

GALLERY REVIEW

THE CHURCHILL AND SARSDEN HERITAGE CENTRE, CHURCHILL, OXFORDSHIRE

by Owen R. Green

It is not often that the geological community and specifically a museum curator, is compelled to offer thanks to a politician or Member of Parliament. James Haughton Langston (1796 - 1863) may prove a rare exception, although a touch of vanity in his actions (not unknown amongst politicians) cannot be ruled out. Langston lived in west Oxfordshire on the Sarsden Estate, in a 17th century house of the same name that he had inherited in 1812. He was the Member of Parliament for the City of Oxford for two terms, 1826-1835 and 1841-1863. During 1826, he was instrumental in funding the construction of a new church in the Oxfordshire village of Churchill. Architecturally the church consists of a mixture of imitations. The tower is a scaled down (approximately two-thirds) version of the Magdalen College tower in Oxford, whilst the hammer-beam roof of the nave is modelled on Christ Church Hall, Oxford. The buttresses are versions of those of the chapel of New College, Oxford. One noticeable feature, again derived from Magdalen Tower, is the external staircase leading to the ringers' chamber, while the windows are modelled on those of various Oxford colleges. The Church, known as All Saints, was completed and consecrated in 1827. The church suffered extensive damage in 2007 following a fire, and it took two years to complete the restoration.

The geological community has to thank the local Squire of Sarsden and Churchill, James Langston MP, for not building the new church on the site of old church (in the Lias Clay based vale), but at the top of a scarp on the Inferior Oolite Clypeus Grit limestone, ensuring the tower could be seen from miles around. However, the old church occupied a site at the centre of the village on which a church had stood since the 14th century. Twenty houses of the original village were destroyed by a disastrous fire in 1684 started by a baker who, to avoid a chimney tax, knocked through an adjoining wall into a neighbour's chimney. The wooden framed, thatched roof buildings of the old village were abandoned, and new stone buildings were rebuilt higher up the hill. The site of the old village is still evident as grassy mounds in the

pastures to the south of the old church and graveyard. As the village 'migrated' up the hill, the old church was partially demolished, until only the old chancel was retained, and despite partial restoration in 1869 and use as a mortuary chapel and to house memorials, its condition deteriorated and demolition was threatened in the 1980s.



Figure 1. The Old Church chancel, now restored and housing the Churchill and Sarsden Heritage Centre.

The Churchill and Sarsden Preservation Society was formed in 1988 to fight for its survival as the last mediaeval building in Churchill. It is thanks to a dedicated and energetic group of fund-raisers and grants that over £30,000 could be spent in restoring the roof and building. Over ten years after initiating the project the Heritage Centre was finally opened in 2001 in the restored chancel (Figure 1). The museum at Churchill is possibly the smallest museum in Oxfordshire, with the building measuring approximately 4.6m (15') by 9.1m (30'). In 2010, the Centre's management committee was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to enable work on the maintenance of the building, enhancing the displays and extending the outreach projects undertaken by the Centre. The Heritage Centre is also supported by grants from West Oxfordshire District Council and Friends of the Cotswolds. The Centre re-opened in April 2011 with the addition of touch screen displays, new exhibits and exciting plans for wider public engagement (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Inside the Heritage Centre touch screens to the left and right provide information on the lives of Warren Hastings, William Smith and James Langston.

But why would the community of a small Oxfordshire village undertake such an ambitious project? The village of Churchill is the birthplace of two significant figures in British history: Warren Hastings (1732 - 1818) was born in Hastings House on Church Hill, subsequently renamed Hastings Hill, and as a young man joined the East India Company, and eventually went on to become the first Governor-General of India. On his retirement from office and return to England, and surviving impeachment and a seven-year trial before the House of Lords (a plaque in Westminster Hall indicates the place where Hastings attended for the 142 days the court was in session), he returned to the Cotswolds to repurchase his ancestral home estate of Daylesford situated 8km to the southwest of Churchill in Gloucestershire (and then situated within a detached part of the county of Worcestershire).

