

SGG Update No 17: April 2025

Working in partnership with Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC), Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT) and others to encourage appreciation, conservation and promotion of the geology of Somerset. See our SGG web site at <https://somesetgeology.org.uk/>. It can also be accessed via SERC's web site at <http://wp.somerc.co.uk/specialist-groups/>.



Dear all

Here is our spring SGG Update, reporting progress over the last year (April 2024 to March 2025) for the two overarching themes agreed as the focus for our activity over the next few years:

- Working to encourage good quality interpretation on the geology of Somerset, in a wide range of different ways, including town trails and where appropriate for Local Geology Sites (LGS);
- Building relationships with owners of LGS to help with them understand the interest of their LGS and to advise on any conservation management desirable.

Encouraging good quality interpretation

Encouraging town building stone trails

In October we held our autumn SGG network meeting on the theme of encouraging town building stone trails – an accessible way to introduce people to the diversity of Somerset's geology and a particular opportunity at the moment, as many of Somerset's town councils take on roles previously covered by the former district councils.

The meeting was kindly hosted by South West Heritage Trust (SWHT) at the Somerset Heritage Centre (SHC). Garry and I had also met Andy King, Technical Director and Principal Geologist of Geckoella Ltd, in May 2024 to plan in advance.

On the day, twenty of us shared our experience and thinking, with our guest speakers including: Bob Croft, Head of Historic Environment at SHC; Andy King of Geckoella Ltd, based at Watchet; Adel Avery, from the Somerset Earth Science Centre in the Mendips (also contributing experience from Simon Carpenter from producing a leaflet for Saltford in Bath & North East Somerset); Kelvin Huff, Dorset Building Stone

Group, including his experience from Sherborne; and Geoff Rowland, Ham Hill Country Park Ranger, Somerset Council.

Garry Dawson and Andy Gordon from SGG contributed sessions on the opportunities they had identified to date. Sheila Alderman chaired the final discussion session and I compiled notes to contribute to action planning on how this strand of SGG's work might best be developed in the future. There were also many useful contributions from others attending (including from those sending apologies).

The notes from the day include: a list of things to think about if you are considering developing a trail for your town or village; and a list of existing sources of information. You can find them as an attached PDF via the *Geo-interpretation* or *News & Updates* pages of our new SGG web site at <https://somesetgeology.org.uk/>. Our thanks to everyone for their contributions to the day.

Since then, Garry and Andy have been working on pilot trails for Taunton and Yeovil respectively, including Andy having piloted his Yeovil material with Yeovil U3A members.

Garry has also been continuing his separate project, as a volunteer working to Nic Wall at SWHT, to document the building stones used in Somerset's towns and villages - with help over this last year from Sheila, Andy Gordon, Val Graham and Doug Robinson from our SGG group. See the *Local Building Stones* section on the *Geo-conservation* page of our new web site: <https://somesetgeology.org.uk/welcome/geo-conservation/>.

A SGG website to provide a gateway to information on the geology of Somerset

We had by last year developed a plan for a full SGG web site, to help signpost people to information on the geology of Somerset – as well as on SGG's activity *per se* – and SERC had agreed

to host and cover the annual fee for it, as one of its associated 'Specialist Groups'.

Over this last year therefore, I have worked closely with Andy Gordon as our 'web master', on how best the content might be arranged, and drafted the basic text for its pages, while Andy has worked on the design and layout. This March we finally asked SERC to remove our previous simple web-page and make the link from its Specialist Groups, direct to our new site, which can be found at <https://somersetgeology.org.uk/>.

Our web site is still in development, but please have a look and let Andy have any comments via Somersetgeology@gmail.com. We are grateful already to: Stephen Locke for checking the basic text for me; and to Val Graham for helping with tips on design. We hope the arrangement of the information will enable new and more detailed material to be easily added. Stephen has, for example, already offered to assist with development of the *History of Somerset geology* section on the *Geo-interpretation* page.

The *Geo-activities* page includes links for regular events such as the annual Mendips Rocks festival. We have also included a *News* section for items of interest on the geology of Somerset that we come across during the year - but please note that it is not intended to be comprehensive and that our web site is not intended to replace existing sources of information, such as Graeme Churchard's calendar of events.

