

JAMES SHIPMAN (1848-1901), PIONEER NOTTINGHAMSHIRE GEOLOGIST

by

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Summary

This short essay seeks to place on record something of the character and work of a man who was once described as "the authority" on the geology of the Nottingham district. Included is a bibliography of Shipman's published work.

The geological knowledge available to today's students is the product of the dedicated labour of many individuals. Some have become famous in the annals of geological history whereas others, by far the majority, have quietly slipped into obscurity, only to emerge from time to time as impersonal names quoted in the text or references of published papers. With the passage of time and the loss of valuable records, it becomes increasingly difficult to give substance to such shadowy names and consequently much that is of interest to the student of the growth of geology is lost.

The purpose of this paper is to give, albeit all too briefly owing to scarcity of material, some details of the career and work of one of Nottingham's greatest amateur geologists, James George Shipman. His name is now almost forgotten and when it does come up, it is only as a passing reference in geological papers, Posnansky in 1960 and Taylor in 1965 being two who quote him. However, at the time of his death his name was almost a household word in certain circles - those interested in archaeology and geology. For the former, his short work on the Nottingham Town Wall is still the only standard work on the subject; the geological data included in the book makes it of great interest to geologists as well as those interested in local history. To Shipman must go the credit for the formation of Nottingham's first geological society, an organisation which grew out of a Saturday afternoon rambling group and characteristically took the name of Nottingham Geological Rambling Club at its foundation in 1889. Unfortunately for the geologists, the Club appears to have been quickly swamped by botanists and soon changed its name. (It still exists as the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Field Club, but now exhibits no interest in the subject that gave it birth.) In view of the breadth of his work, it is easy to understand why the writer of a letter published in the "Nottingham Daily Express" for November 23rd, 1901 (Mr. E. Richards) should claim that Nottingham would long cherish his memory. The writer has been proved wrong; Shipman was soon forgotten.

James Shipman (he appears to have dropped his middle name at an early date) was born of working class parents in 1848, in a Nottingham very different from that of today. I have been unable to trace anything about his parents or childhood; as Shipman had the reputation of being rather retiring, it seems that we will probably never discover much about his background. He had two elder brothers living at the time of his death; their first names tally with those in an entry in the 1851 census reports for Nottingham. At an early age he entered the printing industry, but left later to join the staff of one of the Nottingham papers. This was to be his life's work and he eventually rose to the position of Sub-Editor of the "Nottingham Daily Express."

As a journalist, Shipman worked in a department bringing little contact with the general public (though he was to come to the fore when commissioned by his paper to settle a local dispute of a geological character). His relations with his colleagues seem to have been very good and it is on record that he gave of his very limited spare time to aid in their welfare; this seems reflected in his election as President of the East Midlands branch of the Journalists Institute in 1898 and as a Fellow of the National body a year later.

Outside his profession, Shipman had two dominating interests, his church and his geological work. Shipman was a Congregationalist and his religious life centred round the Colwick Street Mission, founded in 1874 and now defunct. His theology appears to have been liberal and unlike many non-conformists he does not appear to have been a Sabbatarian, though he was a Sunday School teacher. It was out of a rambling group associated with the Mission that the geological society mentioned earlier was formed.

Shipman's interest in geology appears to have commenced actively with his attending a class at the Nottingham Mechanics Institute in 1868 conducted by Edward Wilson, F. G. S. The tutor was himself a Nottinghamshire man, having been born in Mansfield in 1849; he was the son of Dr. T. Wilson of that town and at the early age of fifteen won a prize at Nottingham Grammar School for an essay on "The Coal Fields of Derbyshire." Elected a Life Fellow of the Geological Society of London in 1872 and recipient of the balance of the Murchison Fund in 1888, he was for fourteen years government lecturer at geological and biological classes in the Mechanics Institute and University College, Nottingham. Wilson left Nottingham for Bristol in 1883, where he became Curator of the local museum; he died in Bristol at the early age of 49 on May 21st, 1898. Shipman must have been a good student, for his studies led to a period of close co-operation with Wilson. In 1877 the "Geological Magazine" published Shipman's first paper, entitled "The Conglomerate at the Base of the Lower Keuper." In 1879, the outcome of the collaboration between Shipman and Wilson was made public by the publication in the "Geological Magazine" on their joint paper "On the occurrence of the Keuper Basement Beds in the Neighbourhood of Nottingham." Both papers illustrate Shipman's primary interest in stratigraphy rather than palaeontology, perhaps understandable in view of the not very fossiliferous strata outcropping at Nottingham.

Throughout his life Shipman remained an amateur, though at one stage he was a part-time lecturer in geology at University College, Nottingham which seems to suggest that he was considering taking up the subject professionally. In 1870 he received the Queen's Medal in Geology from the Science and Art Department, South Kensington, and in 1885 he was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society.