However, perhaps the most famous son of the village is William Smith (1769 - 1839), 'the Father of English geology', and the main reason why the geological community has to be thankful to a Victorian politician in funding the building of a new church within the village. Smith's humble beginnings were not that of the typical noble or clerical gentleman scientists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century; indeed he had been excluded from the institutional development of the science of geology. However, unlike the Dorset fossil collector Mary Anning, Smith did gain some recognition during his later life, but as the state-of-the-art touch screens (Figure 3) installed in the Heritage Centre illustrate, brief fame and little fortune were achieved through considerable hard work, undertaking diverse geological related projects and obtaining commissions in

many parts of the country. Smith's remarkable story did, however, begin in Churchill.

Smith was born on 23rd March 1769 in Churchill, where his father was the village blacksmith. Sadly, the house has been demolished, but the site is one of several around the village that are connected with his life. His father died when he was eight, and in 1779 his mother was remarried to Robert Gardner, the landlord of the Chequers Inn. Fortunately, the Chequers Inn remains a thriving hostelry, and members of the geological community can, with a clear conscience, raise a glass to the memory and geological legacy of William Smith.

As a young boy Smith spent some time on his uncle's farm in the village of Over Norton, 5km to the north-east near Chipping Norton, and at the age of eighteen he became an assistant to the land surveyor Edward Webb (1751-1828) and moved to Stow-on-the-Wold, 8½km to the west. Four years later in 1791 Smith was sent by Webb to survey and value an estate at Stowey in Somerset. The rest, as is frequently said, is history. Smith's examination of fossils found at outcrop and along newly dug canal cuttings enabled him to formulate a theory that established the chronological order of strata in England and Wales, and he eventually prepared a geological map published in 1815 and depicting 23 different strata in 21 colours. His life's work has been popularised by the biographical publications of Simon Winchester (2001) and John Morton (2004), now supplemented by a pamphlet produced by the Heritage Centre. New for 2013 is the 'Secrets of the Landscape' trails guide produced by the Oxfordshire Geology Trust and the Heritage Centre. Four walks will guide the

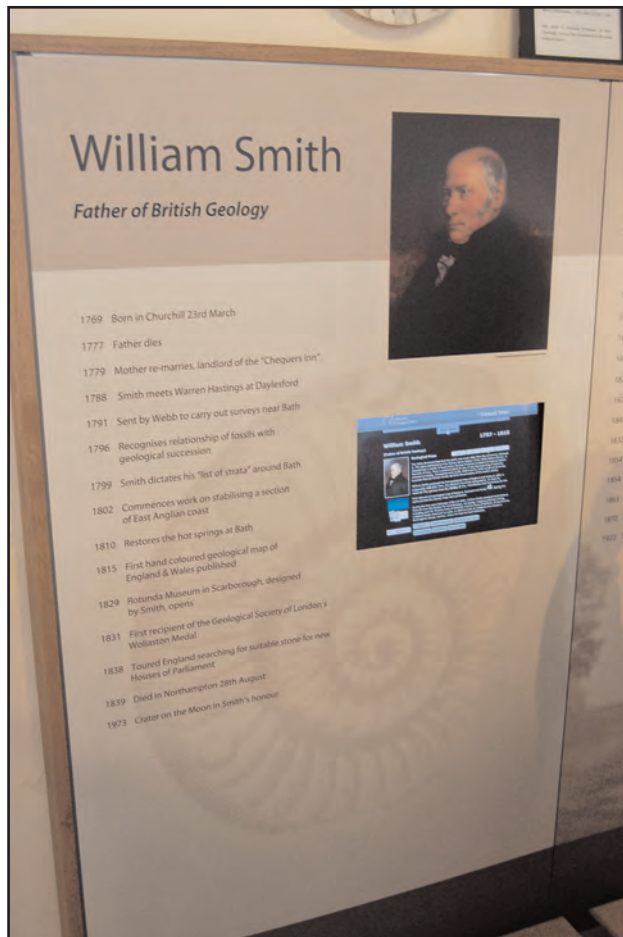


Figure 3. The interactive screen and display relating to William Smith.

