

HistGeogUni

A Global Research Network on the Historical Geographies of the University



HistGeogUni Lecture 2018

Friday, 4 May 2018, 1.00 to 2.30 pm

followed by a reception in the Department of Geography

Dr Heather Ellis

University of Sheffield

Mapping the Geographies of Britain's Literary and Philosophical Societies, 1780-1850

Centre for Research in Communication and Culture
Loughborough University, [Brockington Extension](#), Room U.0.20

Contact: Dr Heike Jöns, email: H.Jons@lboro.ac.uk

HistGeogUni Lecture 2018

Mapping the Geographies of Britain's Literary and Philosophical Societies, 1780-1850



Dr Heather Ellis

University of Sheffield

When historians have looked at Britain's literary and philosophical societies they have treated them primarily as spaces of middle and upper-class sociability designed to strengthen ties between the traditional landed gentry and emerging industrial elites. Their role as knowledge-making institutions has been largely dismissed. Yet, it was this aspect of their activities which drew most comment from contemporaries when the majority of societies were founded in the early years of the nineteenth century. In a *Quarterly Review* article from 1826, the geologist Charles Lyell praised their growth as 'without parallel in the history of contemporary nations', describing them explicitly as institutions dedicated to the 'advancement of the various arts and sciences' and the carrying out of 'deep research'.¹

It is this function of Britain's literary and philosophical societies—as knowledge-making institutions—that I wish to explore in this lecture. I will argue that in the period between 1780 and the reform of Oxford and Cambridge in the 1850s, it was these societies rather than the ancient universities which functioned as the chief knowledge-making spaces in England and Wales. Drawing on research conducted as part of a wider project designed to map the spatial and conceptual geographies of literary and philosophical societies over the course of the long nineteenth century, I will reconstruct some of their key knowledge-making networks involving the movement not only of individual society members but also of their papers, publications, parts of museum collections and scientific equipment. At the same time, I will draw links between the spatial mobilities of knowledge operating within these networks and the conceptual geographies influencing the self-perception and knowledge-making practices of literary and philosophical societies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

¹ [Charles Lyell], 'Scientific Institutions', *Quarterly Review* 34:67 (June 1826), 153-179.