (which still functions in 1979) and these lectures were so popular that in the winter of 1894-95 'the Victorians' arranged ninety-four lectures, sending speakers as far afield as Liverpool and Hull, Tenby and Newcastle.

By 1888 excursions had become an established feature of the summer. These included works visits, visits to places of general interest and, increasingly as the years went by, excursions to study the physical and human geography of the district. The highlights were the trips abroad — to Paris (where the party was received by the President of the

Republic), to Italy, Germany, France and the United States. When abroad, members "carried letters of introduction to similar institutions which invariably led to most courteous receptions." Although members took these excursions very seriously the social side was as important as the geographical and, indeed, they were described by the frivolous as 'Sowerbutts' Picnics'. In this connection it should be noted that the Society has always had a strong social life which has proved valuable to members.

When it was first formed the Society had no President (because the Council did not believe in setting its sights too low) until the Duke of Devonshire accepted this office. He was followed in 1892 by the Duke of York who, becoming King in 1910, consented to be the Society's Patron "and ever since, the Society has been privileged with this honour from the reigning monarch." The Council then decided that, in future, the office of President should be held by active members of the Society.

The Council soon joined in the campaign that the Royal Geographical Society had been conducting since the 1860's to improve geographical education and to gain the recognition of Geography as an academic subject in the universities. It enquired into the teaching of Geography in Manchester schools and organised, with the Royal Geographical Society, an exhibition of Geographical Educational Appliances followed by a course of seventeen lectures on Geographical Education. The Council put pressure on all the appropriate authorities and kept in contact not only with the Royal but also with the Royal Scottish and Tyneside Societies and with the Geographical Association after its formation in 1893. In 1891 H. Yule Oldham was appointed Lecturer in Owens College, the Society and the Royal each paying £50 per annum towards his stipend and the College paying the remainder. This financial arrangement continued when A.J. Herbertson became the Lecturer.

Meanwhile, after twelve journeys to see Continental commercial museums, Sowerbutts and the Rev. L.C. Casartelli established a Commercial and Geographical Museum in 1901. It became a varied collection and when it was dispersed in the latter half of the century most of its items were accepted by well-known museums.

The Society's premises had been the top three floors of a building in St Mary's Parsonage but the lease was due to expire in December 1900. After prolonged negotiations the Dean and Chapter of Manchester Cathedral granted a lease of the site for 999 years on condition that the Society erected a new building with a letting value of two to three times the amount of the ground rent. The estimated cost was £10,000. To raise this the Manchester Geographical Society Building Company was floated with shares of £10 each and members were urged to buy as many as possible. A public appeal was launched with gratifying results and by 1904 the £8,500 contract was given to Messrs Wilson and Toft just before the death of the man who had been the prime mover and inspirational genius of the Society for 20 years — Eli Sowerbutts.

1905—1919 The Harry Sowerbutts era

To meet the emergency caused by the loss of the chief executive officer when demolition and rebuilding were imminent the Council set up an Executive Committee with Eli's second son, Harry, as Assistant Secretary and later as Secretary.

Temporary homelessness caused problems but the new building was opened on the 19th October 1905 and the Society now had a Member's Room, a Library and a Lecture Hall seating 200 people. These occupied the top two floors, the Building Company letting the rest of the building to other tenants. The staircases and corridors were considered fireproof and the amenities included electric light and a hydraulic passenger lift. The lift was a valuable asset until the early 1970's when the Water Authority would no longer permit the use of water for this purpose. The last hydraulic lift in Manchester then proved of great interest to the Staff of the Science Museum who taped the sound of its movement before it was replaced by a modern electric lift.

In 1908 Mrs Rylands (founder of the Deansgate Library) died and her shares in the Building Company came on the market. Several members became Life Members in order to provide money for the purchase of these shares and thereafter the acquisition of shares in the Building Company became the policy of the Council. As a result of this policy the Society was the beneficiary when, after 70 years, the building had to be sold and the Building Company liquidated.

As far as the Society's work was concerned these early years of the Twentieth Century formed a period of quiet progress. Notable events were the lectures given by Scott, Sven Hedin and Shackleton; for these the Council hired, and filled, the Free Trade Hall. In each case, the Society gave a banquet the next day at the Midland Hotel. Photographs of occasions of this kind were found in the Parsonage Building in the early 1970's and are now preserved in the Local History Section of the Manchester Central Library.

