W.A.E. USSHER: AN INSIGHT INTO HIS LIFE AND CHARACTER

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The Ussher Society is named after W.A.E. Ussher, the eminent geologist who spent a large proportion of his working life in South-West England. William Augustus Edmond Ussher was the youngest of six children born to John and Mary Ussher of Eastwell House, Loughrea, County Galway. He joined the Geological Survey at the age of nineteen in 1868 and went on to become a well respected field mapping geologist, retiring in 1909. The ancestry of the Ussher family in Ireland has been documented by House (1978), tracing roots back as far as Archbishop James Ussher who famously stated the date of creation as 4004 BC. Dineley in 1974 wrote about the work of W.A.E. Ussher in South-West England; however, little to date has been written about the life of the man after whom the society takes its name. Using letters from the archives of the British Geological Survey, amongst other sources, ongoing research shows an insight into his life and character.

INTRODUCTION

The Ussher Society was formed in 1962 to act as a focus for geological work in South-West England, a region which has played a key role in the history of British geology (Mather, 2011). It was named after the survey geologist William Augustus Edmond Ussher (1849-1920), an officer of the Geological Survey of Great Britain, who spent much of his working life in South-West England and made a major contribution to establishing the stratigraphical succession in the Devonian, Carboniferous and Permo-Triassic rocks of Devon and Cornwall (Dineley, 1974).

The Ushers were an Irish Protestant landowning family, with recorded ancestry dating back to the 15th Century. House (1978) traced the family back to James Ussher (1581-1656), the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, who, in his work of 1654, “Annalium pars posterior”, dated the creation of the Earth as 4004 BC. It wasn’t until the late 18th Century that Christopher Ussher (II), the paternal grandfather of W.A.E. Ussher (Figure 1), established his family at Eastwell House, Loughrea, County Galway. On his death the house passed to his eldest son, John, whilst a younger brother, Christopher (III), entered the church. The latter married Elizabeth Brush in 1850, before moving to a living in Kensington, London sometime between the birth of their youngest child in 1855 and the 1861 census. Meanwhile John Ussher, the younger brother of Christopher (II), had become a soldier, serving in His Majesty’s Fifth Regiment of Foot. Posted to Canada in 1797 he married Mary Street, the daughter of Samuel Street, a judge and eminent political figure with whom he had six children (Figure 1). In 1831, aged only 16, the youngest of these children, Mary Jane, married her first cousin, John, the heir of Eastwell House. Six children were born to the couple between 1832 and 1849, the youngest being William Augustus Edmond Ussher, who was born only two years before the death of his father, leaving his mother a widow at the age of 35 years.

The object of this paper is to trace the life of W.A.E. Ussher from its beginnings in County Galway to prominence as a valued officer of the Geological Survey. Although his work has been well documented (Dineley, 1974), little is known about his personal life or his relationships with his peers. Published and unpublished sources, in particular the letters to his colleagues held in the British Geological Survey archives, are used to give an insight into his life and character and to provide a background against which, his geological work can be assessed.

THE EARLY YEARS

Research has found little so far about Ussher’s early years. He may have been educated at school or by private tutor. Two Ushers, Christopher and John Xaverius, appear on the register of the Royal School of Armagh (Emerald Ancestors, 2013). These may be his brothers; however, there is no record of his attendance there. It is not known by which route he came to join the Geological Survey, although he would have taken the Civil Service entry examination. In the early days of the survey it was likely that appointments were made through contacts within the family and it may have been through his uncle, the Reverend Christopher Ussher (III), who had obtained a living at St Mary’s Church in Westminster, near to the Geological Survey offices at the Museum of Practical Geology in Jermyn Street, that the contact was made.

Ussher joined the survey in 1868 at the age of 19 as an assistant geologist under the director Sir Roderick Impey Murchison. Murchison was responsible for the rapid expansion of the field survey staff (Flett, 1937) and he took on 19 assistant geologists in 1867 followed by another 14 the following year. At that time it was customary for the officers of the survey to have their portraits taken for the records and Figure 2 shows
Ussher, probably around that time. Ussher joined the survey the year after Horace Bolingbroke Woodward and Figure 3, posed in a studio in Glastonbury, shows the two assistant geologists, suggesting that they not only worked together, but were also friends.

