

Manchester Geographical Society — Past and Present

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Manchester's status as the world's first industrial city meant that its merchants and manufacturers took a great interest in trade and commerce throughout the world. The origins of the Manchester Geographical Society are closely linked to the importance of Manchester as a centre of trade, and in 1879 there was a proposal to found a Society of Commercial Geography in the city. This initiative was not successful, but the Geographical Society was founded in 1884, after H.M. Stanley had spoken in the Free Trade Hall. His lecture on Central Africa bore the sub-title 'The Importance of the Scientific Study of Geography', and the key theme of his lecture was that geographical knowledge, commercial enterprise and civilisation should go hand in hand.

The Inaugural address to the Society was given by the President of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, and the Society was aimed at the businessmen rather than the educationalists of the city. But the Objectives of the new Society did include the aim to encourage "the teaching of geography in schools and colleges". By the end of the century, similar societies had been founded in Edinburgh, Liverpool, Southampton and Tyneside.



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RULES OF THE SOCIETY.

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TO NON-MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY, ONE SHILLING.

Very soon the Manchester Society had organised lectures (often about Africa and the Far East), created its own panel of lecturers (called the Victorians), began running excursions, and founded a *Journal*. By 1890 the *Journal* ran to 466 pages, dealing with topics as diverse as African exploration reports, the teaching of geography, Amazonian resources, British North Borneo, death rates in Preston, seventeenth century Persian trade, cannibals on Rossel Island, the causes of Languedoc, and the forests of the Caucasus. Perhaps the Society's biggest single early achievement was the appointment of Henry Yule Oldham as a Lecturer in Political and Commercial Geography at Owens College in 1891, whose stipend was partly paid by the Society. Thus the Society was partly responsible for the introduction of university level geographical education in the city. The Society built its own premises in St Mary's Parsonage in 1905.

After the First World War, W.H. Barker (Reader in Geography at the University) became one of the Honorary Secretaries, and he began to introduce more geographical (rather than travel) lectures into the Society's programmes. The Society opened a fund to endow a Chair of Geography at the proposed Honours School of Geography at Manchester University, which was filled by Prof H.J. Fleure in 1930; this represented the successful end of a fifty-year campaign.

Title Page of the first 'MGS Journal'.

Decline

The Depression hit both Manchester and its Geographical Society. The Society progressively lost interest in academic geography, and concentrated on travel lectures of the 'Romance of Ruritania' type, and became, for most of its members, a lecture, tea and occasional outing club. The Society's first historian, Nigel Brown, did not pull his punches about what happened on the Society's Council from the mid-1930s:

The new generation of lay councillors were beginning to make their presence felt. During the next fifteen years this group was . . . to imperil the worth of the body which they governed . . . and they left it little more than a travel club . . .

[Professor] Fleure and the staff of his department would have given assistance even under such adverse conditions, had an appeal been made to them, but the 'new generation', acutely aware of their own geographical shortcomings and fearful of their own eclipse, would have as little connection as possible with the university (Brown, 1971, pp.84-5)

This antagonism between the lay Council members of the Society and the academic staff in the Manchester University Department, persisted, on and off, for the next fifty years. What should have been a symbiotic relationship was often nonexistent. Worse, these lay members reduced the influence of the Society in the geographical world at large.