An international designation

The *News & Updates* page already flags up some interesting items. For example, in August 2024, the Somerset coast at Kilve was formally recognized as internationally important for its brittle deformation structures - a first international designation for Somerset's geology. That stretch of coast is of course already recognized as nationally important for its stratigraphy and designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The *News* section also details the publication of a paper in March 2024 describing the discovery of the world's oldest fossilized 'forest' at some locations on the coast west of Minehead - where previously fossil plants had been described as "sparse". Two of the locations are within the limits of existing LGS.

Contribution to conferences

In the summer Garry updated the PowerPoint on our SGG activity that we took to the Mendips Rocks lecture day in autumn 2023. This enabled it to be on show at the Geologists' Association annual conference held in Bristol in September 2024, with Martin Doherty on hand for us over the lunch break to answer any queries on it.

The PowerPoint also featured again at Dorset GA Group's GEOFEST, when Andy Gordon took it for display there in October. In January Garry also attended the Ussher Society conference to keep us in the loop with its activities and research presentations.

History of Geology

More recently Dave Williams and Andy Gordon contributed short presentations at a special conference, held in March 2025, organised by Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS) to celebrate the 175th anniversary of its formation.

Andy spoke on the nationally known early geologist, William Buckland (1784 -1856), who was born in Axminster, Devon (just over the Somerset border), covering Buckland's views on geology and religion and including his discovery of the first dinosaur. Buckland spoke at the first SANHS AGM in 1849.

Dave spoke on the discovery of Somerset Ichthyosaurs, in particular on the collections made by: Charles Moore (1815 -1881), another well-known early geologist, who was born in Ilminster and lived in Ilminster and Bath; and Alfred Gillett (1814-1904) whose collection is held by the Alfred Gillett Trust in Street (see the *Museums* section of the *Geo-exploring* page of our web site.

There are many such interesting stories to tell on the history of geology of Somerset. It can be another accessible way - as with town building stone trails - to engage peoples' interest in Somerset's geology.

Bibliography on the Geology of Somerset

Andy Gordon, has continued, between his other activity for SGG, to update Hugh Prudden's 1997 *Bibliography on the Geology of Somerset*. The latest version is available of the *Geo-research* page of our new web site. Check it out for the full

references to publications that we mention in this *Update* – and let Andy know of any references you come across that are not yet included.

Hugh Prudden's archive

Stephen Locke has liaised for us with Liz Grant, Senior Archivist at Somerset Heritage Centre (SHC) this winter, to look through the late Hugh Prudden's archival material deposited there. Hugh was our SGG secretary for many years and Stephen has now compiled a list of the contents. This has helped to confirm that Hugh's site-specific records are largely held by SERC (as part of his work for SGG to identify sites suitable for LGS status (former RIGS)). However, if you are interested in what is held at SHC, Stephen's list is now available via SHC's on-line catalogue (<https://somerset-cat.swheritage.org.uk/records/A/EJH>).

LGS and building relationships with owners

SERC, our partner organisation for work relating to Local Geology Sites (LGS), has continued to be short staffed over the last year, with discussions in hand on how it might best be managed in the future. Ellen Philpot became Acting Manager for the interim in the autumn.

Garry met Ellen in the summer to brief her on the LGS project spreadsheet. Then Garry and myself met her in October to start planning for the next LGS Panel meeting.

LGS Panel

This was held in February 2025 under SERC's auspices, as it is the lead organization in Somerset for Local Sites partnership working. The LGS Panel is currently chaired by Keith Moore from our SGG group. Keith was a member of the LGS Panel throughout the LGS Review (2016 onward), as well as having earlier experience from Devon. We were also pleased that Barbra Lakin, Biodiversity and Landscape Officer from Somerset Council, was able to join this meeting.

During the year Keith attended SERC's Panel meeting for Local Wildlife Sites to see how it operates and Garry attended a recent meeting for SERC's Specialist Groups to help keep us in the loop as plans for SERC's future develop.

