

John and Jennifer Powell* uncover a fascinating connection between William Smith and the man who immortalised him in marble.

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At the recent opening of a new building dedicated to the ‘Father of English Geology’ on 25 June 2009 at Keyworth, the great man’s presence was made palpable by a number of exhibits – among which is a marble bust of William Smith by notable Victorian sculptor Matthew Noble. Here lies a fascinating link between Smith, the sculptor Noble, Sir John Johnstone and the village of Hackness, near Scarborough.

The fine bust of William Smith was deposited in the Wandsworth store of the Natural History Museum (NHM) where it had been moved in 1985 when the Geological Survey (then the Institute of Geological Sciences) transferred ownership of many of its collections to the NHM. Although listed in John Thackray’s catalogue of the NHM collections, the bust was hidden in a corner behind models of the atomic structure of crystals, and had acquired a fine patina of cobwebs and dust. Thanks to the help of NHM staff, especially David Smith and Jill Darrell, the bust was transferred, on long-term loan, to the new William Smith Building. Here he sits on a plinth of dark grey Carboniferous Limestone from Castletown, Isle of Man.



Many will be aware of the influence that Sir John Johnstone (1799-1869) great-great grandfather of the present Lord Derwent, had on the career and national recognition of William Smith. Following his release from debtors’ prison in 1819, Smith travelled and worked in northern England. He was employed to advise on the water supply to Scarborough, and later (in 1828) Sir John employed him as his estate manager at Hackness Hall. This appointment lasted until 1834, after which Smith acted as Sir John’s scientific adviser. Together with his nephew, renowned geologist John Phillips, Smith helped design and acted as Clerk of Works for the building of the Rotunda Museum, Scarborough (completed 1829). Here he illustrated the local geology and strata in correct stratigraphical order, together with representative fossils. The newly refurbished Rotunda Museum was opened in 2008 (Geoscientist, May 2008) by HRH Prince Charles in the presence of Lord Derwent, founding Chairman of the Scarborough Museums Trust.

During this late stage of his career, Smith lived in the village of Hackness, and the foundations of his Estate Manager’s office can still be seen at Hackness Hall Hotel. Indeed, the Middle Jurassic Callovian stratigraphical unit, the Hackness Rock Member (Osgodby Formation), was defined by Smith during his detailed geological survey of the estate, and his original hand-coloured, ‘six-and-half-inches to the mile’ geological map of the Hackness Hills was published in 1832. Hackness Rock (a sandstone) was used in the construction of the original Rotunda Museum.

Coincidentally, the man who was eventually to become his sculptor, Matthew Noble, was born at Hackness in 1817, the son of stonemason Robert Noble, and served his apprenticeship with his father. His artistic abilities were spotted by Sir John, who arranged for him to study in London under renowned sculptor John Francis, with whom he lodged as a young married man. Sir John Johnston therefore fostered the careers of both William Smith and Matthew Noble. At the time of Smith's death



in 1839, Matthew Noble was 22 and, living in the same small village, it is likely that the two men were closely acquainted (Hugh Torrens, tells me that in a letter (1849) John Phillips notes that Noble “knew him [W.S.] familiarly at Hackness”)

Noble, then aged 33, was commissioned to produce the bust in 1850 for a sum of £50 - to commemorate the opening of the Museum of Practical Geology, South Kensington, in 1851. It is a replica of the bust that he made in 1848 for the memorial to Smith in St Peter's Church, Northampton, where Smith is buried. The original and copy were based on the famous oil portrait of Smith (Hugues Fourau, 1837) painted two years before Smith's death. However, the great man looks a good deal younger in Noble's sculpture - perhaps reflecting the artist's his earlier memories of a more youthful Smith with whom he was acquainted.

Noble worked mainly in the Manchester area, and regularly in Leeds. He exhibited at the Royal Academy, London from 1845 (aged 28) and first came to widespread public attention in 1856 after winning the competition to design the prestigious Monument to the Duke of Wellington in Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester. His prolific commissions in bronze and marble included many notable Victorians, such as Michael Faraday and Sir John Franklin, including pictorial reliefs illustrating his disastrous and incompetent search for the north-west passage.

Noble later acquired great fame and respect as a leading sculptor of portrait busts and statues often for public monuments, and was commissioned to make many sculptures of important figures, including Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, the Bishop of York, and many others. His monumental sculpture can be to be found various cities in the UK including London, Bradford, York, Manchester, as well as in India. Noted for his 'rare kindly qualities of heart and mind. Generous in his acts and in his sympathies' (according to his obituary in the Art Journal, 1876), he died at his home in Kensington in 1876, aged 56, leaving many works unfinished. There is a monument to him in St Peter's Church, Hackness,

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Sources

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