The importance of getting out and about to examine formations for himself was a lesson Shipman learned early; one may be an armchair philosopher but never an armchair geologist. He made frequent visits to interesting localities, constantly recording observations in detail; he utilised an auger a great deal to supplement outcrop information. The importance of keeping records of all temporary exposures is an aspect of Shipman's work that was of paramount importance and it was a lesson that he impressed on others. W. T. Aveline paid a glowing tribute to Shipman in the Preface to the Geological Survey Memoir on the Nottingham area (2nd Edition 1880); it is well that it be reproduced here, not only as an indication of Shipman's painstaking and regular work but also for the emphasis it gives to the importance of keeping records of temporary exposures:-



Fig. 1.

James Shipman (1848 - 1901). The only known photograph, taken during his early 30's. (Photo in the possession of the Geological Society of London, reproduced by courtesy)

Fig. 2.

Edward Wilson (1848 - 1898), pioneer teacher of geology at the Mechanics Institute and subsequently at University College, Nottingham. (Photo in the possession of the Dept. of Geology, University of Nottingham, reproduced by courtesy).



"There has also been another source of fresh information, which has tended to modify the geological work on the east side of Nottingham. When this part was first surveyed, it was chiefly covered with fields and small gardens, guarded by high fences and locked gates, while a few roads and brickyards afforded the only sections from which to make out the geological structure of this area, which has since been transformed into a busy town. It was from the exposures of the strata made while digging the foundations of the houses, constructing the deep sewers, forming the new streets, and cutting down the roads, that a more accurate knowledge of the geology of that area was acquired. But the information thus opened out would have been entirely lost had it not been for a gentleman of Nottingham, Mr. James Shipman, who, for upwards of 10 years, spent most of his leisure hours in watching the excavations, and carefully noting every change of the strata exposed, marking the directions of the Faults and the amount of their throw, the thickness and dip of the beds &c., &c. Mr. Shipman kindly allowed me to make use of the results of his long and diligent labours, and I only regret that the small scale of the 1-inch map will not allow of full justice being done to his work."

Shipman's results, referred to by Aveline, are found in a series of lectures given before the Nottingham Naturalists' Society and later published in their "Transactions" and "The Midland Naturalist"; had the "Geology of Nottinghamshire", on which Shipman was reputed to be working at the time of his death, ever been published, it would have been a major source of information on the geology of the area. Shipman's practice of visiting exposures led him to embark on his only major archaeological work, "Notes on the Old Town Wall of Nottingham." (1899). Shipman records his reluctance to undertake work of an archaeological nature as he was unqualified to do it; however, as no one else seemed bothered about the exposure which brought the remains of the wall to light, he undertook to record the details. James Shipman's published works illustrate the various phases of his work. His earliest published work was on the Keuper and Triassic rocks; he then turned to the rich alluvial deposits of the Trent Valley and from this to specific localities around Nottingham, this latter phase of his work commencing with a paper on the "Geology of the Parish of Lenton" (1884) and going on to cover "The Geology of Stapleford and Sandiacre" (1891). The only published paper in which the geology of Nottingham proper is covered was published in 1889 in the "Transactions of the Nottingham Naturalists' Society." The last period of Shipman's life was spent, in the main, on studies of the coal deposits in the county and it is about these that he writes in his last few strictly geological papers. His interest in the coal measures is reflected in his building up of what the "Nottingham Daily Guardian" referred to as "one of most valuable and representative collections of coal sections known to exist"; it seems that this was the collection which Sir J. J. H. Teall advised Shipman's brother, after the death of the geologist, to present to University College, Nottingham.

The scarcity of manuscript material and photographs and the almost total lack of personal data make it difficult to visualise Shipman. His home, in the now not very salubrious Robin Hood Chase area of Nottingham, was typical of the Victorian lower middle class type; No. 8 Manning Grove was the last of three moves of house. According to all reports on Shipman's character, he was of a retiring disposition, to "the point of timidity" asserted his friend, the Nottingham antiquarian Alfred Stapleton. This is repeated by J. W. Carr in his obituary of Shipman, published in the "Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society of London" for May, 1902: "Owing to his extremely shy and retiring disposition, he was not so well-known outside his own locality as his great abilities and wide knowledge merited, for few men with equally restricted opportunities have done so much for local geology." The same article also stressed his ". . . . extreme thoroughness and conscientiousness" as being "the keynote of all his work." This latter point is also brought out by Stapleton who stated that Shipman's maxim was "Take your time. Don't hurry, make the very best you possibly can of the thing before publishing." It might be that in this Shipman went just a little too far, for Stapleton also records that for some years prior to his death Shipman

had been working on some fossil footprints found at Mansfield in a formation not previously known for evidence of life. It is doubtful whether this was ever published.

