

The Father of Australian Geology



*Reverend William Branwhite Clark with his family
on the front lawn of St Thomas' Rectory, North Sydney*

Reverend William Branwhite Clarke was born in East Bergholt, East Suffolk on 2 June 1798, the son of William and Sarah Clarke. Clarke's middle name originates from the maiden name of his mother, Sarah Branwhite, who hailed from the village of Lavenham. His father was the headmaster of East Bergholt Free Grammar School, and although blind when William Branwhite was born, he carried on at the school until his death in 1818. East Bergholt was also the birthplace of the renowned artist, John Constable and both boys attended the Dedham Grammar School and knew each other well. It is most likely these early childhood picturesque landscapes of rivers and streams, meadows and woods had a tremendous influence on both Clarke and Constable and even helped to inspire their future respective careers as scientist and painter - one capturing it on canvas, the other delving into its history.

Clarke went on to attend the Jesus College at Cambridge and amongst others took on the subject of geology under the guidance of Reverend Professor Adam Sedgwick. Geology was not a required subject but the



Reverend William Branwhite Clarke

appeal of the lecturing style of Professor Sedgwick encouraged many students to attend his classes. Like many students of his day and indeed the Professor Sedgwick, he pursued a life as a clergyman and a scientist. Clarke obtained his BA degree in 1821 and in that same year was made deacon of Norwich Cathedral by Bishop Bathurst. Clarke was ordained in 1823 - the beginning of a brilliant career as a well-respected preacher who travelled in his spare time in England and Europe in pursuit of extending the world's knowledge of geological landforms.

It was during his scientific work in Brussels that he met Sophia Barker and became engaged in 1830. However, Clarke returned to England and

difficulties arose, resulting in a broken engagement and broken heart for the Reverend Clarke. In 1832 Clarke married Maria Stather and in 1833 he was offered a curate=s position at a new church in Dorset - St. Mary Longfleet. It was here that their first child, Mordaunt William Shipley Clarke was born. The surrounding district had other attractions for the Reverend Clarke - fossils and fascinating geological landscapes - and his scientific pursuits began to take up most of his time.

For reasons of health, a better financial situation and perhaps a sense of a geological adventure in an geologically unmapped new world, Clarke sailed to Australia in 1839 on the Roxburgh Castle. His first assignment in Australia was at the King School, Parramatta and his pastoral responsibilities took in all of Castle Hill and Dural. He worked tirelessly on all his duties and ministered to his large parish on horseback. At the same time he never neglected his scientific career and contributed widely to his chosen field of geology in New South Wales, including advising the Government of the day on where deposits of gold and coal could be found in the Colony, writing for the Sydney Gazette and the Sydney Morning Herald, and acting as curator for the Australian Museum. All the while he and his family lived in relative poverty, not receiving

the stipend he expected when he left his English home for this foreign land; Australia was also in the grips of an economic depression in the 1840s as Clarke himself wrote home to his mother:

'the whole colony is in a state of distress and I see no end to the pecuniary troubles that have come upon us. There is scarcely one man in a thousand who can pay his way, even public men are unpaid.. we are all nearly ruined...'

In 1846 he was appointed the first Rector of St. Thomas' Church of England, Willoughby Parish, North Sydney which he held until 1870. As with his previous appointment in Parramatta, his pastoral duties extended widely throughout the whole north shore covering over 200 square miles.

On his travels he had many an encounter with local Aboriginal bands. While it is known that he expressed concern for their plight and displacement, and a respect for their culture, as was the case with early European encounters and as a scientist, he would have also treated them as 'scientific curiosities'.

A popular preacher and well-respected by his parishioners on the north shore, Clarke continued to undertake geological investigations in New South Wales as far north as the Queensland border and south into Victoria. While funded by the

Government at the time, Clarke always undertook these excursions with the approval of the Bishop of the day.

Those with whom he formed friendships in the Colony included Dr. Charles Nicholson, collector of antiquities, whose collection forms the basis of the Nicholson Museum at Sydney University; William Sharp Macleay, patron of natural sciences (like Nicholson, Macleay's collection is preserved at Sydney University in the Macleay Museum); Phillip Parker King, a navigator and cartographer; Conrad Martens, artist and a parishioner of St. Thomas' Church, to name just a few.

Although they never met, Clarke was also a correspondent of Charles Darwin. Clarke admired greatly Darwin's work on the *Origin of Species* and he wrote and congratulated Darwin at the same time offering him his own observations on the subject. Reverend Clarke remained an active debater on the issue of the separation of science and religion, strictly adhering to the belief that the discipline of natural sciences in no way undermines the spiritual teachings of the church. Darwin wrote back thanking Clarke for his comments and paid tribute to Clarke's scientific contributions.

The Reverend Clarke retired from the parish of St. Thomas' in 1870 when he was 72 years of age. Upon his retirement

the members of his congregation expressed their pleasure with his services for 24 years with a gift of 115 sovereigns. He died at the family home Branthwaite which was located in Bay Road, Waverton not far from the Church,. He was 80 years of age.

His most distinguished career as a clergyman and a scientist is acknowledged worldwide. In Australia he is known as *'The Father of Australian Geology'* and it is said that he had the skills, talent, wit and humour to make 'the field of geology a respectable profession in the colony'.

To be inspired by the remarkable Reverend Clarke today, we are able to visit St. Thomas' Church, North Sydney and witness the hallowed walls he preached in; we are able to view his monument at his gravesite in St. Thomas' Rest Park, the former St. Thomas' Cemetery, West Street, Crows Nest, read some of his diaries and documents in the Rare Book Collection at Sydney University, view some of his field instruments which he carried with him on his geological excursions, at the Macleay Museum, and see his handwritten notations in the burial register at the Sexton's Cottage Museum, St. Thomas' Rest Park. Sadly, in Australia, we are unable to see his geological specimens as most of them were destroyed when

Sydney's International Garden Palace Exhibition building caught fire in 1882 where they were on display.

Reverend William Branwhite Clarke's lifetime work as a geologist is also remembered by the Clarke Medal formed by the Royal Society of New South Wales and the first of its type in Australia awarded to

'any person who shall have distinguished himself by original research in the fields of geology, mineralogy, botany, zoology of Australia'.

Recipients of this award include:

Professor Thomas Huxley, Professor James Wright Dana, Father Julian Tension Woods, Sir Edgeworth David and Sir Douglas Mawson.

St. Thomas' Cemetery is now known as the St. Thomas' Rest Park and is located at 250 West Street, Crows Nest.

Sexton's Cottage Museum is open:

Thursday 1 - 4pm

First Sunday of each month 2 - 4pm

For group visits outside these hours contact Stanton Library's Historical Services Department on 9936 8400 to make an appointment.

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Walker, Jeannie

Clarke the Clergyman: the Rev. W.B. Clarke
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The life and times of the father of Australian
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Mann, G.V.F.

History of the Municipality of North Sydney

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Morgan, C.

Life and Death on the north side: a history of
St. Thomas' Church and Cemetery

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Look under both St. Thomas' Church and
Clarke, W.B. Rev.
