

**Teacher Special Issue****Researching the changing professional profile of the Geographical Association's Presidents 1893-2021**

By Alan Parkinson, Head of Geography at King's Ely Junior; President Geographical Association (September 2021- 22)

**Abstract**

In November 2018, several colleagues asked me to put myself forward for election as President of the Geographical Association (GA). In April 2019, I launched a blog called '*All the (GA) Presidents: Men (and Women)*', drawing on a wealth of sources, books and personal memories to research and compile a biography of each of the 106 former presidents, along with other significant figures in the development of both the Association and school geography. I drew on journals and personal communications to uncover the stories of the fascinating characters in the long history of a peripatetic and responsive Association of geography educators. This article outlines a thirty-month process of compiling the blog, with brief details of the significant personalities I uncovered along the way, and some examples of how the professional profiles of GA Presidents have evolved since 1893.

**1. Introduction: back to the beginning**

On the 20th of May 1893 a dozen men gathered in the New Common Room at Christ Church, University of Oxford, for a meeting which resulted in the establishment of the Geographical Association (Balchin, 1993). In an article called 'From lantern slides to software' published for the GA's 90th Anniversary Richard Daugherty (GA President in 1989) explained how:

*"Lantern slides were not as widely used in 1893 as they might have been. Mr B B Dickinson of Rugby School wanted to make more and better use of them. Accordingly he issued a circular inviting public school masters to join him in formatting a private association for the purpose of subdividing the work of making lantern slides for the teaching of geography... What started out as a lantern slide cooperative has become a complex of interrelated activities, each of which is designed in some way to help put one geography teacher in touch with another". (Daugherty, 1983)*

Examples of the current archive of lantern slides held by the GA can be seen in Figure 1.

## Teacher Special Issue



Figure 1. Lantern slides from the GA's Fleure Collection which once ran to over 10000 slides. Image credit: Alan Parkinson

The meeting came about partly as a result of the Royal Geographical Society's refusal at the time to accept female members, which led to the involvement of Douglas Freshfield,

**Teacher Special Issue**

formerly the RGS's Honorary Librarian. The GA's initial aims included the following statement:

*"Its most important work will be the encouragement of any methods of teaching which tend to the comprehension of geographical principles rather than isolated fact."* (Daugherty, 1983)

As I began researching the biography of each of the GA's presidents, I was reminded of a warning Frances Soar, the GA's former Office Administrator, gave me when I worked at 160 Solly Street, Sheffield in 2010. He told me to avoid digging in the archives as educators had been doing so for decades and only talking about the same things (Frances was correct). As it turned out, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented access to the archives until July 2021.

**2. Research methodology**

My research for the blog is part of the 'legacy' I would like to leave following my presidential year. I wanted to expand my own knowledge of the people who had held the role before me, so that I could also refer to them during my Presidential Lecture. A year is a short time to make an impact on an organisation as complex as the GA. Some members proved elusive, until one document or image unlocked some fascinating information about them.

GA members who opt-in to receive the journal *Geography* or *Teaching Geography* as part of their subscription have access to a JSTOR archive of all past copies of these journals. These journals formed the basis for my research, particularly the annual reports and reports from conference officers. Many early GA Presidents were significant figures of the time, and therefore have *Wikipediapages*. I conducted searches in relevant university archives where possible, and my Reader's card at the British Library was helpful for a short while before the pandemic closed this avenue. Where presidents had links with schools, archivists and librarians were particularly helpful – though not all school have someone in this role. The fact that presidents were often employed at fee-paying schools made this source more likely. The Internet Archive website (<https://archive.org>) provided scanned copies of many early textbooks, and Flickr, Twitter and Pinterest (see below) threw up images and links to follow. As I approached the present-day, former presidents proved helpful. Chris Kington (President in 2002) kindly loaned me letters from former presidents along with books and other papers. During his own presidential year he had asked them what gave them their 'spark' for geography. The answers are revealing – often the initial spark came from their own inspirational geography teacher.

