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## WRITTEN IN HISTORY: The Geological Society in the 19th century

Caroline Lam reports on the success of our fundraising campaign to preserve the Society's historically important letter books

**IN THE AUTUMN** of 2022, the Society launched *Written in History*, a campaign to fund the conservation of twelve volumes of letters sent to the Assistant Secretary's office between 1834 and 1880. Despite being one of the primary records of the Society's history, the letter books had to be closed off due to their poor condition.

The good news is that thanks to the generosity of numerous donors, *Written in History* has now reached its fundraising target, which has allowed us to conserve all the volumes. For the first time, we can read letters that have not been looked at since they were originally bound into the volumes around 150 years ago.

The letters have filled many gaps in our history. To celebrate, this article provides a small glimpse into the everyday workings of the Society and its Fellows and staff in the 19th century.

### **Beware the Collector**

Many of the letters in the volumes concern the payment of Fellows' annual fees. However if you hadn't paid your annual subscription promptly, you might receive an unwelcome visit from the Society's 'Collector'. The Collector's role was to chase up outstanding fees and if you were particularly unlucky, he might turn up at your home, or even worse, at your place of work. He received 5% of the

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amount collected, so it was in his best interests to be as efficient as possible.

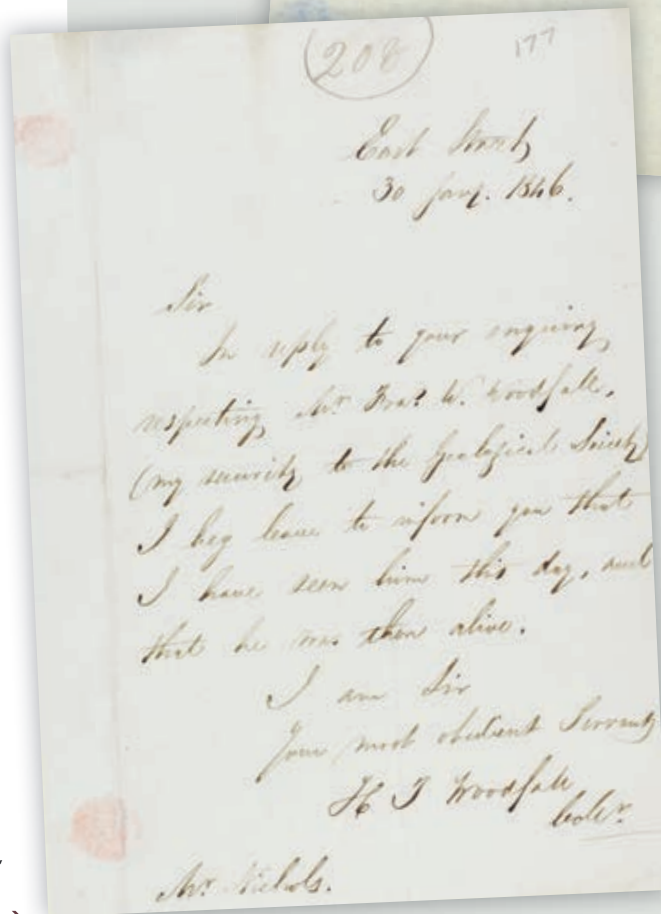
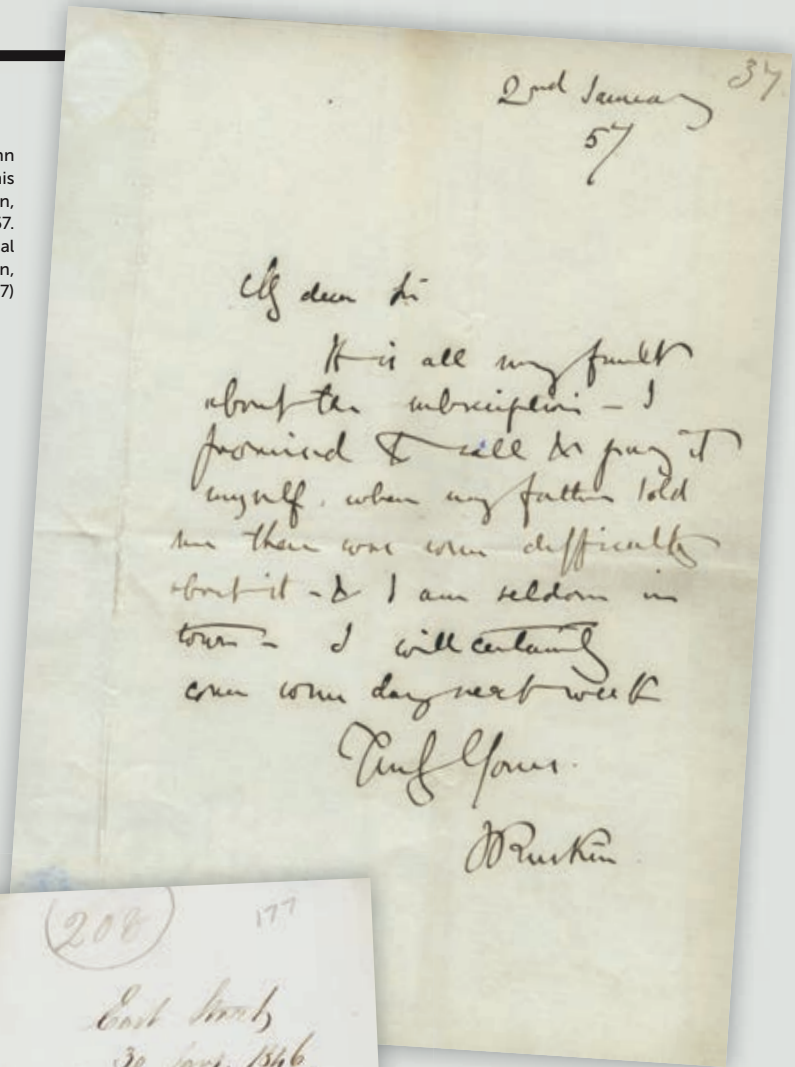
Mr Hamond, the Society’s longstanding Collector, had been sacked in December 1842 after failing to chase up fees worth £252, which was around 9% of the total annual subscriptions across the membership. Not only that, but Hamond had suspiciously forgotten to record the payments of those who had given him money and didn’t bank the takings. Mr H J Woodfall was appointed Collector in January 1843, and he and his brother Francis had to sign a bond as security (that is, an agreement to underwrite any financial discrepancies).

