

SGI 30 William Smith's House, 15 Buckingham Street

City of Westminster

William Smith's House, 15 Buckingham Street, WC2N 6DU

Grid Ref: TQ 303 804

Green Plaque on William Smith's house at 15 Buckingham Street

William Smith, also known as Strata Smith, lived at 15 Buckingham Street from 1804 to 1819. Here in 1815, Smith produced *A Delineation of the Strata of England and Wales with part of Scotland*, the first geological map of a nation in the world, backed by John Cary, cartographer, based in the Strand. The culmination of 15 years of individual field work, the map is a remarkable accomplishment by any standard. For one man working alone, pursuing a then unique geological concept, it was an outstanding achievement for which William Smith is known as "the father of English geology". In 2015 the History of Geology Group arranged for a Green Plaque to be erected where Smith's house once stood to celebrate 200 years since the publication of the map. The plaque was unveiled by Sir David Attenborough.

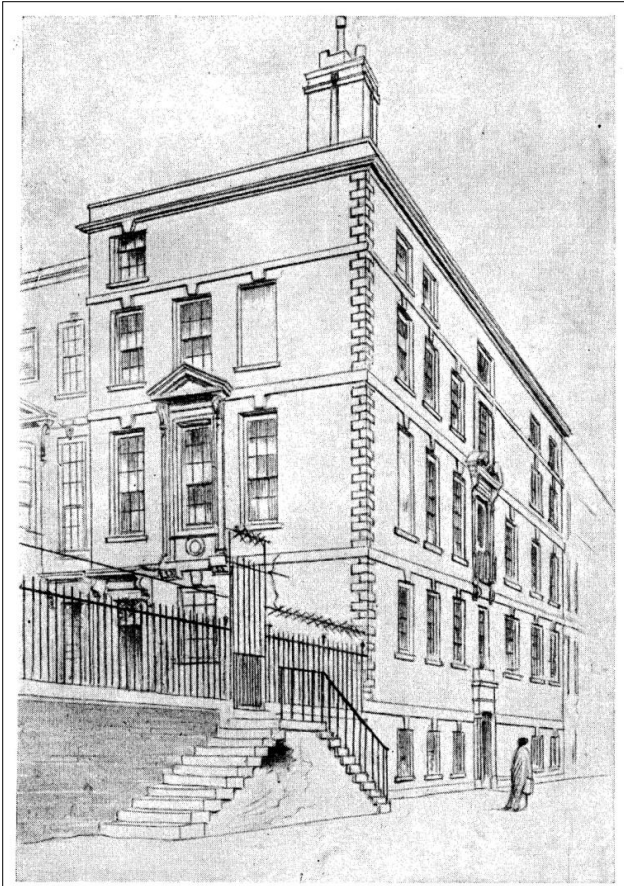
Smith was the first to recognise a fundamental concept of geology that individual fossil varieties relate specifically to particular rock strata and can be used to distinguish between otherwise similar looking rock layers. This concept enabled him to construct his map. He recognised that strata occur in the same order everywhere so was also able to predict the presence and depth of economic deposits. This principle underpins the search for modern oil and gas, as it did for coal in his time. Smith practised as a mineral surveyor and civil engineer, applying his principles to slope stabilisation, sea defence, canal building, land drainage and prospecting for water, coal and other minerals. He travelled extensively which gave him opportunities to refine his map and create more detailed county maps.

The Geological Society of London, founded in 1807, the first such society in the world, introduced William Smith as "the Father of English Geology", in 1831. Today, it honours Smith through its prestigious William Smith medal awarded for excellence in contributions to applied and economic aspects of the science, and its annual William Smith Conference. Smith's map and bust are displayed in the Society's apartments in Burlington House, Piccadilly.

