

News release



5 October 2015

‘Father of geology’ William Smith is celebrated in bicentenary special exhibition

Handwritten in Stone: How William Smith and his maps changed geology

9 October 2015 – 31 January 2016

Two hundred years ago William Smith published the first geological map of England and Wales, a beautiful and ground-breaking piece of work which remains important to this day. Celebrating the bicentenary of this publication, *Handwritten in Stone* presents an intimate portrait of the extraordinary life and work of the ‘father of geology’.

The exhibition draws on the largest archive of Smith material in the world, held at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

Alongside the famous 1815 map itself, Smith’s personal papers, drawings, publications, maps and geological sections will be publicly displayed for the first time, together with fossil material from the Museum’s

collections. The displays also include the oldest geological map in the world, Smith’s 1799 map of Bath.



Born in Churchill in Oxfordshire, Smith conceived his geological theories and created the first stratigraphic maps single-handedly. His story – with its dramatic highs and lows – was brought to a wider audience in 2001 with the publication of Simon Winchester’s *The Map that Changed the World*. As part of the public programme for *Handwritten in Stone*, Simon Winchester will give a talk at the Museum on Tuesday 13 October (book at www.bit.ly/mnhevents).

As well as the historical story of Smith and his maps, *Handwritten in Stone* also presents the important legacy of his work, showing how his approach to mapping remains in use today. In a

lecture at the Museum on 3 November, Professor Mike Searle (University of Oxford) will reveal how he has used Smith's techniques to map the Himalaya, combining field mapping with modern approaches.

Generously supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the bicentenary exhibition was also made possible thanks to the work of over 20 volunteers, including a volunteer-curated section of the gallery itself.

The full programme of events at the Museum, including the *Handwritten in Stone* special events, is available as a [downloadable PDF](#).



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Notes to editors

About William Smith

William Smith (1769-1839) was born in the rural village of Churchill, Oxfordshire, England on 23 March, 1769. He was the first child of the village blacksmith, John Smith (1735-1777) and his wife Ann Smith (1745-1807). Brother John and sister Ann followed shortly after the birth of William, just before their father's death in 1777. William attended the local school until the age of 11, receiving the only formal education he ever would. After his mother remarried William began work for his uncle, also named William Smith. It was then that he began to learn practical skills in agriculture and civil engineering. It was also at this very young age that William began developing his fascination with the landscape of the country around him and the earth beneath him. [Read more...](#)

www.williamsmithonline.com

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About the Museum of Natural History

Founded in 1860 as the centre for scientific study at the University of Oxford, the Museum of Natural History now holds the University's internationally significant collections of entomological, geological and zoological specimens. Housed in a stunning example of neo-Gothic architecture, the Museum's growing collections underpin a broad programme of natural environment research, teaching and public engagement.

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