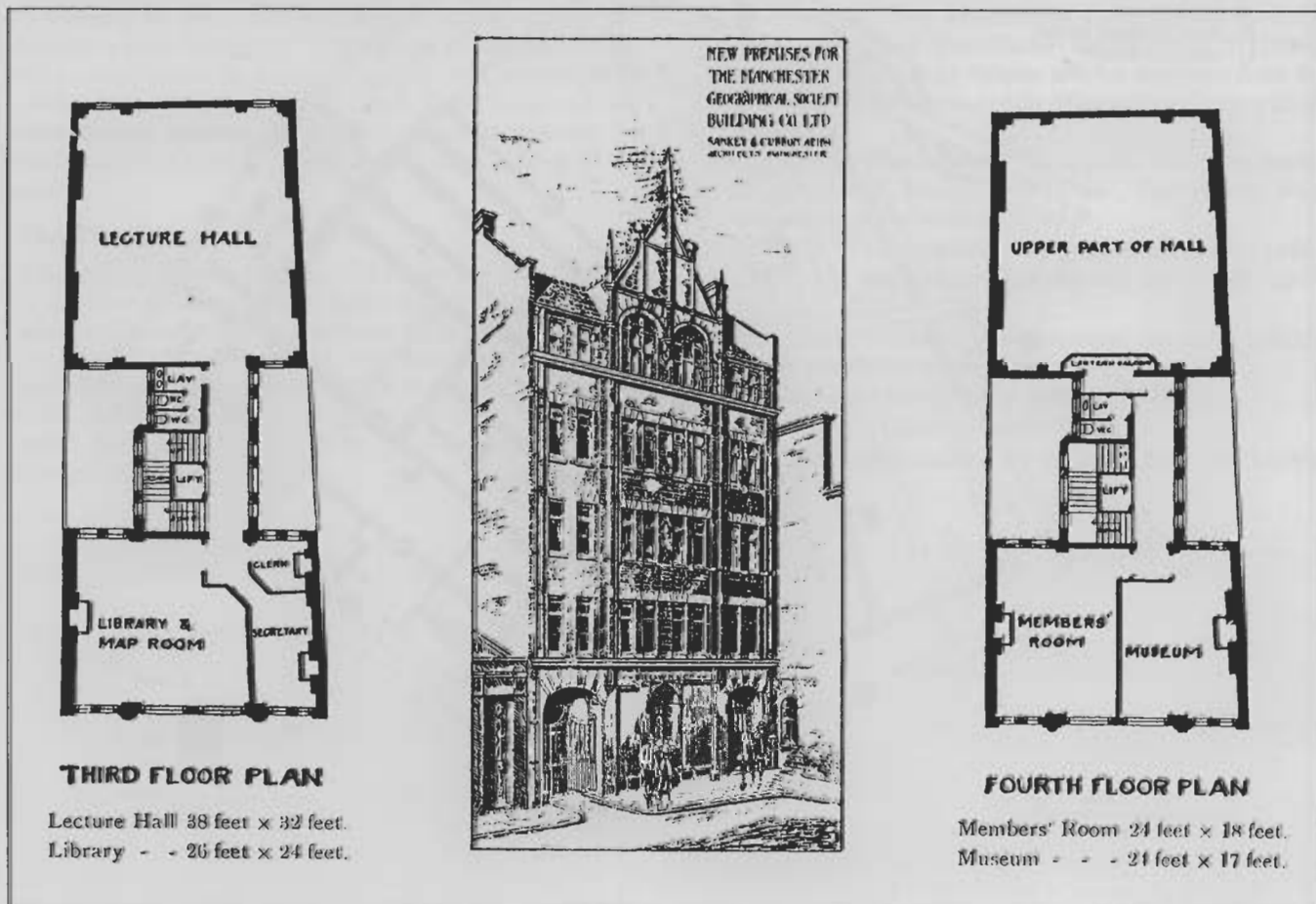
There were several attempts to revive the more academic geographical interests of the Society after the Second World War. These included more lectures by professional geographers, a study circle, and field excursions. However,

the *Journal* got thinner, appeared irregularly, and eventually ceased publication after the 1962 edition. In 1970 the Society's library was given on permanent loan to Manchester University Library. Perhaps a measure of the separation was the fact that the present author, a student, researcher and then lecturer from 1966, knew virtually nothing of the Society's activities until asked to become its Assistant Editor in 1981. Even as recently as 1987 there were only two academics on the Council of the Society (which then had a potential membership of thirty-five).

The Society's history up to 1973 can be summed up under seven headings:

- 1) the Society's origins gave it a strong commercial/travel orientation;
- 2) it always ran a lecture series, concentrating on travel rather than academic topics;
- 3) its early links with higher education were reflected in its role in the appointment of a Lecturer in 1891, and a Professor in 1930;
- 4) relations with the University were generally distant from the mid-1930s;
- 5) it published a journal with a mix of exploration, travel and academic material until 1962;
- 6) it amassed a large library, which was given on permanent loan to Manchester University in 1970; and
- 7) it built, and then had to sell its own premises in 1973.

This sale generated a substantial amount of capital, which meant that, after a long period of financial difficulty, the Society at last had the funds to give much more support to



The Society's former premises in St Mary's Parsonage.

geography. But at first it did little other than support expeditions and give grants to the then two University departments (Manchester and Salford) for the purchase of books and maps.

