

UNEARTHED

Hutton's enduring influence on creativity

James Hutton's tercentenary has inspired exhibitions, concerts and artworks across Scotland. Steve Garrett reflects on how creative practice is sparking new ways of experiencing deep time

2 026 MARKS 300 YEARS since the birth of James Hutton, often regarded as the founder of modern geology. Across Scotland, his tercentenary has inspired exhibitions, concerts, poetry, film and visual art that celebrate not only Hutton himself, but the enduring influence of his ideas.

These celebrations have formed part of the Scottish Geology Festival (scottishgeologytrust.org/festival), culminating in '*Hutton 300: The Concert*' in June. Performed to a capacity audience in Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh—fittingly close to Hutton's grave—the concert brought together geology-inspired poetry, film and music to explore the intersection of deep time and geological processes on creative work, undoubtedly raising public awareness of Hutton's legacy.

Celebrating a pioneer

Why should we celebrate a pioneer of our discipline from hundreds of years ago? First and foremost, field observation was the foundation of Hutton's philosophical enquiry. His four-part *Theory of the Earth* (1795) evolved only after a lifetime of observing weather and soils on his farm and examining field relationships between rocks. Following Hutton's example,

observation remains the foundation of geology and is also a springboard for creative work.

Yet Hutton's legacy extends beyond careful observation. He used evidence to question powerful dogma, including prevailing ideas about the age of Earth and the formation of igneous rocks. This willingness to challenge assumptions remains an excellent example for geologists and artists alike, for whom curiosity and continual reappraisal are central to the creative process.

This openness to new ideas was also reflected in the company Hutton kept. As part of the close-knit community of scientists, engineers and philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, he routinely exchanged ideas. The cross-disciplinary nature of these personal connections provides a powerful model for the collaborations between geologists and artists that are flourishing today.

Perhaps this is why Hutton continues to resonate so strongly. A doctor, chemical engineer, farmer and natural philosopher, he was also an engaging companion who inspired great loyalty amongst his friends. This puts a relatable face to a radical thinker whose insights fundamentally altered humanity's perception of time,

'An end, a beginning.' Garron Point on the east coast of Scotland captured in pencil and yellow ochre, marking the point where the Highland Boundary Fault vanishes under the waves
© Calum Wallis



and whom many now see as deserving much wider global recognition.

Sharing perspectives

The vast extent of geological time that Hutton revealed can be difficult to grasp because it lies beyond ordinary human experience. Science provides evidence—strata, fossils, soil samples, data, climate records—but creative practice can translate that evidence into something felt emotionally, making the incomprehensible almost tangible.

Shared experience is often rooted in the field. The new Deep Time Trail at Siccar Point (james-hutton.org/deep-time-trail) invites visitors to stand before the famous unconformity that inspired Hutton's vision of "the abyss of time", with poetry, music and sound art linked to QR codes on way markers along the route.



Other artists have similarly retraced Hutton's footsteps, finding inspiration directly in the landscapes that shaped his thinking.

Geological ideas continue to resonate beyond science. Unconformities have inspired work in fabric, glass and writing, becoming metaphors for cultural loss and forgotten histories, while the slow movement of tectonic plates and the sudden rupture of earthquakes mirror the rhythms of personal life and the disruption of change. Even geological materials themselves—from ancient gneiss and sediments to synthetic Anthropocene debris—have become a shared creative language through which artists and geologists explore Earth's history.

Engaging generations

This year's Hutton-inspired exhibitions are reaching multiple generations,

particularly those events that are free or low-cost and located in city centres or other easily accessible venues. Younger audiences can be engaged very effectively, but often inconsistently if schools and parents do not take children to these events—a challenge exacerbated by geology's increasing absence from

“Geology reminds us of our insignificance within deep time and our power to alter the future trajectory of life on Earth”

Angela Palmer, artist

school and university curricula.

Creative events can bridge this gap because they allow science to be encountered physically rather than purely academically. Hands-on workshops create a direct connection with geological materials, while exhibitions encourage visitors to engage with rocks, landscapes and deep time in ways that are both intellectual and emotional.

Senior 'lifelong learners' are often among the most engaged audiences, with the time, capacity and resources to participate fully. Hutton himself was a role model for lifelong curiosity: he was 62 years old when he first visited Siccar Point and crystallised a lifetime of observing weather, soils, erosion and geology into one of the most influential insights in Earth science. →



'The Unconformities',
as identified by Hutton
at Jedburgh, Castle
Street and Salisbury
Crag in Edinburgh
depicted in Earth-
pigment dyed cotton
organza and silk
organza
© Louise Bennetts

“How extraordinary that Hutton stood in front of these familiar rocks, yet drew such extraordinary conclusions”

Louise Bennetts, artist

Reframing concerns

Hutton saw Earth as continually changing. Today, however, we are acutely aware of the unprecedented pace of human-induced environmental change. Against this backdrop, artists and creators can address pressing questions about climate change and biodiversity loss, responding to what has become known as solastalgia—the emotional distress caused by environmental change.

Creative work can help by building

a more emotional and reciprocal connection to Earth, revealing its beauty, complexity and deep time through materials. Local environmental action can also include artists reframing and reusing materials that might otherwise be under-appreciated or considered waste, encouraging audiences to see value in what is often overlooked.

In doing so, Hutton's concept of deep time can encourage greater humility and care for Earth, alongside a recognition that human wellbeing is inextricably linked to sustained biodiversity. From audience reactions at the many events this year, it is clear that creative work can restore a sense of curiosity and wonder. Viewers become aware that the rocks beneath our feet are not an inert backdrop, but an archive of planetary memory extending far beyond human history. Geological creativity can also slow people down, encouraging contemplation and holding people in an encounter with Earth long enough for perceptions to shift—something increasingly rare in a culture that values immediacy.

Three hundred years after Hutton reshaped our understanding of Earth, artists, musicians, poets and geologists continue to reinterpret his ideas for new audiences. The celebrations of this landmark year suggest that geology is not only a science of understanding the planet, but also a source of creative inspiration, curiosity and hope. If Hutton's legacy has been renewed in 2026, perhaps it will continue inspiring fresh ways of seeing Earth long into the future. **G**

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the thoughtful perspectives from geologists (Lucy Williams, Angus Miller), poets (Jack Cooper), musicians (Michael Begg, Karine Polwart), artists (Calum Wallis, Louise Bennetts, Angela Palmer, Becky Little), and those who, like myself, work in both geological and creative worlds (Patrick Corbett, Ruth Siddall, Phoebe Sleath). I encourage the reader to explore their work further for greater insight and inspiration.

STEVE GARRETT

Earth scientist and musician, UK