Ellen reported that SERC had not yet been able to fully implement the post-Panel processing required from the LGS Panel meeting in 2024 (see SGG *Update* No 16), but that the last stages for that should be in place by this April. We also had a useful discussion to clarify the potential situations in which a LGS might be deregistered.

Getting information to owners/mangers

The Panel has previously agreed that new LGS should be a relatively low priority in the future, and that we would concentrate in the coming years on building relationships with owners to achieve greater understanding, including making contact where this had not been possible during the main LGS Review (2016 -2022).

As part of this new approach, we were able to progress a leaflet, suggested by Dee Edwards in 2023, on the lines of one produced by our equivalent group in Cornwall a few years ago, to assist owners in understanding the value of LGS in an accessible way. A final draft was presented to the LGS Panel and it was agreed as suitable for attachment as a PDF to both SERC's LGS web page and SGG's new web site. You can find it on our web site under the *LGS: information for owners* section of the *Geo-conservation* page.

Contacts with owners and site visits

We were also able to report on several instances over the last year where contact has been newly made with owners/managers or information has now been shared with them.

For example, Garry had met with Barbra Lakin from Somerset Council earlier in the year, to assist her in clarifying which LGS are now owned and/or managed by Somerset Council. This includes, not only those that come under the auspices of Somerset Highways (with whom Garry met last year), but several previously held as open space by the former district councils.

One of these is a LGS on an old railway cutting near Shepton Mallet, formerly held by Mendip District Council, where a path has now been cleared along the old line. There is now potential for further clearance to re-expose the near-shore 'Bowlish facies' of Lower Jurassic marine sediments present there (featured in the previous Nature Conservancy Council publication, *New Sites for Old*, Duff *et al*, 1985, and in a paper by Bristow & Donovan, 2015).

Following last year's LGS Panel meeting, Sheila Alderman was able to make contact with the local trust that owns and manages Sparkford Hill Copse as a local open space, and which has a LGS within it. She was able to pass the ownership details to SERC and organize some practical conservation work (see further below).

Hadspen Quarry

Recently Sheila has also been able to arrange a visit in late March, to Hadspen Quarry, a LGS, to accompany national expert on the Jurassic Inferior Oolite, Bob Chandler. Bob was keen to undertake some further research work there and the visit was also helpful in clarifying the new exposure to be retained in the more recently quarried area to the east.

This has added to the information gathered for the 2016-2022 Review, so that next year the LGS Panel will be able to consider a revised LGS boundary, including the new exposure. Our thanks to the owner and quarry manager for their welcome, interest and help.

Practical conservation work and interpretation

There was also progress to report to the LGS Panel on some practical conservation work and interpretation. See box opposite for new interpretation being planned for Ham Hill Country Park, as well as below.

Sparkford Hill Copse

Sheila and Andy Gordon were able to clear a small area of accessible rock face for the trust that owns Sparkford Hill Copse. The local variant of the Langport Beds or 'White Lias' there is now better exposed. The site is a LGS for its transition from the Late Triassic Penarth Group into fully marine Lower Jurassic strata and was documented by Richardson in 1911. It is also immediately adjacent to a cutting in the current Yeovil-Castle Cary railway line. The line was opened in 1856 and provided a clean section in the 1860s for description by Charles Moore.

Sheila and Andy were also able to carry out some further clearance (to that achieved last year) at the LGS on Dorchester Road south of Yeovil (south of the roundabout, see *Update* No 16). This further extends the exposure of the Jurassic Bridport Sands Formation there.

Both the Sparkford and Dorchester Road sessions were organized via DIGS, our equivalent group in Dorset, which has the arrangements in place, including insurance, for practical conservation work. Our thanks to DIGS and all who helped.

Hestercombe

This March, Garry joined a session at Hestercombe Gardens, organized by Adele Bolt, teacher of geology at Richard Huish College, Taunton. Together with volunteer students they cleared an outcrop in an old quarry just beyond the boundary of the public gardens, in advance of Adele taking her A Level geology students there for fieldwork the following week. The site is a LGS for exposure of igneous lamprophyre dykes intruded into the older sedimentary strata of the Devonian Morte Mudstone Formation.

