

## W.A.E. USSHER: AN INSIGHT INTO HIS LIFE AND CHARACTER

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The Ussher Society is named after W.A.E. Ussher, the eminent geologist who spent a large proportion of his working life in South-West England. William Augustus Edmond Ussher was the youngest of six children born to John and Mary Ussher of Eastwell House, Loughra, County Galway. He joined the Geological Survey at the age of nineteen in 1868 and went on to become a well respected field mapping geologist, retiring in 1909. The ancestry of the Ussher family in Ireland has been documented by House (1978), tracing roots back as far as Archbishop James Ussher who famously stated the date of creation as 4004 BC. Dineley in 1974 wrote about the work of W.A.E. Ussher in South-West England; however, little to date has been written about the life of the man after whom the society takes its name. Using letters from the archives of the British Geological Survey, amongst other sources, ongoing research shows an insight into his life and character.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Ussher Society was formed in 1962 to act as a focus for geological work in South-West England, a region which has played a key role in the history of British geology (Mather, 2011). It was named after the survey geologist William Augustus Edmond Ussher (1849-1920), an officer of the Geological Survey of Great Britain, who spent much of his working life in South-West England and made a major contribution to establishing the stratigraphical succession in the Devonian, Carboniferous and Permo-Triassic rocks of Devon and Cornwall (Dineley, 1974).

The Usshers were an Irish Protestant landowning family, with recorded ancestry dating back to the 15th Century. House (1978) traced the family back to James Ussher (1581-1656), the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, who, in his work of 1654, "*Annalium pars posterior*", dated the creation of the Earth as 4004 BC. It wasn't until the late 18th Century that Christopher Ussher (II), the paternal grandfather of W.A.E. Ussher (Figure 1), established his family at Eastwell House, Loughrea, County Galway. On his death the house passed to his eldest son, John, whilst a younger brother, Christopher (III), entered the church. The latter married Elizabeth Brush in 1850, before moving to a living in Kensington, London sometime between the birth of their youngest child in 1855 and the 1861 census. Meanwhile John Ussher, the younger brother of Christopher (II), had become a soldier, serving in His Majesty's Fifth Regiment of Foot. Posted to Canada in 1797 he married Mary Street, the daughter of Samuel Street, a judge and eminent political figure with whom he had six children (Figure 1). In 1831, aged only 16, the youngest of these children, Mary Jane, married her first cousin, John, the heir of Eastwell House. Six children were born to the couple between 1832 and 1849, the youngest being William Augustus Edmond Ussher, who was born only two years before the death of his father, leaving his mother a widow at the age of 35 years.

The object of this paper is to trace the life of W.A.E. Ussher from its beginnings in County Galway to prominence as a valued officer of the Geological Survey. Although his work has been well documented (Dineley, 1974), little is known about his personal life or his relationships with his peers. Published and unpublished sources, in particular the letters to his colleagues held in the British Geological Survey archives, are used to give an insight into his life and character and to provide a background against which, his geological work can be assessed.

### THE EARLY YEARS

Research has found little so far about Ussher's early years. He may have been educated at school or by private tutor. Two Usshers, Christopher and John Xaverius, appear on the register of the Royal School of Armagh (Emerald Ancestors, 2013). These may be his brothers; however, there is no record of his attendance there. It is not known by which route he came to join the Geological Survey, although he would have taken the Civil Service entry examination. In the early days of the survey it was likely that appointments were made through contacts within the family and it may have been through his uncle, the Reverend Christopher Ussher (III), who had obtained a living at St Mary's Church in Westminster, near to the Geological Survey offices at the Museum of Practical Geology in Jermyn Street, that the contact was made.

Ussher joined the survey in 1868 at the age of 19 as an assistant geologist under the director Sir Roderick Impey Murchison. Murchison was responsible for the rapid expansion of the field survey staff (Flett, 1937) and he took on 19 assistant geologists in 1867 followed by another 14 the following year. At that time it was customary for the officers of the survey to have their portraits taken for the records and Figure 2 shows