

William Baker (1787-1853)

Firstly can I say how pleased I am to be here this afternoon, as a representative of the Geological Society, for the rededication of this memorial to William Baker, one of our Fellows. As a geologist I am perhaps a little disappointed at his, or his family's, choice of stone. As you can see the limestone has weathered rather badly in sharp contrast to that of his friend, the engineer John Bowen.

Baker was born in 1787, the son of a Bridgwater butcher who partly grazed and farmed his own stock. His formal education seems to have been minimal, although he developed an interest in natural history as he visited neighbouring villages with his father. At 13 he was apprenticed to Mr Tuthill, a Bridgwater carrier. Recognising his lack of education, in his free time he read avidly, borrowing books and buying them with money he earned from making leather stocks for the Bridgwater Volunteers, for whom he played as a fifer from the age of 9 to 18. On completion of his apprenticeship he travelled, working at his trade, until returning to Bridgwater in 1809. Here he set himself up in a small shop in Fore Street, continuing to trade for over 40 years. Soon married, with ultimately 6 children, he became a respected local businessman, serving the town in a variety of roles - churchwarden, town councillor, alderman and magistrate (but never mayor).

Once he had settled back in Bridgewater, Baker became friendly with contemporary locally-based natural history enthusiasts with whom he rambled over the Quantocks and elsewhere in Somerset collecting specimens. These friends included the grocer Thomas Clark who observed flowers and trees, Robert Anstice who collected fish, with Baker himself concentrating on birds and insects. He also corresponded with

eminent naturalists, such as William Leach, a specialist in insects and crustacea at the British Museum and William Buckland, Reader in Geology at Oxford University.

It was his correspondence and later friendship with Buckland that led to his nomination and then election to Fellowship of the Geological Society in November 1842. Baker had a collection of curiosities and was said to own an alligator's head and a boa constrictor. The eccentric Buckland not only owned a wide range of animals but also declared his intention of eating his way through the animal kingdom. Dining with the Bucklands was an adventure, as almost any animal might be served up from mice on toast (said by his daughter to be not bad) to crocodile steak (said to be awful). Buckland regarded Baker highly as he not only nominated him for Fellowship but invited him to dine with him at the Geological Society Club, an exclusive dining club attended by a few senior Fellows.

Baker collected for the rest of his life, moving to larger premises in St Mary Street to provide more space for his collections and growing family. On the formation of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society he was appointed its first Secretary and presented 7 papers to it. In 1851 his health began to deteriorate but he remained active until his death two years later. About 80 of the principal inhabitants of the town, including the Mayor, attended his funeral, forming a procession from the Town Hall. In his monograph on Baker's life his friend Bowen records that "All seemed to feel his loss as that of an able, good and most kind man, who in the varied path of his life had uniformly endeavoured to do his duty". This is a tribute of which we could all be proud and I am sure that William Baker would be honoured that, 160 years after his death, the Mayor and citizens of Bridgwater, and others like me from further afield, are meeting to remember his life and celebrate his achievements as a public servant, naturalist and geologist.