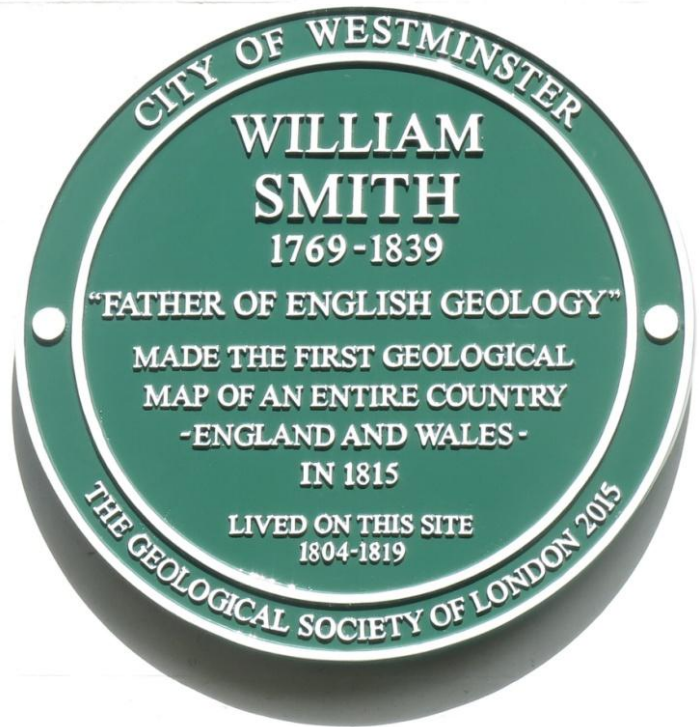
William Smith moved into 15 Buckingham Street in 1804 on a 21 year lease at £84 per annum. He desired a large home in London to accommodate his large collections of fossils and geological map manuscripts in a private museum that he could show to potential clients. He chose Buckingham Street because it was in a smart residential and professional neighbourhood recently developed by the Adams brothers and occupied by architects, surveyors, draftsmen, and printers. It was a short walk to the City and to Whitehall and, nearby, the Strand was the centre of London's map trade. No. 15 was located adjacent to the York Watergate with access to boats along the Thames with fine views over south London. It was a location and building that would impress potential clients. Smith lost his lease after financial failure and a spell in debtors' prison. In trying to stave off bankruptcy Smith sold his fossil collection to the British Museum who in turn passed it on to the Natural History Museum where they continue to be cared for.

The subsequent lessee of no.15 was the nascent Institution of Civil Engineers taking up its first official home. The original building was demolished c.1906 and the present building, Burdett House was constructed in the 1970s. Smith lived here before the advent of railways, Charing Cross Bridge and Station and the construction of the Victoria Embankment Gardens and Trafalgar Square. However, apart from the modern building now at no. 15, the immediate neighbourhood – the rest of Buckingham Street, the steps down to the narrow terrace and the Watergate – remain very much as they were in Smith's time. For more details on the description of York Watergate see SGI 29.

Text adapted from History of Geology Group with thanks



15 Buckingham Street as Smith would have known it. Anon, c1883



Plaque on existing building
Photo: Laurie Baker

References

Geological Society of London where William Smith's map can be viewed: www.geolsoc.org.uk/smith_map
 History of Geology Group with more information on William Smith: <http://historyofgeologygroup.co.uk>
 Natural History Museum where William Smith's fossils are housed (they are not on display): www.nhm.ac.uk
 Rotunda Museum, Scarborough – the Museum designed by William Smith to house his fossil display. A few of the specimens from NHM are on display there: www.yorkshire.com/view/culture/scarborough/rotunda-william-smith-museum-of-geology-125953
 Website devoted to William Smith's map: www.strata-smith.com
 Oxford University Museum. Web pages devoted to William Smith's paper archives: www.oum.ox.ac.uk/collections/feature.php?irn=5035

Popular books on William Smith

John Moreton 2001. *Strata Smith*. Tempus

Simon Winchester, 2001. *The Map that changed the World*. Viking