**GeoBlogsGA Past Presidents Follow On**

The project proceeded without access to the 'motherlode' when researching a charity like the GA, which has so many volunteer groups: copies of the minutes from committees and sub-groups. I was also unable to fully access the minutes of GA 'Council' meetings, which predated the current Education Group and Governing Body. My aim

**Teacher Special Issue**

was to add one presidential biography to the blog every few weeks, and add further updates as they were uncovered. I created draft posts and fleshed them out as publication day approached. For all living presidents, I made personal contact and used a Google Form to collect answers to a number of questions regarding their own theme, achievements and memories. Jeremy Krause (2001) kindly put me in touch with Sheila Jones (1975) who sent me a precious cache of photographs before she sadly passed away in June 2021. Each of the 106 biographies is still a 'work in progress' and I would welcome further contributions from readers.

**3. The early days**

In 1897 Douglas Freshfield became the GA's first President, staying in post until 1911. As membership grew into the hundreds, the first volume of *The Geographical Teacher* journal was published in 1900, thanks to financial support from T. G. Rooper, a HMI (one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of schools). The first issue featured Rooper's concerns that geography was 'a dreary recitation of names and statistics of no interest to the learner and of little use except, perhaps in the sorting department of the Post Office' (Rooper, 1901). Freshfield's introduction outlined the importance of connections between teachers, to 'exchange experiences and learn the progress that is being made in method or in appliances' and reflected on the need for some way to develop these connections (Freshfield, 1901). This recognition of the importance of connections remained valid a century later in Roger Carter's Presidential lecture of 1999 (Carter, 1999).

During the Annual General Meeting in 1903, Freshfield reminded members that: "The Geographical Association began its corporate existence as a body militant, a body struggling against a national and professional apathy, of which they recognised the dangers" (Balchin, 1993). In a valedictory address when he stepped down, he further reminded members that: "the reason why some of us wanted to see ladies in the Society was that many ladies are engaged in geographical teaching and often in high posts" (Freshfield, 1911). By 1903, the GA was already making links with the Ordnance Survey and the Director General Sir Charles Close (who would become GA President himself some decades later) agreed to discounts on purchases of map extracts for classroom use.

After 1911, the usual pattern of one Presidential year in office started (although two presidents served for several years during World War Two to provide stability at a time of crisis). Primary membership was open to all from the outset, although there was little dedicated support for primary school colleagues for some time, and the President was always male until the 1960s (Balchin, 1993). Efforts were made to bring in distinguished outsiders with geographic interests to strengthen the Association's standing. Not all of them had strong geographical credentials, including Hilaire Belloc and George Robert Parkin, although John Scott Keltie (president in 1914), carried out a formal review of school geography, and found that:

*"Geographical material is being used to stimulate intelligent enquiry and as a means of mental discipline rather than as information to be committed to memory" (Keltie, 1914).*



**Teacher Special Issue**

The first clutch of presidents were mostly academic geographers, with the occasional public school master (teachers at a fee-paying school), along with colonial administrators, philosophers, MPs and theologians. They were joined by men who were linked with other institutions, such as the Rothamsted Institute, the London School of Economics and prominent museums such as the Pitt Rivers in Oxford and the Science Museum (Henry Lyons, GA President in 1929 introduced interactive exhibits at the latter which tripled visitor numbers). Lord Robert Cecil (president in 1922) was even awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace for his work with the League of Nations, a forerunner of the United Nations. There were also some controversial characters including Sir Halford Mackinder, after whom a Chair at the University of Oxford is named, whose expedition to climb Mt. Kenya resulted in the deaths of a number of porters. Mackinder's ideas, particularly the Heartland theory remained influential for some decades, and he is even name-checked in Tim Marshall's best-selling book *Prisoners of Geography*. There has been a resurgence and critique of these ideas by school geography teachers (Trolley, 2020).

Some real legends of the Association had their moment in the early part of the 20th century. They include H. J. Fleure: the long-standing Honorary Librarian who moved the GA to Aberystwyth and Manchester before it found its home in Sheffield. A member from 1906 was James Fairgrieve (Figure 2) who would do more than perhaps anyone else to develop ideas for the teaching of the subject, including the early use of cinema and moving pictures in 1928. L Dudley Stamp (1950) sold books by the millions decades before David Waugh and also led several land use surveys of the UK, which involved members and students in the collection of data – an early crowdsourced project.