Interest in education continued. The Council turned its attention to the Civil Service Commission and pressed for the inclusion of Geography as an independent subject in examinations for entry into the public service. They were pleased when John Macfarlane of the University Staff was able to report that the subject would be included "probably from 1909".

In 1908 the Society entertained a party of twenty members of the Commercial Geographical Society of Paris and, in the same year, the newly-formed Manchester Branch of the Geographical Association held its meetings in the Parsonage Building. In 1911 J.H. Reed, Honorary Secretary of the Victorians, spoke to the British Association on Cotton Growing within the British Empire and repeated the lecture before the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society the following year. In 1918 the Geographical Association held its first national meeting outside London in Zeppelin-free Manchester, using the Society's premises.

The First World War had brought difficulties — audiences became smaller, lecturers harder to find and the size of the Journal had to be reduced — but the Society survived, helped by a generous gift from a private donor. With the end of hostilities it began to look forward to a new era of prosperity and usefulness.

1919—33 The T.W. Sowerbutts era

The Society's optimism suffered a set-back with the death in February 1919 of Harry Sowerbutts, but fortunately his elder brother, T.W. Sowerbutts, agreed to take over the

position of Secretary. The work of the Society continued with vigour and in May 1920 it was reported at the Annual General Meeting that most of the ground lost during the war had been regained.

Great satisfaction was expressed when W.H. Barker was appointed Reader, later Professor, in Geography in the University in 1922. The Society elected him to the Council and in 1923 he became one of the two Honorary Secretaries. His influence became apparent as the lecture programme began to swing towards Geography and away from travel with such lecturers as de Martonne, Roxby and Fleure. He instituted a Study Circle which met fortnightly and was attended by University students as well as by Society Members. Indeed, in 1924, the Society presented a syllabus "which can rarely, if ever, have been equalled". It was at this time that the Council, at the request of the Geographical Association, agreed to allot space in the Members' Room for a permanent exhibition of text-books.

When the Council learned that the University hoped to create an Honours School of Geography it opened a fund to endow a Chair of Geography. The appointment of H.J. Fleure as Professor in 1930 was the successful end of a 50-year campaign.

Meanwhile the Manchester area was feeling the effects of industrial depression; the Society's membership declined, the production of the Journal became irregular and the financial position became so serious that in 1932 Sowerbutts voluntarily gave up part of his salary. Fortunately, by the end of that year the worst seemed to be over and the Society became solvent owing to the determined efforts of some of its members.

During this period, following the death of several eminent members, L.M. Angus-Butterworth worked alone as Honorary Secretary from 1929 for many difficult years, as well as at times editing the Journal.

1933—50 The Arthur Marshman era

The Secretary, T.W. Sowerbutts, died at the end of 1933 and the Council promoted the Librarian, Arthur Marshman, to the post but a new Librarian was not appointed. This resulted in considerable understaffing and the consequent accumulation of arrears of work.

The passage of time had brought many changes in the Council. The creation of the Chair of Geography had achieved one of the main objectives of the Society and the Council seemed content to let activities be confined to lectures and outings. Moreover, the Society had struggled over the years for the recognition of its subject and now, with the increase of knowledge in all branches of science, older members found the new approach to Geography unfamiliar and not always to their liking. During the next fifteen years this was to have a significant effect on the Society as its interest in academic geography declined. However, a more immediate problem was the outbreak of the Second World War.

At the beginning all lectures ceased although a curtailed programme was put together later. The Society's 'treasures' were moved to the basement for safety and were

retrieved after the war safe but dirty. The building was damaged slightly, not destroyed, and in this the Society was more fortunate than others in the city.

In February 1945, as a result of the initiative of R.S. Booth, the Council undertook the provision of geographical lectures for local schoolchildren and the Manchester Education Committee helped to finance them with an annual grant. These Children's Lectures were to be an important part of the Society's work for over twenty-five years, by which time the teaching of Modern Geography and the provision of projectors were so well established in schools that another objective of the Society had been achieved and the lectures were no longer necessary.

After the war Miss E. Pickering (Honorary Secretary since 1941) had the difficult task of reconciling the views of the traditionalists and the new, more scientifically-minded members. In this she was helped by T.L. Green of the University's Department of Education and a former Inspector of Schools who realised that the Society had allowed its standards to fall and was in danger of becoming a Travel Club. The lecture programmes reveal their skill. Scientific lectures such as Brigadier Bagnold's Desert Sand Dunes and Professor Pugh's Exploration of the Oceans were carefully interspersed among the travel talks and the rank and file became more familiar with current geographical thought.

