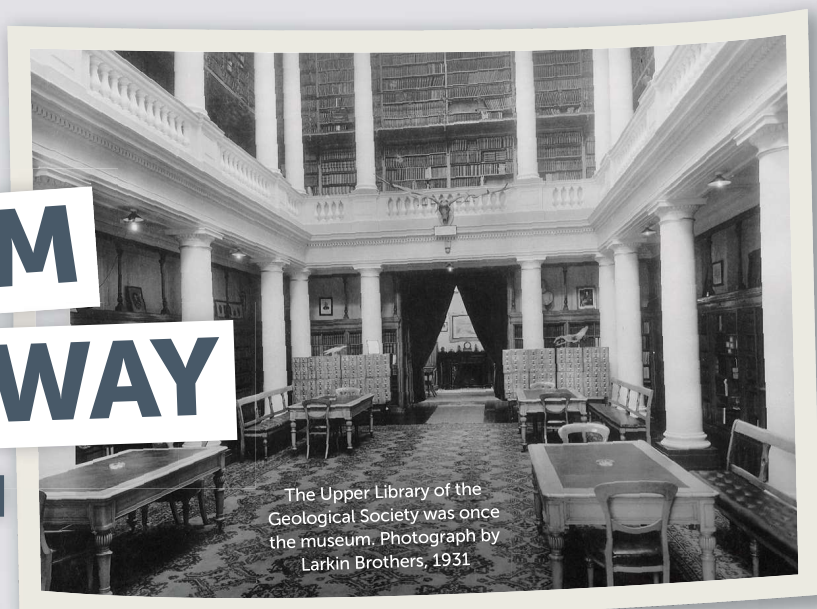


# THE MUSEUM THAT GOT AWAY

NINA MORGAN RECOUNTS THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM



The Upper Library of the Geological Society was once the museum. Photograph by Larkin Brothers, 1931

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**WHEN THE FOUNDERS** of the Geological Society of London hit on the idea of setting up a museum to serve as a research tool for experienced geologists and an educational resource for the rest, they invited members to donate their fossil and rock finds. They could hardly have imagined how eagerly their requests would be met. Nor could they anticipate the ensuing chaos. With donations pouring in from around the world, issues soon arose about how to safely store and curate the masses of material collected.

## A curator's life

A succession of curators and keepers battled these problems without success. Among them was Thomas Webster [1773–1844], Keeper of the Museum from 1812 until 1827. Overwhelmed by the workload and affected by the bitter atmosphere, he suffered at least two long spells of serious illness.

His successor, William Lonsdale [1794–1871], suffered a similar fate, and was relieved of his curatorship in 1836 when his health broke down from overwork.

The museum's problems caught the eye of an editor at *Nature*, who outlined some of the difficulties faced in an article published on 20 January 1876:

"Like many other institutions of gradual growth, the history of this museum has never been written, and very few people, even of the Fellows of the Society, know what it contains, for there has never been a printed catalogue."

## Neglected and underused

As a result, it seems the museum was not well used. A notice in *The Geologist: Being a Record of Investigations in Geology, Mineralogy, &c.*, first published in 1842, reported that the museum was "not visited by a dozen students in the twelvemonth". This, *Nature* commented, was despite the museum housing important collections, including "the extensive series of fossils presented by Sir Roderick Murchison, from which were drawn the figures in his world-renowned 'Siluria'. The fossils figured in the papers by Murchison and Sedgwick in describing the structure of Wales and the Lake District are also there ... Among the many donors are the well-known names of Sir Henry de la Beche, Sir Charles Lyell, Greenough, Warburton and Sir Woodbine Parish... the old red sandstone fishes presented by Lady Gordon Cumming are remarkable for their beauty as well as for the extent of the collection."


## Breaking up

To make matters worse, the collection had to be packed up and moved several times. As the *Nature* article noted:

"The previous changes in the locality of the museum have been as follows:— In No. 4 Garden Court Temple, the first fixed habitation of the Society (June 1809), the collection was commenced. In June 1816 to 20, Bedford Street; in the autumn of 1828, to Somerset House; at Somerset House it has remained till this last move to Burlington House."

By 1911, it all became too much—the museum was broken up. Apart from a few specimens, including an *Ichthyosaurus* jaw

found by Mary Anning [1799–1847] and the rhino skull donated by Henry Warburton [1784–1858], the collection was split mainly between the Museum of Practical Geology in Jermyn Street (then part of the British Geological Survey) and the Natural History Museum.

Although the Geological Society Museum is no more, it lives on in the form of temporary exhibits in the Society's library. "We borrow material back from the Natural History Museum and British Geological Survey quite frequently", explains Caroline Lam, Archivist at the Geological Society. The display on show in February 2026 included *Iguanodon* teeth given by Gideon Mantell [1790–1852] in the 1820s and a display of donations made by female collectors is in the offing (see page 10). Now that really will be something to get your teeth into! 

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