Even notable Fellows fell foul of the Collector, as evidenced by an apologetic letter from John Ruskin [1819 – 1900], who had been a Fellow since 1840. Despite being a successful art critic and patron of the arts (notably to the Pre-Raphaelites), his annual fees were still being paid by his father! Woodfall paid a visit to Ruskin senior at his wine importing business but was refused payment because Ruskin’s father believed he had already paid.

**Resident or Non-resident?**

Until 1862, there were two rates of membership fees. A ‘Resident’ lived within a 20-mile radius of London and subsequently paid the higher rate of three guineas per year – presumably as you were more likely to use the Society’s facilities. If you lived outside London or at least spent no more than 60 days in town, you were classed as a ‘Non-resident’. Depending on what date you joined, a →

Letter from John Ruskin about his overdue subscription, 2 Jan 1857. © The Geological Society of London, GSL/L/R/14/37



One of a number of letters from Woodfall assuring the Society that his brother Francis, who had agreed to act as security, is still alive. © The Geological Society of London, GSL/L/R/9/177

188 a.

J. Charlton begs to lay before the Council the expense he pays by the year for extra labour in the house & which has been paid by him since his appointments here & mentioned to the Presidents on three previous occasions -

Man for Stoves, coaling & dirty work for 8 months in the year at 2/6 a week £ 11.0.0

Woman attending for Evening Meetings & on following days & charing (exclusive of washing stairs which is allowed for) - 5.12.0

Note from Isaac Charlton [1855] claiming expenses for the payment of casual workers who did the more menial tasks around the Society, such as a woman who washed the stairs. © The Geological Society of London, GSL/L/R/188A)

13  
Geological Society  
April 5<sup>th</sup> 1843.

Gentlemen,

I am under the necessity of submitting the following statement upon your notice - The salary I am at present receiving, in my present position, is insufficient to meet the respectability & credit due to the office I have the honour to hold; a position which requires me to employ my little habits and disbursements: the numerous & arduous duties also, which press upon me, call for the devotion of most of my private hours, which before were otherwise directed to your consideration and service. I have the honour to remain, Gentlemen, Your most Obedt. Servant  
Chas. Nichols

The President & Council of the Geological Society.