All younger members had studied Modern Geography and amongst them were some professional geographers. A group called the Wednesday Working Party, organised by T.N.L. Brown, tackled the neglected Library. They weeded out useless books and rearranged the others on a regional basis thus beginning the regenerative movement in the Society which developed in the 1950's.

1950—79 The contemporary era

T.N.L. Brown, who had joined the Society in 1947, took over the Editorship of the Journal in 1950. In 1952 he became Honorary Secretary and held that office continually, except for his term of Presidency in 1961-64, until his death in 1969. In his efforts to revitalise the Society he was fortunate in having the complete support of Arthur Marshman and, after December 1955, of the new Secretary Mr A. Murch. Inspired by their enthusiasm, the Society once more became vigorous.

As Professor Rodgers says in his foreword to Brown's History, he was well qualified to reconcile professional and amateur interests among the members and he was successful in bringing more closely together the Society and the Staff of the Geography Department of the University, one of whom, Professor Crowe, was President from 1958 to 1961.

Brown always insisted that a certain number of lectures in the year should be by professional geographers, while there should be others to attract those members whose interests were less specialised. The result was a series of interesting and well-balanced programmes, and in 1953 in addition to the ordinary Tuesday meetings, there were five public lectures sponsored by the Society in the Free Trade Hall on the Ascent of Everest.

The Working Party continued to reorganize the Library and then turned its attention to the many thousands of 3¼ inch lantern slides. During these investigations some valuable early atlases were discovered and sold to the University, thus relieving the Society's chronic financial problems for the time being.

The Study Circle was revived in 1954 under the leadership of H.B. Rodgers (later Professor) and out of it emerged the Lymm Survey. This was an academic, geographical study quite unique in the Society's history and an account of its findings was published in Vol. LVIII of the Journal, the collators being Mrs V. Chapman, T.N.L. Brown and H.B. Rodgers.

Another notable change in the Society's activities was in the Victorian Excursions. These, organised by the Victorian Secretary H.T.B. Sowerbutts (son of T.W.) and his successor Miss Muriel Smith, were Field Excursions as opposed to the outings of the 1940's. A remarkable feature was the number of capable and willing leaders who did an immense amount of preparatory work and supplied detailed maps and hand-outs. The excursions varied in length from an evening's study of the River Bollin to a week in the Hebrides. They included several weekends but most were of the all-day-Saturday type. They ranged from the Lancashire Coast to the North Yorkshire Moors and from the Cotswolds and Wales to the Lake District. In 1967 a party joined the Royal Scottish Geographical Society for a week's tour of the Highlands arranged by Mr Moir, Secretary of the Scottish Society.

In addition to the Excursions and the Annual Dinners, social activities were enhanced by the formation in 1961 of a Tea Club run by a Ladies' Committee headed by Mrs Irene Brown and Mrs Ivy Murch. With a team of bakers, this group of members supplied home-made teas for a small charge before every Tuesday lecture. They had not expected to make a profit but were so successful that the Ladies' Committee was occasionally able to help the Society financially and to provide amenities in the premises. Its last gift, when the Tea Club ceased to function in the 1970's, was a President's Jewel and eight replicas for past Presidents.

The Working Party had discovered that many of the valuable books in the Society's Library were deteriorating through lack of maintenance. Professional help could not be afforded and the security of the building and its contents was becoming an increasing problem. Authority was therefore given at the Annual General Meeting of 1969 to approach Dr Ratcliffe, Librarian of the Manchester University Library, and offer the Historic Library of the Society to the University on Permanent Loan. Unfortunately Mr Brown died before the negotiations were complete so Miss Margaret Lever, Assistant Honorary Secretary and a Manchester graduate, was asked to continue the discussions on behalf of the Society. As a result of these negotiations, the books (and shelves) were transferred by the University porters to the Library, where they can be consulted by members of the Society as well as by students.

Following the posthumous discovery of the manuscript of Brown's History of the Manchester Geographical Society, a fund was raised to publish it. The actual production was an example of the Society's capacity for team-work. Professor Rodgers checked it and wrote the foreword; qualified librarians among the members prepared it

for publication and compiled the index, and members with secretarial skills typed it. It was published by the Manchester University Press and throughout members of the University gave encouragement, help and advice to the Society.

The retirement of Mr Murch in 1969 had come as a second blow following so quickly after Mr Brown's death. Administrative changes followed and the Honorary Secretary, Miss M.D. Leigh, aided by the Assistant Honorary Secretary, Miss M. Lever, undertook the actual running of the Society with part-time secretarial help, a team of willing members acting as projectionists for lectures.