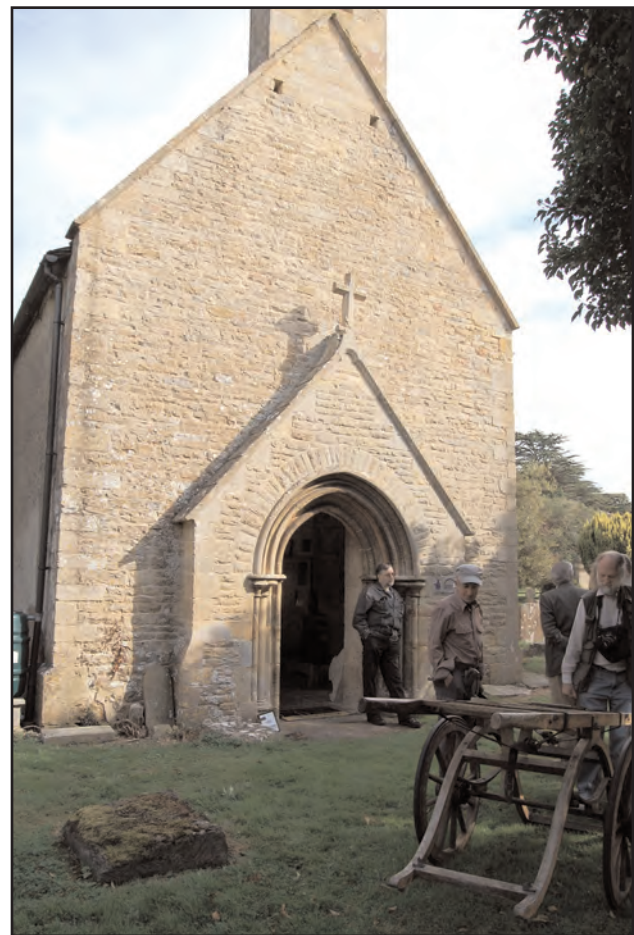


Figure 4. The west door entrance to the old chancel.

visitor around the village and along the bridleways and footpaths indicating local geological features and building stones.

There is little evidence of Smith returning to his childhood village (although he returned to Oxford in 1832 to receive the Wollaston Medal from the Geological Society of London in a ceremony at the Sheldonian Theatre), but his achievement is commemorated by the 4.5 metre monument constructed from Middle Jurassic 'Rugg stones' - large silicified blocks of Chipping Norton Limestone, purported to be from nearby Sarsgrove Wood, and situated on a small green in the middle of the village. It is also commemorated in detail by the touch screen exhibition in the Heritage Centre where his extraordinary story can be traced, together with examples of his revolutionary geological maps.

The part played in the community by the village squire, James Langston (1796-1863), is also displayed on a third touch screen unit, while the Heritage Centre also has all census returns for Churchill and Sarsden for the years 1841, 1851,

1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901, plus many other local records, maps, building records, photographs and local family trees. Staffed by volunteers, the Centre (Figure 4) is usually open from April to September on Saturdays and Sundays from 2-4pm, and at other times by appointment. Further information can be found on the website at: <http://www.churchillheritage.org.uk/index.html>.

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Owen R. Green, Department of Earth Sciences,
University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford,
OX1 3AN. E-mail: oweng@earth.ox.ac.uk

EDITORIAL NOTE:

2015 will be the bicentenary of the publication of Smith's map and the geological community (particularly the Geologists' Association) will be marking this in various ways. Oxford University Museum will be co-ordinating some events with the Heritage Centre and the Oxfordshire Geology Trust.