



A brief history of the Freelance Geological Association (FGA), 1948–1967



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ABSTRACT

The Freelance Geological Association (FGA) (1948–1967), formerly Society, was a group of amateurs based in south and south-east London. Enthusiastic early members founded the FGA shortly after World War Two, and defined its direction and form. The original driving interests were caving and fieldwork. At that time there were many quarries that were still working and a few discarded underground mines, popularly known as caves, which were still accessible close to south London, in Kent, Sussex and Surrey. Gault Clay and London Clay pits (for brick and tile manufacture), and tips from the deep mines of the Kent coalfield were still easily accessible, as were quarries in Cretaceous chalk. The FGA thrived on fieldwork (including caving), public exhibitions, frequent indoor meetings at members' houses and scientific publication. A strength of the group was the stratigraphy and palaeontology of south-east England, particularly the Cretaceous and Tertiary. Members developed specialist interests, such as the Gault, its ammonites and their stratigraphy; various aspects of archaeology; and the systematics of fossil crustaceans. They also forged links with other experts. The Proceedings (later Journal) of the FGA was a vehicle for publication of the research and observations of the membership, which, unfortunately, only a few fully exploited. Nevertheless, these few included several who developed into active members of the Geologists' Association, and contributors to its Proceedings and/or field meetings.

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1. Introduction

Geologists are fascinated with extinctions. We study extinct organisms that are fossilised and extinct volcanoes. Parts of our fabric of geology may also go extinct, even those aspects with which we are intimately connected. The Freelance Geological Association (FGA, formerly Freelance Geological Society) is gone, but not forgotten. It was a small, mainly amateur society, based in south and south-east London, but in its lifetime of about 20 years it was an organisation of energy and productivity run by a group of highly enthusiastic and committed members. Joe Collins (JSHC) was a founding member of the FGA and also its archivist. We have used the archives and Joe's personal knowledge to write this history of a society which was separate from the Geologists' Association, yet similarly thrived on field meetings and related publication. We present this as a history of geologists, as much as

geology, and with particular reference to some of the individuals that have shaped the subject.

A locality map is presented (Fig. 1) to show the distribution of those collecting sites in south-east England mentioned in the text. Other sites further afield and mentioned in the text, such as Shropshire and the Mendips, were outside this local area. An introduction to the geology of this region may be found in [Brenchley and Rawson \(2006\)](#) and references therein, supplemented by a suitable large scale geological map (the authors favour [Geological Survey of Great Britain, 1971](#)).

2. Materials and methods

The principal tools used in writing this paper were JSHC's memories of the FGA and the archives in his possession. The latter will eventually be donated to the archives of the Natural History Museum, London (NHM). SKD has copied an aliquot of this archive, interspersed with some original documents of which there were multiple archival copies, and this will be deposited in the NHM upon publication of the present contribution.

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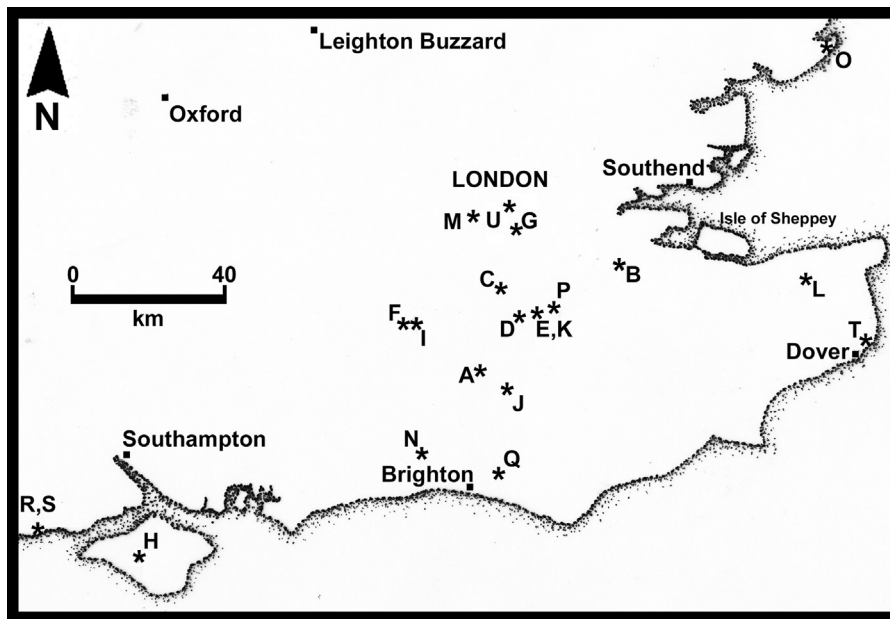