Meanwhile anxieties about the Building increased. Not only was the Building Company put to the expense of installing a new lift but Security became more and more difficult and the cost of running the building mounted. When it was made clear that the new Fire Regulations were not satisfied by the building, which was thought excellent in 1905, the Company decided to sell. This could not be done immediately because of the existing tenancies so the Society had time to plan. It was fortunate that its affairs at this time were in the competent hands of a former president, E.D. Pugh, both as Chairman of the Building Company and Honorary Treasurer of the Society.

Mr Murch had drawn attention to the condition of the remaining museum objects and the Council asked Miss Lever to look into the Society's belongings. Members, aware of the value of some of them as antiques, helped to clean many articles and, with the expert advice of the Whitworth Art Gallery Staff, a large picture and a folder of Chinese paintings were sold through London Sales Rooms, as also was a pair of Geographical Globes. The Whitworth Art Gallery was pleased to accept a tapestry, and the City Art Gallery a picture by a Manchester artist (J.W. Holden) for their Study Collection. Old 3¼ inch slides of Manchester as well as large Society photographs were given to the Local History Department of the Manchester Central Library, whilst the large collections of slides and negatives were accepted by the Department of Archaeology of the Manchester Museum with a view to their dispersal to other museums (world-wide). Miscellaneous slides of specific interest were given to local organisations whilst many small antiques and some pieces of furniture were sold to local dealers. Hundreds of old copies of the Journal were sorted into sets for sale to different universities. Members provided transport and several people spent every weekday in August 1973 clearing everything before the removal in September.

The Society then rented an office in the Corn Exchange Buildings. Since October 1973 lectures have taken place in the premises of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, the Council meeting in the Seminar Room of the Manchester University Library by kind permission of Dr Ratcliffe.

The Lecture Programme was unaffected by the upheaval and the size of audiences increased. T.N.L. Brown's policy of having a number of academic lectures in each session was continued and, now that Salford University had a School of Geography, the Society had a further source of such lectures. Moreover, the Council began to award small grants to groups of university students organising geographical expeditions, on condition that they would give an account to the Society of their work and experiences. This helped the students and kept members abreast of modern trends in Geography as

well as fulfilling one of the original aims of the Society. With the coming of modern communications and the development of colour photography, professional lecturers of a new type had come into being; travellers and explorers, earning their living by writing, broadcasting and lecturing. These lecturers, with their sophisticated techniques and equipment, were expensive but the Society had a little more money and by careful arrangement of the programmes could afford an occasional lecture of this sort.

There were four special annual meetings: The President's Evening and the Members' Evening both followed by a buffet supper; the Herbertson Lecture, always given by a professional geographer and arranged alternately with the Manchester Branch of the Geographical Association; and from 1976, a triangular joint meeting between the two Manchester Societies and the Royal Geographical Society. The Royal provided the speaker and the local Societies the hospitality. Both joint lectures attracted Sixth Form pupils from schools in Greater Manchester and Civic Heads were present at some of the triangular meetings.

The Excursions continued vigorously for a few years but dwindled in number towards the end of the decade as costs became greater and leaders and excursionists became older; it was the lectures which attracted new members. For many years these excursions, together with social activities and the Lecture Panel, had been the responsibility of the Secretary of the Victorians but the Victorians as such seemed to have lost their sense of identity and they decided it would be realistic to disband. The work was divided between Miss Audrey Williams as external Lecture Convener and Miss Muriel Smith (the past Secretary of the Victorians) as Secretary and Treasurer of activities. On the retirement of Miss Williams at the Annual General Meeting of 1976 Miss Smith was re-elected and the Lecture Panel arrangements were undertaken by the office. At the same meeting W.H. Poland was elected as Honorary Secretary of the Society and a separate Honorary Programme Secretary, Miss M.D. Leigh, was appointed.

In 1979 the Society and the two University Departments collaborated in the preparation of this first volume of the New Series of the Journal under the editorship of Professor H.P. White of Salford University. At the Annual General Meeting of that year a revised version of the Constitution was approved and Professor H.B. Rodgers of Manchester University, a member of the Society since 1951, was elected President.

Sources

1884—1950 **BROWN T.N.L. — History of the Manchester Geographical Society**, Manchester University Press, 1971.

1950—1979 The Society's Journal, Minutes of the Council, Annual Reports and Accounts, Records of the 'Victorians'.

Quotations are from Brown's 'History'.