Teacher Special Issue



**Teacher Special Issue**

Figure 2. A caricature of James Fairgrieve, GA President 1935, while teaching at William Ellis School

Image credit: William Ellis School, with thanks to Christopher Willey

As the century progressed, the pendulum swung back towards academic geographer presidents. *The Geographical Teacher* journal did however feature increasing contributions from teachers, including many early female contributors. In 1916, an article by Lily Winchester on *The Teaching of Geography to Little Children* introduced primary geography themes which persist in some form to this day: Nature Study, study of the home environment, the weather and physical processes, and the use of maps. In 1918, the GA created four standing committees, two of which were chaired by teachers who would become future Presidents. There are now many more committees and special interest groups (SIGs), guided by the work of the Education Group (EG) alongside boards such as Worldwise.

My research also uncovered several people who were described as ‘presidents who never were’ including A J Herbertson (Gilbert, 1965), Norman Pye, and G J Cons, who created some early geography films for TV but sadly died before he could take office in 1961. There are many more fascinating stories to read in my blog (<http://gapresidents.blogspot.com>).

**4. 1960s-1990s**

By the 1960s, and the start of my own primary education, the ‘new geography’ based on Haggett and Chorley’s influential Madingley lectures was emerging in academic circles and also appearing in GA journals. I remember the personal influence of a book called *The Map that came to Life* with wonderful illustrations by Ronald Lampitt which I read repeatedly (Parkinson, 2017).

The Madingley Lectures were a series of courses led by Richard Chorley and Peter Haggett in the early 1960s, which resulted in a number of influential books, and the promotion of models and quantitative techniques which eventually made their way into school geography.

There was a period of geomorphologist Presidents including J A Steers (1959) – the doyen of coastal geography, Sydney Wooldridge, David Leslie Linton, Andrew Goudie and Denys Brunsden. There were also those with links to field studies, such as Geoffrey Hutchings (1961) and Nick Lapthorn more recently. Perhaps the most famous quote on fieldwork came from John Allan Patmore’s Presidential Address of 1980:

*“Observation is the key to the importance of landscape to the geographer. It links him (sic) firmly to reality, it develops his appreciation and poses the questions he must answer to develop understanding. Contact with the actual landscape is contact with reality. Confined within classroom walls, geography is an impoverished shadow, like chemistry without experiments or biology without recourse to tangible specimens of plants and animals” (Patmore, 1980).*

**Teacher Special Issue**

Over time, the selection of presidents also changed. In the early years, likely candidates were approached directly, but the process is now open to all GA members with an election if necessary. Presidents are usually expected to have completed other work within the GA as members of volunteer groups or other committees.

Significant figures such as Professor Alice Garnett and Stan Gregory kept the GA on a secure financial footing in uncertain times, negotiating cheap rent for the GA when it moved to Park Library, then Fulwood Road in Sheffield. Alice Garnett (Figure 3) also became the first female president, in 1968. Sheila Jones became the first female teacher president in 1975, while teaching at Colston Girls School in Bristol, and was also Branches Officer. There was a strong connection with the Institute of Education at University College, London, which provided Molly Long (the GA's second female president in 1970), Norman Graves and others. The IoE would later 'provide' Professor David Lambert as the Chief Executive, who led the GA into the Action Plan for Geography (2006-11) along with the RGS-IBG.



**Teacher Special Issue**



Figure 3. Portrait of Professor Alice Garnett, GA President 1968 – the first female President – image credit: Alan Parkinson

By the 1980s the GA needed to increasingly respond to DES (DfE) decisions. In the words of Rex Walford (1983) the GA had to become 'streetwise', and organised events



**Teacher Special Issue**

such as a 1985 conference (see also Figure 4), which saw Keith Joseph give the first speech about geography education by a serving Secretary of State for Education. This work was vital at a time when there was a very real threat of geography disappearing as a compulsory school subject, and Patrick Bailey and Tony Binns had to create a *Case for Geography* in 1987 which was presented to then Secretary of State for Education Keith Joseph (Bailey and Binns, 1987).



Figure 4. Conference programmes from 1982 and 1983 Image credit: Geographical Association

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the GA became increasingly professionalised, with paid staff rather than volunteers in honorary positions. This process took some years to

**Teacher Special Issue**

work through, and also resulted in the appointment of a Chief Executive (The current Chief Executive is Alan Kinder). The previous holder of the post was Professor David Lambert. Volunteers had often kept the GA going, with Presidents drawn from Honorary Secretaries, Librarians and Treasurer proving vital. Peter Fox (2003) remains the only teacher president not to have been working at a fee-paying school while president. The teacher educator link was also strong from the 1990s, with presidents including Simon Catling (1992) (see Figure 5), Margaret Roberts (2008), Mary Biddulph (2016) and, most recently Susan Pike (2020).



