

How WEGA started: The Birth of the West of England Geological Association

By Mary Morris

In the early 1970s, Dr (as he then was) Brian Williams took over from Dr. Brian Hawkins an Extra-Mural Class in Geology which had been introduced at Twyford House, Shirehampton, Bristol. The class was a success and grew over the following years, as newcomers joined the regular members, to the extent that it had to move to a larger room.

Such was Brian's enthusiasm for his subject that it later inspired one of the class members, Peter Stewart, who had already led field trips in the area, to suggest the formation of a West of England section of the Geological Association. Peter wrote to the main G.A., who gave permission for this to be set up. He then approached Michael Davies, whose photographic skills had provided Brian with some splendid records of our field trips, and he agreed to be involved with responsibility for publicity. Next, Peter persuaded Mary Morris to act as Secretary. The three met on 1st May 1975, when they agreed the aim would be to further the study of Geology, with lecture meetings, field trips, the mutual exchange of information and the promotion of interest in the subject in schools. The defined area would cover the counties of Avon, Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Devon and Cornwall. After Brian had paved the way, the three visited Professor Dineley, then in charge of the Department at Bristol University, who kindly gave permission to use one of the lecture theatres for our meetings.

Members of the class were approached and, with their encouraging support and participation, a steering committee was set up - including Brian Williams, of course! It agreed to hold lectures, followed by discussion, on the second Tuesday evening in the month between October and March - 4 at Bristol, 1 at Bath University and 1 at St. Paul's College, Cheltenham, through Gordon Margretts. Four field meetings were planned for the summer. A subscription was set at £1, with 25p for students or sixth-formers!

Publicity was circulated to the Bristol Naturalists' Society, Bath Geology Society, the Open University, Bristol Geographical Society, as well as the Geology Departments at Bristol, Bath and Cheltenham. Press releases were prepared as well as announcements for local radio and television. Details were also sent to schools in the area with Geology on the curriculum. The inaugural meeting was fixed for 18th October 1975, at which Professor John Sutton gave a lecture on the Pre-Cambrian. Professor Dineley and members of the Department helped at the reception. The speaker's wife, Dr. Janet Watson, also attended and gave a lecture a year or two later. On 11th November John Phillips spoke at Bristol on volcanoes. J.M. Hancock lectured on stratigraphy on 9th December at Bath. A film was shown at Bristol for the January meeting. A.S. Hallam, of Oxford, talked on the Lias on 10th February at Cheltenham, and the concluding lecture was by Gordon Warwick at Bristol on 9th March. The first field trip was to the Malverns, led by Gordon Margretts, followed by the Brecon Beacons, led by Brian Williams.

Many members of the Bristol Department gave their support and helpful advice, including Drs. Reg Bradshaw, Paul Hancock and Doug. Hamilton, though the person who did most to encourage the setting up of WEGA was Brian Williams. However, for having the idea in the first place and for stimulating the interest of the original members, credit must go to Peter Stewart.

**Early History of WEGA by Professor Peter Stewart
(Written in response to a request from Mary Morris)**

As you will recall, it began when we all attended the Shirehampton UoB Extramural Dept Geology lectures.

The lecture programme was only carried out during the winter months. When this ended we were left to our own devices and a number of us wanted to continue by making visits to sites of geological interest. I had a book by Kellaway on visits to sites in the Bristol and Mendip areas. I led a number of visits to limestone areas which were quite successful until I led a visit to a volcanic site on mid-Mendip where there was no stratigraphy and I got completely out of my depth!!!

I had found and obtained a number of guides to areas of geological interest produced by the Geological Association (GA) and I joined the GA. I visited some of these areas. I also obtained a very good book on Geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the South West.

It struck me that here was a group of keen people fired up by Brian and the previous lecturer, wanting to do geology. The GA was the natural society and umbrella for such a group. I wrote to the GA headquarters asking whether it would be possible to form a Western Group of GA (WEGA) and they agreed So we formed WEGA. That was it! At the time the group consisted of, amongst others, you, me, Mike Davis? (the photographer), the people with the shop on Gloucester Rd, Joyce, and a lady who lived on the other side of the Downs - another Joyce?

I had some ideas on how the group could develop as I had previously been Chairman of the Mendip Nature Research Committee of Wells Natural History and Archaeological Society and had been responsible for setting up the Mendip Nature Research Station or MNRS at Green Ore on Mendip. This covered Mendip Geology, Ornithology, Botany, Astronomy, Speleo-Biology and Karst studies. I was at the time a Fellow of the Geological Society of London (FGS), proposed by Dr. F.S. Wallis, Director of Bristol City Museums So I had a reasonable scientific background and the FGS was the top Geological qualification at that time.

When Brian and Paul Hancock became aware that the group had been formed they realised that it would be a valuable vehicle for supporting the University Geological extramural programme. They both then attended our committee meetings and I found that subsequently many of the ideas that I tried to put forward were sidelined and they began to take control.

About this time any work at Rolls-Royce became more demanding and I started my M.Sc. research work at Cranfield Institute of Technology. My input at WEGA had by now become marginalised and had little impact so I came to the conclusion that I was wasting my time and withdrew and left it in Brian's capable hands. It went from strength to strength which is really what is important.