Letter from Charles Nichols seeking a pay rise, 5 April 1843. © The Geological Society of London, GSL/L/R/8/12

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Non-resident either paid no annual subscription or a much-reduced rate.

There are plentiful letters from Fellows moving or coming back from abroad informing the Society of their Resident or Non-resident status. As the difference in the fees was the equivalent to around £200 today, Fellows kept a keen eye on their status.

One tetchy letter came from Sir Edward Belcher [1799 – 1877] who had suddenly found himself a Resident after his naval career was cut short in 1854. He had just escaped court martial after prematurely abandoning the ships under his command during one of the expeditions to rescue the lost explorer Sir John Franklin.

In the letter Belcher complains that his breakfast had been rudely interrupted by the Collector looking for payment of Resident's fees. Splitting hairs, Belcher

stated that until 18th February, the date when Woodfall called, he had technically only resided in London for 48 days that year so was therefore not yet a Resident! Belcher would resign his membership the next month.

**The Society's staff**

The day-to-day running of the Society was undertaken by a small team of dedicated staff. The House Porter, Isaac Charlton

[c.1814 – 1892], lived onsite with his wife, who acted as housekeeper. So, while women were unable to become Fellows, they clearly did work for the Society but in servant-type roles. Generally the names of servants (both male and female) are absent from the record (one unusual letter names a potential maid, Louisa Groves, who would have been one of the lowest paid members of staff). Charlton's wife is never mentioned by name, but according to the Census, the first Mrs Charlton was named Ann (Charlton seems to have later remarried someone called Emily).


Charlton held the post of House Porter for 50 years, finally retiring in 1891. In comparison, his successor, John Clarke, lasted three days. The Society's clerk found Clarke so inebriated on the doormat that he had to be carried inside. He was quickly dismissed.

Another long-standing staff member was Charles Nichols, who started work for the Society in 1839. His job title of 'clerk' is deceptive as he essentially took on many of the duties that were supposed to be assigned to the Assistant Secretary, William Lonsdale [1794 – 1871]. The health of Lonsdale, who joined the Society in 1829, had broken down due to the heavy workload. Not only was Lonsdale required to run the entire administrative side of the Society, but he was also to act as Librarian, Curator and Editor of the journal too. Despite being relieved of curatorial duties in 1838, Lonsdale's health never recovered and he had to finally retire in 1842.

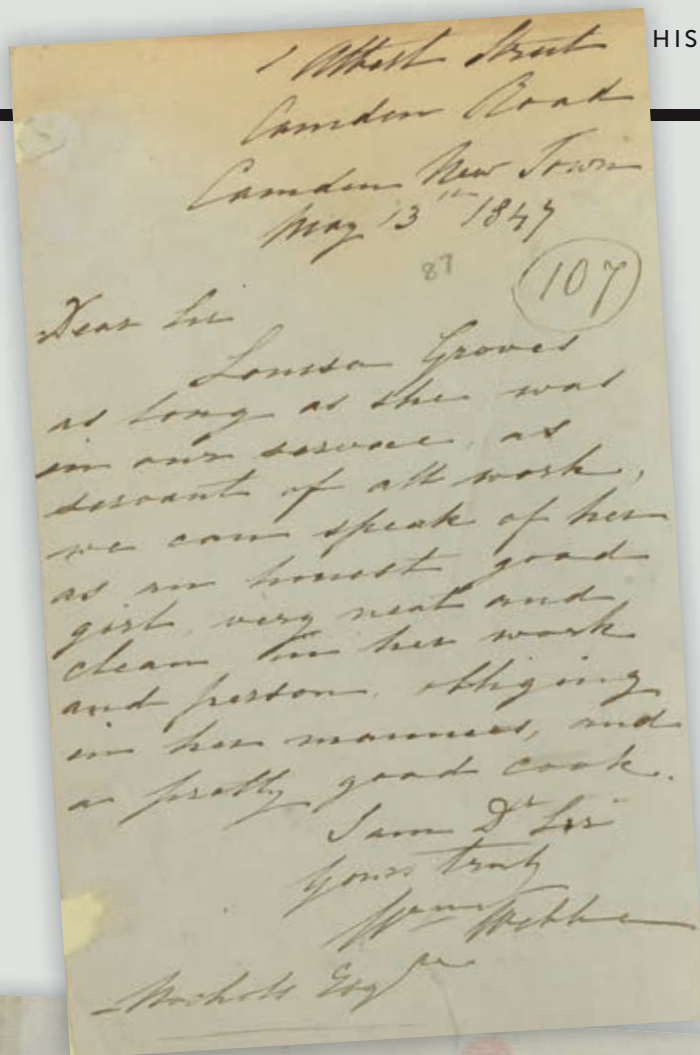
That Nichols was effectively acting as Assistant Secretary is evidenced by a letter – a second request for a pay rise – dated 5th April 1843. The first request, in October 1840, saw his wages rise from £75 to £84 per annum.

