

Early Developments

The formation of the Rotunda Geology Group was a result of the creation of the Scarborough Museums Trust, which in turn was linked to the restoration of the Rotunda Museum. The whole story started with 'Earth Alert 2', a meeting of various UK geological societies held in Scarborough in August 2002. Lord Derwent of Hackness Hall was invited to open the meeting in recognition of him being the direct ancestor of Sir John Johnstone, who supported William Smith, 'father of English Geology', and for several years employed him on his Hackness estate. Smith had played an important role during the building of the museum, which was built out of stone provided by Johnstone from the estate. During the meeting Lord Derwent was approached by representatives of the various societies to express their concern that the Rotunda was currently in a sorry state and displayed no geological material.

Within a week Lord Derwent had talked with Scarborough Borough Council (who owned the museum) and it was soon agreed that the management of the Rotunda Museum, Art Gallery and Woodend could be transferred to a trust (the buildings and collections remaining under the Council's ownership). A shadow trust was set up initially and Lord Derwent and the Council began a fund-raising campaign to restore the Rotunda and turn it into a primarily geological museum. Over £4 million was raised by the time the museum was finally reopened in May 2008.



Fig 1. Rotunda Restoration underway in September 2007. Almost complete is the new lower-level entrance and shop area.

In 2004, Lord Derwent approached Pete Rawson, then still a Professor of Geology at University College London and one of several specialists on Yorkshire Coast geology, to join the shadow trust. One of Lord Derwent's subsequent ideas was that a Philosophical Society should be formed to support the Trust (the original Scarborough Philosophical Society had folded by about 1930). He asked Pete to explore this, though the latter thought that it would not be popular with the various local societies involved in the fields of interest covered by the museum and gallery service. But he visited Scarborough in July 2005 to meet with representatives of two of the biggest societies (the Scarborough Archaeological and Historical Society and the Scarborough Field Naturalists Society) and several local geologists before informing Lord Derwent that an all-embracing group would not be advisable but that the one obvious local gap was in geology. Lord Derwent accepted the idea and so the Rotunda Geology Group was born.

Initially Pete approached Will Watts, the then Dinosaur Coast Project Officer with Scarborough Borough Council, and Peter Robinson, a local geologist who Pete Rawson had known since 1960. Peter Robinson then produced a document dated 11 October 2005 in which he proposed the name 'Rotunda Geology Group' and suggested an initial meeting of a 'small number of core people' to 'determine the level and type of activities of the Group'. This provided the agenda for the first meeting, held on 11 November, of the 'core people', who formed a working group chaired by Councillor Michael Pitts: other members were Pete Rawson (not present at this meeting), Peter Robinson, Alan Staniforth (local geologist), Brian Sweeney (Hull University Scarborough Campus), Will Watts and Steve Whitehead (geology teacher at Scarborough 6th Form College). Over the next few months this informal committee held several further meetings, during which the name 'Rotunda Geology Group' was agreed (6 December 2005) and ideas developed on an initial programme for autumn 2006, creating a website, and formally launching the RGG.

At its fourth meeting, on 6 March 2006, 'Mrs E. Beresford was welcomed as Secretary' and at subsequent meetings the committee expanded to include some additional local people with varying connections/expertise. The need for some financial help also became apparent, so on 3 April Michael Pitts asked Lord Derwent for some 'start-up funding' for the RGG and was immediately granted £500. Four of the 7 additional members attended the following day's committee meeting, when Will Watts explained that the RGG 'would be linked to the Rotunda Museum but would be an independent Geology Group that would deliver events and activities for its members.'

By then the restoration and additional building of the Rotunda was well under way and gaining some local publicity. One significant publicity event was launched on behalf of the RGG by Shirley Stone, who was the first person to be employed by the Trust, as Marketing and Publicity Officer (Museums and Gallery). She organised a local schools competition to design a logo for the group. The results were announced in July: the winner was Bryony Harper of Seamer and Irton Primary School, who utilised the recently discovered Speeton Clay plesiosaur in her design. Bryony's draft version was then professionally redrawn. The plesiosaur was used again on 26 July to provide the highlight of the formal launch of the RGG at the Hull University Scarborough campus. This formed part of a 4 day 'Plesiosaur event' there, from 25-28 July, when the skeleton was publicly displayed for the first time. It was followed by a field excursion to Filey Bay on

Saturday 29 July, led by Pete Rawson, to see the Speeton Clay, the source of the plesiosaur. Shortly afterwards Pete and his wife Sue retired to Scarborough where Pete continued as a Trustee until 2019 (chair from 2008-2016) to provide a crucial link between the Trust and the RGG.

The first programme of RGG lectures started in autumn 2006 and was designed as a 'taster' before the group began to recruit members for 2007. Thanks to Magnus Johnson, the head of the Centre for Coastal Studies on the Scarborough campus, the RGG was able to hold its meetings on the campus, free of charge. With excellent facilities and ample car parking this proved to be a very successful venue for several years until in 2018 the campus was closed and the group moved to a smaller room in Woodend at the beginning of that year, where it remains to the present day.

The opening RGG meeting took place on 7 September when Brian Sweeney talked about 'Coastal Erosion in North Yorkshire, including the Holbeck Hall landslip'. The following three autumn meetings embraced very diverse talks by the relevant experts – 'Dinosaur Footprints of the Yorkshire Coast' by Dr Martin Whyte (University of Sheffield), 'Volcanoes of Montserrat' by Dr Sue Loughlin (British Geological Survey) and 'Evolution of plant life during the Cretaceous' by Professor Jane Francis (University of Leeds). This set the professional standard for future RGG meetings – a breadth of talks by the relevant experts aimed at a very mixed audience, from total beginners to active and retired geoscientists. The talks were well attended – and free for this 'taster' session. By the end of the year Sue Rawson had volunteered to act as a temporary programme secretary for 2007. Early in the new year the committee decided to charge an attendance fee of £1 per meeting and John Hudson became acting treasurer. The slow process of setting up a constitution and formalising various officer roles began. The next stage in the evolution of the RGG was under way!

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