One of the first mapping assignments that Ussher worked on was the Wellington sheet, of which he mapped the main part on the one-inch scale between 1870 and 1875, with assistance from H.B. Woodward and Clement Reid on the southern part. Training at that time took the form of learning on the job, with some help from more experienced geologists. Despite his inexperience his geological map (Geological Survey, 1906) stood as a testament to his thoroughness and ability, until superseded with the recent publication of the updated Wellington sheet in 2009 (British Geological Survey, 2009). The Wellington mapping took place between 1870 and 1875. The census of 1871 shows Ussher to be resident in lodgings in St James, Taunton, together with his younger cousin Arland A. Ussher, the eldest son of the Reverend Christopher Ussher (III), showing the link between the families to remain strong.

Although it is not known why the cousins were living together at this time Arland A. Ussher went on to become a watercolourist, painting many scenes of South-West England and Ireland. It is possible that he accompanied Ussher in the field, sketching landscapes as his cousin carried out his mapping work.

By 1876 it appears that Ussher was starting to get involved in geology in other areas of the south-west publishing papers on the gravels of the River Dart (Ussher, 1876) followed by the pebbles at Budleigh (Ussher, 1877a) and the Watcombe Clay (Ussher, 1877b) in the Transactions of the Devonshire Association. Other notable people publishing geological papers in the Transactions at this time included the Sidmouth based polymath, Peter Orlando Hutchinson (Mather and Symes,
describe the "jolly dinner on Saturday" with "Songs from Prof Ramsey, Best, Tiddeman, Sketchly, Rutley and Pugh" a list of well respected geologists, and ends by saying that it was "unanimously voted that we have an annual dinner in future.

Ussher was still engaged with his memoir for Devon and Somerset as, in another letter, Woodward writes concerning the clay with flints "I must confess I cannot see how it was formed by dissolution of the Chalk" and also that "your hypothesis of land ice is certainly very ingenious and original", but there is "not sufficient evidence to make it wash". As Dineley (1974) remarked, Ussher was never afraid to put forward a provisional working hypothesis and many of the archived letters relate to his latest ideas. Woodward finishes his letter with "this office had just been put into a muddle by the incoming of a giant case with drawers for our private use so that I will shut up reserving some remarks on your former letter for another and briefer note which I hope to write tomorrow. Kind regards to your mother". By this time, while Ussher remained working in the field as an assistant geologist, Woodward was in the office working to further his career. Having been rapidly promoted to the position of geologist two years previously Woodward went on to climb through the ranks, ending his career as assistant to the director. Ussher was to remain as an assistant geologist for 24 years before he was promoted. This was not through any fault, but due to promotions being blocked by Geikie, who had taken over as director in 1882 (Wilson, 1985).

By 1881 W.A.E. Ussher was registered in the census as living at 101 Abingdon Road, Kensington with his mother, elder sister Mary Johnston and her daughter Belinda, aged nine. Mary had married a doctor, William Stuart Johnston, and Belinda was registered as being born in Paubasse in the Pyrenees (France). Mary is listed as a widow so it is likely that she came back to live with her mother and brother after the death of her husband. Although the Ussher family is large, it appears that they were close-knit and kept in touch, helping out each other in time of need.

During the early 1880s there is little evidence of Ussher's movements as there are no letters in the archives. However, publications from this period range around the south-west from north Devon and west Somerset through to south Devon and Cornwall (see publication list in Dineley, 1974). In 1886 he started mapping in Gloucestershire and this was the start of a period where, for about six years, he moved away from working in the south-west. He was sent to map in other areas of England including Lincoln, 1888, North Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire, 1890 and Sussex, 1889 and 1891 (Field maps in BGS Archives). The picture of Ussher shown in Figure 4 was taken by Frank Meadows Sutcliffe of Whitby and it seems probable that it was taken about 1890 when he was working in the Yorkshire area. At this time Ussher would have been around 40 years old.