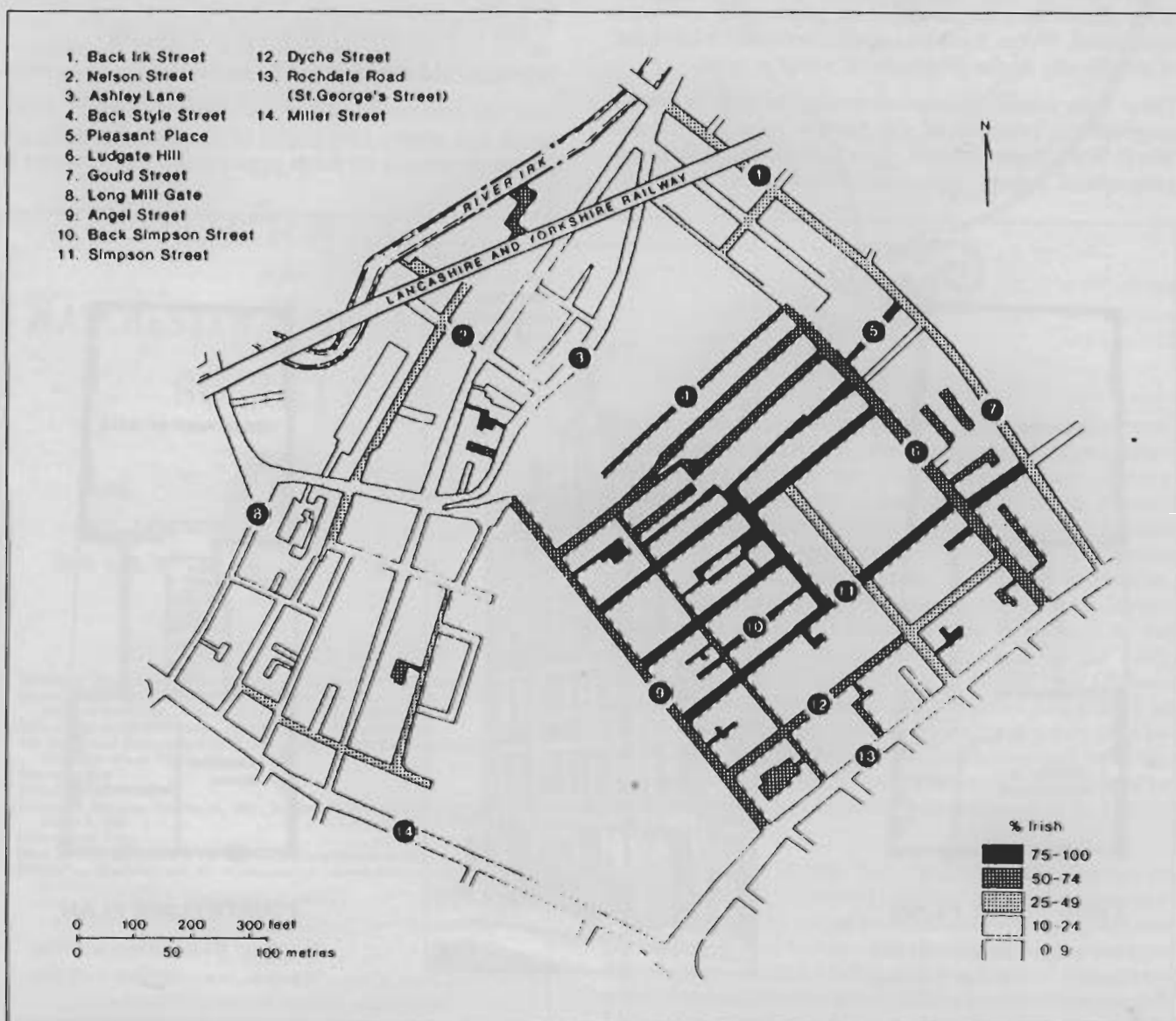
Revival

Perhaps the turning point was the re-launch of the Society's *Journal* as *The Manchester Geographer* in 1980, which from 1986 concentrated on publishing articles on the north-west of England. In the Centenary year of 1984, a special issue was published, containing a history of the Society's *Journal* by the former Manchester University Professor, T.W. Freeman, which reprinted seventeen articles from the Old Series *Journal*. At the same time an exhibition of the Society's atlases was held in the John Rylands Library. Another Centenary initiative was to support part-time postgraduate scholars in the then two University departments.

Since then other innovations have included more lectures open to the public (from 1986), an academic lecture series (from 1989), occasional workshops and conferences (from 1990), two research funds (for University staff from 1990, and for students from 1996), two prizes for the best students in the (by then) three Geography departments (Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan, Salford; 1992). It also funded

and subsequently published the Society's Library catalogue in 1992 (which catalogued the collection and made it known and accessible again after a gap of twenty-two years). On the other hand, the Society ceased to support expeditions in 1996, having noted 'that so many other sources of expedition funding had become available. The Society now keeps both the types and amounts of its expenditure under constant review; advised by its Academic Committee. The most recent innovation is the creation of a fieldwork guidebook called *Exploring Greater Manchester*, based on experience gleaned from all three departments. It covers topics including urban, social, historical and physical geography. It is available on floppy disc, and its twenty exercises are aimed at a wide audience: "If you live, learn, work, research or teach in Manchester, why not explore its potential by trying one of these exercises?"