In the letter he writes, "The salary I am at present receiving, is, I have found, insufficient to meet the respectability & credit due to the office I have the honor to hold; a position which exposes me to many little liabilities and disbursements: the numerous & arduous duties also, which press upon me, call for the devotion of most of my private hours, which before were otherwise directed."

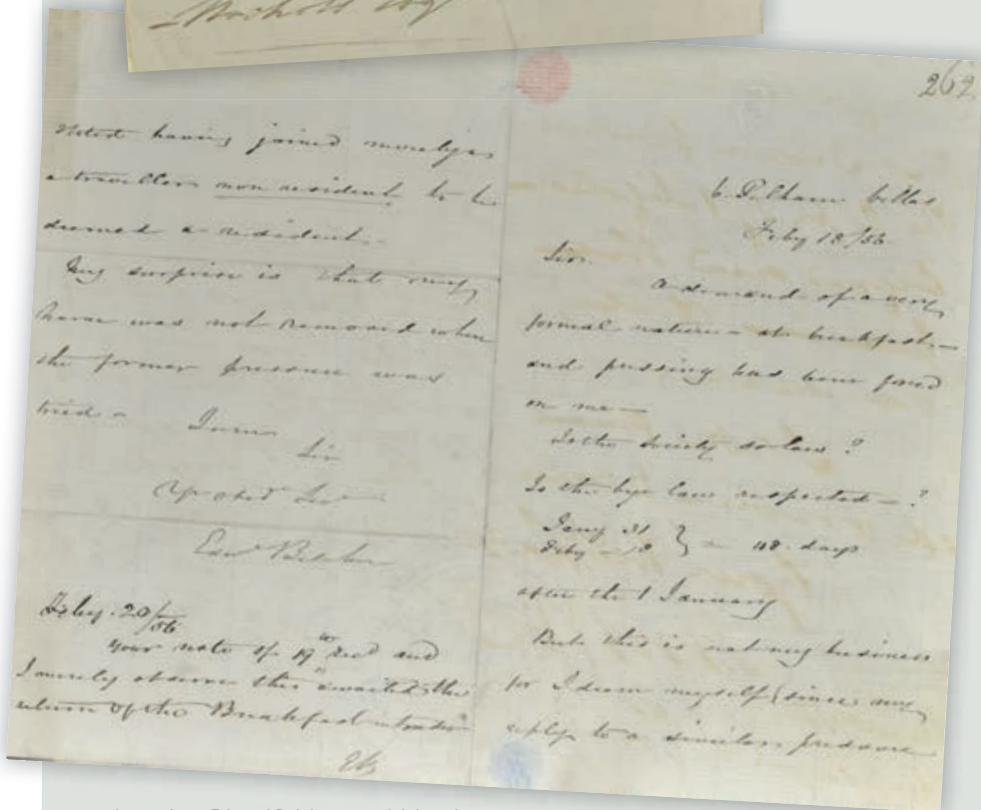
The 'little liabilities and disbursements' were the expectation that he would have to pay numerous bills out of his own pocket and claim the money back. More interesting is the hint of what he did in his private hours before taking up employment as the clerk. This could be his side career moonlighting as a society entertainer under the stage name 'Charles Charles'.

Nichols' request was successful and his wages rose to £100 per annum. On his retirement in 1861, the Society awarded him the equivalent of one year's wages in recognition of his long service. 

**We'd like to thank our many generous donors for helping us reach our target.**



Letter of reference for Louisa Groves, maid. (© The Geological Society of London, GSL/L/R/10/87)



Letter from Edward Belcher complaining about the Collector, 18 Feb 1856. (© The Geological Society of London, GSL/L/R/13/262)

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