Although he was not mapping in the south-west it appears that his main base was still there, living with his mother at Rookfields, their house in Cary Crescent, Torquay. It was here that his mother died on 12 December 1888 at the age of 74. It was also from here that he wrote letters to his old friend Woodward and the petrographers back at the London office, F.H. Hatch and J.J.H. Teall.

Frederick Henry Hatch was appointed as a Temporary Assistant Geologist (petrologist for England and Wales) in 1886 and worked for a time under the supervision of Jethro Justinian Harris Teall, the official Chief Petrographer. Working for the survey for only a short period between 1886 and 1892, Hatch emigrated to South Africa and was influential in the geological exploration taking place in the Transvaal and the goldfields (Howarth, 2012). Hatch and Ussher seem to have enjoyed a good relationship as well as the usual work-related topics. In correspondence of 1890, Ussher complains about the work instructions from the then director of the survey, Sir Archibald Geikie: "Geikie has given instructions that I can't carry out in an impossible time and I have been working up till 7 or 8 and for an hour after dinner to try to finish by the end of April". The next month he must have visited the office for his letter reads

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By 1891 Ussher was back working in South-West England as in the census of that year he is registered as a lodger with William Saale, a retired builder at 28 Village, Stoke Fleming, when he must have been he was living in South Hams. However, a letter written from Tremlett House, Stoke Fleming to Teall in 1891 confirms that his main residence was still Rookfields: ‘I am going to Torquay, Rookfields tomorrow, on Monday office work and on Tuesday I hope to get Somervale to show me his evidence near South Pool’. Alexander Somervale was the successor to William Pengelly as Honorary Secretary of the Torquay Natural History Society.

In addition to the Devonshire Association and the Torquay Natural History Society, Ussher was also involved with members of the Geologists’ Association and led field excursions as well as attending others. In the volume “Geology in the Field” (Monckton and Herries, 1910), published as a jubilee volume of the Geologists’ Association, Ussher (1910) wrote the section on the geology of Cornwall, Devon and West Somerset.

**Marriage and the Storrs Family**

Promoted from being an assistant to the position of geologist in 1882 gave Ussher more freedom and financial stability, and in 1883 he married Alice Mabel Storrs, a girl 20 years his junior. Alice Mabel was the second daughter of the Reverend Charles Storrs and his wife Edith, who at the time of the marriage were residing in Ellacombe, Torquay. Although there is no direct record linking Ussher to the Storrs family it is to be presumed that they met through mutual acquaintances.

According to the report in the Western Times (Exeter) of 28 July 1893, the bride wore a dress of surah silk, trimmed with Flanders lace and a veil of Honiton lace. Her bouquet was a gift of the bridegroom and he also gave her a pearl brooch and a gold bracelet. Five of her younger sisters acted as bridesmaids and she also had four of Ussher’s nieces, including Miss Johnston (Belinda). Mr Arland Ussher (cousin) acted as best man. The reception was held at the Vicarage and the married couple left that night for London en-route to Ireland.

Originating from Doncaster Charles Edward Storrs, a clerk in Holy Orders, married Edith Gouing, the daughter of a brewer, from Headingly, in 1866. After the marriage they travelled out to Amritsar, in north-west India, where both their eldest daughter Edith Beatrice and Alice Mabel were born. Returning to England before the birth of their third daughter in 1871 Charles Storrs became curate of the Holy Trinity in Heworth Green, Yorkshire. By 1881 Charles had become the Vicar of Snath and had fathered three more daughters, including twins. The census of this year shows three girls of the name of Smith as boarders, possibly being tutored by Charles to supplement his income. In 1887 the Storrs family added a seventh daughter, to the family; registered as being born in Bristol, during the short period of two and a half years that the Reverend Storrs was vicar at St Pauls, Bedminster. In April 1888, Charles became the Vicar of Ellacombe (Torquay) and Chaplain of the Western Hospital and the family moved to the Vicarage in Lower Bronshill Road, Tormohun. The living seems to have provided a good income as, in the census of 1891, they have four servants: a cook, two housemaids and a nurse. It was in Torquay that their eighth, and final, daughter was born in 1890.