Fig. 1. Locality map of notable FGA collecting sites in south-east England that are mentioned in the text. Key: Godstone (A), Burham (B), Biggin Hill (C), Westerham and Hosey Common (D), Dunton Green (E), Box Hill/Dorking (F), Bexley (G), Isle of Wight (H), Mersham (I), Lingfield (J), Otford (K), Chislet Colliery (L), Peckham (M), Small Dole (N), Walton-on-the-Naze (O), Wrotham (P), Lewes (Q), Highcliffe (R), Barton-on-Sea (S), St. Margaret's Bay (T) and Abbey Wood (U).

When quoting from FGA documents, minor spelling errors have been silently corrected. Most of these documents were for internal circulation and cannot be considered publications as such. The exception is the FGA's Proceedings/Journal which is held in at least one library (see below). There is a sequential system of internal numbering of documents and these will be quoted for some of the more significant contributions to facilitate any future examination of the archives.

3. Origins

The origin of the Freelance Geological Society (FGS, eventually to be renamed Association) was with five part-time students at the Beckenham Technical Institute (BTI) in south London and one keen colleague from work in March 1948. These founder members – JSHC (Fig. 2E), Raymond ('Bunny') Milbourne (Fig. 2D), David Tulett (Fig. 2B), Alfred Harris and Albert Elphick, together with Ronald Gravener and a colleague from work (Fig. 2B, D and E) – were united by a common hobby of fossil collecting, and an interest in caving (Fig. 3), natural science in general and fieldwork (Fig. 4). Two of this select band, JSHC and David Tulett, published an account of these early days in the FGS's first cyclostyled magazine, in A5 size, entitled 'You Lazy Types!' (March 1950). This contained frivolous and humorous details of numerous escapades that involved the sextet during early field trips; similar numbers followed.

A preliminary field meeting, to make three friends out exploring the countryside sound rather more grand than it was, was to the old mine workings ('caves') in the North Downs near Godstone, Surrey (Fig. 1A). One day excursions such as this one occurred on Sundays (indeed, on 22 consecutive Sundays in the first year of the FGS!), in the days when a working week was commonly five and a half or six days. Ron Gravener, David Tulett and JSHC formed the select party. Transport for these early field excursions was primarily by public transport and Godstone could be easily reached by Green Line bus from south London. This first underground meeting was supported by the only piece of caving equipment, a lead-line; protective

helmets would come later, though supplemented here and there by ex-Army 'tin hats'.

Reporting back to the others in the class at the BTI enthused Ray Milbourne, Alf Harris and Bert Elphick. A return visit to Godstone was made on Sunday, 7th March, and was recorded as the date of foundation of the FGS in later documents; this indicates that the earlier trip was made in late February (29th or 22nd?) of 1948, a leap year.

The group gave itself the name of the Freelance Geological Society before the next field meeting to a chalk pit at Burham, north Kent (Fig. 1B). 'Freelance' was chosen to emphasise the diverse range of interests of the membership, rather than any indication of independence. Despite a litter of mortar bombs and shell splinters in the quarry, collecting was better than Godstone. It was only on leaving that a sign proclaiming "DANGER KEEP OUT W.D." [= War Department] was discovered. Other excursions in this first year included a dene hole (see below) and chalk quarry near Biggin Hill, Surrey (Fig. 1C), 'caves' at Hosey Common near Westerham, Kent (Fig. 1D), the Gault Clay pit near Dunton Green, Kent (Fig. 1E), Box Hill, Surrey, for the chalk escarpment and a pit in the Lower Greensand near Dorking, Surrey (Fig. 1F). Dene holes were of particular interest; "An ancient excavation of a kind found in chalk-formations in England and France, consisting of a narrow shaft sunk down to the chalk, and there widening out into one or more chambers" (Brown, 1993, p. 632). New members included Joyce Bulford, Joan Measure and Keith Chambers.

With the acquisition of ropes and ladders, thoughts of visiting dene holes in Joydens Wood, near Bexley, Kent, were revived (Fig. 1G). Some of these holes date back to at least Roman times (Le Gear, 1992) and had been dug through the overlying Thanet Sands (Paleocene) to reach the underlying Cretaceous chalk. The chalk was either spread over the nearby farm land to reduce the acidity of the soil or used for cement manufacture. The dene holes reached an average of about 10 m, but could be much deeper. The shafts varied in diameter between 1 and 2 m. On reaching the chalk, the shaft was extended for the sake of safety before digging from one to, commonly, three trefoil chambers.

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