A good example of the kind of work being supported is that undertaken by Mervyn Busteed and Rob Hodgson on the nineteenth century Irish communities in Manchester. They applied for and received several research grants to pay for data to be extracted from the Census Enumerators' Books for the Angel Meadow area, and then published their results in *The Manchester Geographer* (Vol.14, 1993). The sheer concentration of Irish in the area between Angel Hill and Ludgate Hill can be seen in their map. They concluded



Proportion Irish in Angel Meadow, 1851.

that

... the Irish community in Manchester was one of the largest in nineteenth century urban Britain but it had a significance beyond its considerable numbers ... This article has concentrated ... on the geography of Irish settlement in one working class district ... there was a geographical pattern of separation of the Irish from the host community ... this segregation was the result of a certain reserve — which occasionally erupted into an open hostility — on the part of the host population, some of whom regarded the Irish as a religious, political and economic threat ...
(*The Manchester Geographer*, 14, 1993, p.22)

In the same issue, Chris Law wrote on contemporary tourism in Greater Manchester, noting that the idea of the city as a tourist destination had changed dramatically since the early 1980s. He concluded that, despite Granada Studios and Castlefield, the city still has a long way to go. All recent issues of *The Manchester Geographer* have included articles on Manchester; for example, Chinese catering (Vol.14, 1993), the local economy and labour market (Vol.13, 1992), transport developments, and conservation (Vol.12, 1991). The Journal was renamed *The North West Geographer* in 1997, with articles on regional journals, crime and hospital closures.

As we have seen, for most of its history, the Society has not had a strong representation of professional academic geographers on its ruling Council. Matters came to a head during the first half of the 1980s, when there was a period of virtual civil war between conservatives and modernisers on Council. However, after a very unhappy period, three academics (one from each department) were newly elected to Council in 1987, and the present author became the Society's Hon. Secretary. The changes of the early 1980s were consolidated by major changes to the Constitution in 1988, which streamlined the Council. There is now a fairly even balance between the lay and academic members on the Society's Council; antagonism is now a thing of the past.

The Present

After selling its own building, the Society rented an office in the Corn Exchange, until being forced out by the IRA bomb explosion in 1996. The move to its present office in the Friends' Meeting House was very fortunate, as the Society's lectures had been held in that building for many years. As a result of the move, the Society's archives (to 1985) have been deposited in the Greater Manchester Record Office.

Today, the Society's membership is relatively small, consisting mostly of lay members whose main interest is in the lecture series. In addition to these lectures, the Society now concentrates its activities on higher education through the activities described above, and has very strong links with the three Geography Departments at Manchester University, the University of Salford, and, most recently, Manchester Metropolitan University. In the world of Geography the Society maintains links with the Royal Geographical Society (including an annual joint lecture), the local branch of the Geographical Association (two joint lectures), the only other surviving regional geographical society (the Royal Scottish), and, most recently, the Council for British Geography. It continues to correspond and exchange journals with several foreign geographical societies. There is clearly room for both academic and popular activities within the Society's remit. The Society now continuously monitors its activities and expenditure, responding to the changing needs of geography in the region. A Society which was in danger of disintegration only twelve years ago, at the time of its Centenary, is now looking forward to its second century with considerable confidence.

Membership of the Society currently costs £10 a year, and members are entitled to attend all the Tuesday lunchtime lectures held at the Friends' Meeting House from October to March each year. Information about the Society, its lectures, and *The North West Geographer* can be obtained from its office in the Friends' Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS.

Further Reading

- T.N.L. Brown, *The History of the Manchester Geographical Society, 1884-1950* (Manchester, 1971)
- T.W. Freeman, 'The Manchester Geographical Society, 1884-1984', *The Manchester Geographer*, 5 (1984), pp.2-19. [contains seventeen articles reprinted from the old series of the *Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society*]
- B.P. Hindle, 'Turmoil and Transition: the Manchester Geographical Society, 1973-96' *The North West Geographer* (forthcoming)
- M.D. Leigh, 'The Manchester Geographical Society: 1884-1979', *The Manchester Geographer*, 1/1 (1980), pp.7-14.
- A. Lloyd, Manchester Geographical Society Library Catalogue (Manchester, 1992).
- The Manchester Geographer* (1980-93).
- The North West Geographer* (1997-).
- All the above are available for purchase from the Society.