Charles E. Storrs appears to have been a stern observer of the Christian faith and in 1895 he gave a sermon entitled “If Christ came to Ellacombe”, where he expressed his belief that Christ would be disappointed if he came to Ellacombe at that time (Dixon, 2011). He talked of “drunken crowds” and “sottish selfishness” and said that the “evil of Intemperance (was) rampant”. Research carried out at that time into the reason for a decline in church going amongst working men gave one of the reasons for non-attendance as the sermons being too long, too dull and too dry (Dixon, 2011).
Mr and Mrs W.A.E. Ussher

In the same year as his marriage (1893) a letter to Teall places Ussher at 5 Hoe Park Terrace in Plymouth, and it is from this address that a set of Dartmoor photos were donated to the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) at this time (Figure 5). These photographs are now in the BGS archives. This address is registered two years earlier in the census to Florence and Frederick Taylor and it is possible that they were friends of Ussher.

Figure 5. Photograph of Hay Tor on Dartmoor. Donated to the British Association for the Advancement of Science collection in 1893 from the address 5 Hoe Park Terrace, Plymouth, by an unknown author. In March 1893 a letter places W.A.E. Ussher at the same address. British Geological Survey, P2383222.

The year 1894 saw the birth of Ussher’s first son, Christopher, a seamy period after marriage. Christopher was followed relatively swiftly by William Richard in 1896 and John in 1897. A fourth son, Charles Edward, was born in 1899, died young. The appearance of a family caused some disruption to his life and in a letter of 1897 to Teall Ussher writes he is “finding it difficult to focus” as “things are distributed about arranging collection in a small house which we are taking and furnishing for three years. In lodgings here for next 2 or 3 weeks”. The lodging address in question was 3 Leaham Villas on The Hoe in Plymouth, now turned into a hotel, while the small house to which he refers is possibly 2 Charlton Terrace in Mannamead, Plymouth, now turned into a hotel, while the small house to which he refers is possibly 2 Charlton Terrace in Mannamead, Plymouth, now turned into a hotel.

The BAAS address in question was 5 Hoe Park Terrace, Plymouth, from where he subsequently writes a series of letters, again to Teall, in 1898 to 1899. As well as discussing such geologically contentious matters as Halisands and the Start Complex: “I can’t quite see the argument for Arcbean”, this series of letters also reveal a little about Teall, including what is an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes “an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes "an apparent vegetarian tendency where Ussher writes “Great Scott- a bit of alluvium becomes a Godsend”. He then alludes to Teall’s vegetarianism again by saying “I should like to have you on this ground for 2 days on a vegetable diet”. In 1901 Ussher’s first daughter Mary was born.

Records over the next few years are scarce, the last letter from Teall House being dated 27 March 1905, but it appears that the Usshers had moved to Sydenham before 1896 and a number of letters from here written by Ussher to Flett, the Chief Petroglypher who had followed Teall, still survive. Although mainly talking of specimens, in August 1904 he complains that the “house is quite full and have had to take a room out for a niece who is on a visit”. Flett must have also been planning to visit because Ussher directs him to take rooms at the White Hart in Queens. Although there is no record of the name of the visiting niece, one wonders if it might have been Belinda, the daughter of Ussher’s elder sister Mary who had lived with him for a period after the death of her father. The year 1904 also saw the death of the Reverend Charles Storrs at Steyning in Sussex, shortly followed by his wife Edith at the relatively young age of 57.

The First World War and after

Although Ussher was too old to serve in the war his two eldest sons, Christopher and William Richard were of age at the start of the conflict in 1914, the same year that Ussher was awarded the Murchison Medal of the Geological Society. Christopher, a bank clerk, is recorded as joining the Royal Fusiliers as a private, whilst William Richard had already decided on the Navy as a career, having been registered the previous year as a midshipman (probationary) on the dreadnought battleship, HMS Neptune. Although John is not of age at the start of the war, military records show a John Ussher as belonging to the 1st Machine Gun Corps and cited as a recipient of the Distinguished Conduct Medal in August 1918, although whether this is W.A.E. Ussher’s son or another relative is unclear. Luckily for the Ussher family, all three sons survived the war. On his return Christopher married Violet May Grey in 1918 and settled back in south-east England, while...
William Richard married Vivian Evelyn Clara Schotz in 1919 and moved to America to work as a salesman, finally becoming naturalized in 1932. Despite increasing ill-health Ussher saw the return from the war and the marriages of his eldest sons before his death on 19 March 1920. His obituary (Anon., 1920), records that “many British geologists will lose an old friend, who, whether in his usual mood of breezy optimism, or in a rarer phase of boisterous pessimism was always good company.” Alice Mabel Ussher remained in Sussex and eventually died in 1952 at the age of 82 years.