Figure 5. Image taken during 1993 Centenary event

Front row seated from left to right

**Michael Wise, Robert Steel, Simon Catling, Pat Cleverley, Andrew Goudie, Patrick Bailey, Denys Brunsden, Eleanor Rawling, Rex Walford**

Back row standing from left to right

**W V Balchin, Sheila Jones, Vic Dennison, John Allan Patmore, Bill Mead**

**Image credit: Sheila Jones**

**5. Conclusions**

The Chair at the first meeting of the GA in 1893 was Halford J Mackinder, whose attitudes and actions were not at all in accord with the aims of an Association which strives to be diverse, inclusive, and ready to engage in awkward conversations about its past. As with many other organisations, GA trustees, staff and volunteers are involved in exploring the 'decolonisation' of the curriculum, trying to draw in a wider range of voices at conferences and looking for further opportunities to encourage wider representation of BAME geographers at all levels, and in all strands of its operation.



**Teacher Special Issue**

The GA's current strategy, due to run until 2025, is based on three aims: to advocate for geography, connect geographers and empower them. Communicating the opportunities for greater inclusion remains both a priority and a challenge, but the current direction of travel is promising. The GA has supported geography teachers and all those interested in geography education every day since the 20th of May 1893 and long may it continue to do so.

**6. Coda and notes**

1) In July 2021, I was able to visit 160 Solly Street for the first time and head down into the stacks. The very first box I opened contained conference programmes going back to the 1940s. The project continues.

2) My blog can be read

at <http://gapresidents.blogspot.com> Contact: a.parkinson@gmail.com Twitter: @GeoBlogs

3) This work is informed by numerous personal communications 2019-2021 with former Presidents and their families and issues of 'Geography', 'Teaching Geography', 'The Geographical Teacher' and 'Primary Geographer'.

4) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Charney Manor Primary Conference in February 2021.

5) Dedicated to Sheila Jones – 1929-2021 (GA President in 1975) and W V Tidswell, my PGCE tutor 1986-7

**8. References**

Bailey, P., & Binns, T. (1987) 'A Case for Geography: A Response to Sir Keith Joseph.' *Geography*, vol. 72, no. 4, pp. 327–331.

Balchin, W.G.V. (1993) *The Geographical Association: The First Hundred Years, 1893-1993* Sheffield: Geographical Association

Boardman, D & McPartland, M. (1993) 'A Hundred Years of Geography Teaching'. *Teaching Geography*, vol. 18 no. 1, pp. 3-6.

Carter, R. (1999) 'Connecting Geography: An Agenda for Action.' *Geography*, vol. 84, no. 4, pp. 289–297.

Daugherty R. (1983) 'From lantern slides to software'. *Times Education Supplement*, published 1.4.83

Freshfield, D. W (1901) 'Introduction'. *The Geographical Teacher*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 1.



**Teacher Special Issue**

Freshfield, D. W. (1911) 'Valedictory address'. *The Geographical Teacher*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 5–9.

Gilbert, E. W. (1965) 'Andrew John Herbertson 1865-1915: An Appreciation of His Life and Work.' *Geography*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1965, pp. 313–331.

Keltie, J. S. (1914) 'Thirty years progress in geographical education'. *The Geographical Teacher*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1914, pp. 215–227.

Krause, J. (2003) 'Tell the world about learning geography'. *Geography*, vol 88, pp. 4 – 14.

Parkinson, A. (2017) 'You can take the boy out of Yorkshire.' in Catling, S. (Ed.) *'Reflections on Primary Geography'* Sheffield: Geographical Association

Patmore, J. A (1980) 'Geography and Relevance.' *Geography*, vol. 65, no. 4, pp. 265-283.

Rooper, T. G. (1901) 'On methods of teaching geography'. *The Geographical Teacher*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 4–10.

Walford, R. (2000) *'Geography in British Schools, 1850-2000: Making a World of Difference'* London: Routledge

Winchester, L. (1916) 'The Teaching of Geography to Little Children'. *The Geographical Teacher*, vol. 8, no. 5