Shipman does not appear to have enjoyed robust health and perhaps it is this factor that accounts for the reports of him being rather shy; however, as we have seen that he ran a geological society, was active as a church worker, and spent hours visiting exposures, one tends to think the reports not completely accurate - indeed it would be difficult to lead a geological field excursion and remain shy and retiring.

The only personal description of him known to survive suggests that his personality was more serious than shy. J.A. Hammerton who joined the "Nottingham Daily Express" as Editor about a fortnight before the General Election of 1895 and held the post for two years, includes the following evocative, if somewhat acid, word picture of him in his memoirs, "Books and Myself" (p. 112).

"Shipman, the senior sub-editor, had either walked straight out of a Dickens novel or was ready to walk into one; indeed, I felt that he would have been more real in a Dickens story than he was in life. Very diminutive in stature, with a habit of walking so that while both his feet pointed to the right and seemed determined to carry him from the straight path, he still showed himself master of his soul by directing his course ahead. A devoted Sunday-school teacher, he took life with fearful seriousness; his work likewise. I suspect that he had been found in the sub-editors' room, sitting at the same desk, many years before, like some of the items of the office furniture, and although I have no information on the point, I suppose he left it only for the eternal home to which for so many years he had been directing the thoughts of his Sunday-school children. He was an amateur geologist, and had even written a dreary book on "The Rambles of a Geologist", a copy of which he presented to me, suitably inscribed. One of the original reflections in its pages recorded how he had observed that, after peering into the secrets of nature by chipping rocks with his hammer on a summer's day, he lay down to rest on the greensward, still wearing his straw hat (the 'boater' of our younger days) and he perceived that when lying on his back his hat was apt to come in contact with the ground, and so to tilt itself off his head. He was quite an efficient sub-editor of the dull old sort, albeit capable of such original reflections. He came once to an evening gathering at my home, carrying a bulky roll of music with him. My wife and I were horrified, but felt we could do no less than ask him to favour the company with a song, which he most willingly did, to his own great satisfaction, but only to remind us of the Glasgow comedian's ancient joke about the singer whom you could not hear behind a tramway ticket. Measured on a wall of the reporters' room was a record of the heights of many members of the staff, past and present. Shipman's was the lowest

Shipman does not appear to have been engaged in any major controversy; not for him the thoughts that troubled his Scots counterpart Hugh Miller (Shipman and Miller seem to share much in common). The only recorded instance of his taking up a controversial matter relates to the use of Darley Dale stone in the construction of the Nottingham Guild Hall. A dispute had blown up as to whether the stone being used by the contractors was as specified, some individuals appearing to think that the stone used was not of the correct quality. Shipman was commissioned by his paper to investigate and he did so in his usual way, by visiting the various quarries in the Darley Dale area and seeing for himself the various types of rock being quarried. His findings were published first by his paper and later in pamphlet form; summarised, they are that the stone was "not the original Darley Dale Stone, but was of very good quality and wouldweather well", a conclusion borne out by the present state of the Guildhall.

James Shipman led an active life and at times one is left wondering as to how he fitted everything in. His habit of recording data at temporary exposures was put to good use and incorporated in the Survey maps of the area. An example of the information obtained from exposures being contrary to what the geological maps indicated is to be found in his paper on the "Geology of the Parish of Lenton", first

published as part of Godfrey's "History of the Parish and Priory of Lenton" and later as a separate work. The Survey map represented the Coal Measures as rising to the surface over a large area on the north side of Wollaton Park, which is west of Nottingham. Shipman noted, however, that when excavations were being made for a new gas-holder, where the map showed Coal Measures Lower Mottled Sandstone was revealed. In drawing attention to the error, he seeks to explain how it could have been due to surface observation and points out that the Lower Mottled Sandstone extends over the area in question in a thin sheet through which at one or two points "the Coal Measures actually do peep out."

Shipman's important contributions to the knowledge of the geology of Nottingham area provided firm foundations for the future. Not unnaturally, fuller knowledge has necessitated modifications in detail of his conclusions, but his pioneer studies and his recording of information from sections no longer available will ensure consultation of his papers for many years to come. His death on Thursday, November 21st 1901, was quite unexpected and an inquest was called for; the Coroner's Report gave the cause of death as "apoplexy" due to the bursting of a small blood vessel on the surface of the brain. Shipman was buried in the family grave in the dissenters plot at Nottingham General Cemetery on November 26th. A few days before his funeral, a letter had appeared in the "Nottingham Daily Express" from the then Director of the Geological Survey, Jethro Teall, in which letter he expressed his grief and referred to Shipman as "the" authority on the geology of the district. It was, the Director noted, a source of regret not only to himself but also to his colleagues that Shipman "has gone from us without receiving from the Geological Society a special mark of the esteem in which his labours are held. His work would undoubtedly have been specially recognised by the Society had he lived but a short time longer."

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