A WELSH - ANTARCTIC CONNECTION

The Welsh-born Australian geologist and Antarctic explorer Sir Tannatt William Edgeworth David (usually referred to as Edgeworth David) was born in St Fagans, near Cardiff, in south Wales in 1858. It is said that he credited his interest in geology and natural history to W.A.E. Ussher, his mother’s cousin, who was only nine years his senior (Branagan 2005). The proximity of his home to South-West England suggests that he may have accompanied Ussher on some of his survey work in the region.

Edgeworth David studied geology at Oxford, and subsequently focussed his work on the coalfields of South Wales. Following a brief period at the Royal School of Mines in London he accepted a position as Assistant Geological Surveyor in New South Wales, Australia, where he used his knowledge of the Welsh coalfield to discover new coal seams in the Hunter Valley on behalf of the government before taking up a position as Professor of Geology at the University of Sydney (Branagan and Vallance, 1981; Branagan 2005).

As well as his work on economic minerals he was also interested in the impact of glaciations. Photographs from the British Geological Survey archives, presented to the director Sir Archibald Geikie, probably around 1901, show glacial deposits of Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia, indicating that Edgeworth David still retained a close interest in matters glacial twenty years after he read his first paper “Evidences of Glacial Action in the Neighbourhood of Cardiff” to the Cardiff Naturalists’ Society (David, 1881). It was this interest that led to Edgeworth David becoming a member of Shackleton’s expedition to the Antarctic. In 1908 he led an ascent of Mount Erebus, an active volcano, followed later in the same year by an attempt to reach the Magnetic South Pole, finally raising the flag there in January 1909 (Branagan and Vallance, 1981; Branagan 2005). Visiting Cardiff in February 1911, Edgeworth David was met by the Mayor and civic dignitaries before giving a lecture on his Antarctic endeavours (Cardiff Naturalists’ Society, 1910).

The Usshers were a very close family, keeping in contact with their many relatives throughout the world and keeping family names going through the generations. Looking back to the branch of the Ussher family in Canada, it appears that the first use of the name Edgeworth came from one of the older brothers of W.A.E. Ussher’s mother, Mary Jane. Captain Edgeworth Ussher, the second son of John Ussher and Mary Thompson who married the Reverend William David, the vicar of St Fagans, near Cardiff and became the mother of Edgeworth David.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

W.A.E. Ussher seems to have been a rather unique figure in the geological world. Despite few personal records surviving, his remaining letters give the impression of someone who was forthright in his speech, and not afraid to put forward new ideas. His scientific study and meticulous fieldwork undoubtedly formed the foundations for many geological studies in South-West England today, yet his family life undoubtedly influenced him greatly. In his early life his mother seems to have been a great influence and he certainly lived with her during his early career, as she was well known to H.B. Woodward, although she does not appear to be mentioned in the census records of either 1861 or 1871, indicating she may have been abroad or in Ireland at the time. Later in life the appearance of a large family does not appear to have curtailed his geological endeavours. The family appear to be moderately wealthy and employ a number of servants to help with the domestic chores. There is no indication of whether the marriage was a happy one, but Alice Mabel Ussher did not marry again after the death of her husband and remained a widow until her death 33 years later in 1952. The story behind the Ussher family is both interesting and far reaching. This paper does not attempt to chronicle all the known facts about the branches researched, but rather restricts the accounts to those of direct relevance to W.A.E. Ussher and his immediate family. It is likely that there are still direct descendants of W.A.E. Ussher alive today, however, their privacy has been respected and no attempt has been made to trace them.

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REFERENCES


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