The volunteer students were mostly from a diploma course for those interested in careers in uniformed services such as the police, paramedics, and the forces, who need to do voluntary service as part of their course. We hope it may spark an interest in geology for them – as well as for the geology A Level students. And as Garry said *'It's remarkable how much fourteen students can clear in two hours!'* Thank you to them all – and to Adele for making the arrangements with Hestercombe Gardens.

Ham Hill Country Park and next SGG autumn meeting

The next SGG network meeting will be on **Monday 6 October 2025** at Ham Hill Country Park, where ranger Geoff Rowland (who is also a SGG network member) will be able to update us on the latest progress with the Country Park's Lottery-funded project. Full details to come in early Sept.

The building works for the new visitor centre at Ham Hill started this March and we understand that one wall will cover interpretation on Ham Hill's geology. The Country Park, which includes the LGS, a geological SSSI and a geology trail in memory of SGG's late secretary Hugh Prudden, is owned and managed by Somerset Council.

Planning

Wendy reported on Sunny Hill Quarry LGS in the Mendips, as there had been a planning application for extension of the adjacent Stoke Quarry. The LGS is not directly affected, but further review had been flagged up during the LGS Review as ideally required in the future in conjunction with the Stoke Quarry operator and Natural England – as the LGS boundary currently overlaps with both the active quarry and a geological SSSI. SGG had clarified the situation for the planning authority.

SGG organization

Garry and myself have been supported through this last year with SGG administration by Andy Gordon and Sheila Alderman, with whom we held a SGG Co-ordinating group meeting in January.

This will be my last *SGG Update* as I now need, after nine years, with the LGS Review complete and on-going arrangements established, to stand down as joint Co-ordinator for personal reasons. Garry will continue as SGG Coordinator, with Andy and Sheila to help him think through what other volunteer support might ideally be needed.

Garry has been involved with SGG from its formation, so he will be well placed to ensure it continues into the future. He was the geology volunteer for Somerset Wildlife Trust, before it invited the late Desmond Donovan to become chair of a new Geology Advisory Group in the 1980s, which subsequently became SGG. Plus, as you can see from this *Update*, there are many of you that help in a wide variety of ways. So, I know Garry will be well supported.

The LGS Review, in particular, has been a great way for me to be able to spend voluntary time on geological conservation in retirement, after a career in different aspects of landscape and heritage conservation. There has been some great team working along the way too, with a special thanks to Garry for the close liaison between us as joint co-ordinators.

Thanks too to Andy King, who held the baton of SGG after Hugh Prudden's death and organized a meeting for SGG with SERC in autumn 2015 – when he proposed the LGS Review. Andy handed the baton to me in March 2016, due to his consultancy commitments and I took it on, knowing that Garry was willing to help.

Since then, I've learnt much about how wide the variety of geological interest is within Somerset. So, this comes with a big thankyou to you all - and with very best wishes for the future!

Wendy Lutley and Garry Dawson Co-coordinators

***Thanks** – our thanks to everyone who has helped this year in all these different ways.*

How you can help in the future

- **SGG web site and Bibliography** – please let Andy Gordon have any new or updating information via Somersetgeology@gmail.com.
- **Practical conservation** - email Garry via Somersetgeology@gmail.com, if you would like to be notified of any opportunities. A small number of us are also signed up as **SERC volunteers for LGS survey** (but with limited activity at present).
- Please also get in touch with Garry if you think you may be able to contribute to **SGG's Co-ordinating group and organization**. We need to draw on a width of skills, ideas and interests to function most effectively.
- *Wendy will pass the **SGG mailing list** to Garry in May – please email him via Somersetgeology@gmail.com if you no longer wish to be on it.*

SGG is a member of **GeoConservationUK** (see <https://geoconservationuk.org/>) which **encourages the appreciation, conservation & promotion of local/regional geological and geomorphological sites for education & public benefit**. Our SGG web site can be found at <https://somersetgeology.org.uk/> with previous *Updates* available on the *News & Updates* page.