

● History of the Society

The Geographical Society of London was founded in 1830 as an institution to promote the advancement of geographical science. Like many learned societies, it had started as a dining club in London, where select members held informal dinner debates on current scientific issues and ideas. Under the patronage of King William IV, it later became known as the Royal Geographical Society and was granted its Royal Charter under Queen Victoria in 1859.


From 1830 - 1840 the RGS met in the rooms of the Horticultural Society in Regent Street, London and from 1854 -1870 at 15 Whitehall Place, London. In 1870, the Society finally found a home when it moved to 1 Saville Row, London – an address that quickly became associated with adventure and travel. The Society also used a lecture theatre in Burlington Gardens, London which was lent to it by the Civil Service Commission. However, the arrangements were thought to be rather cramped and squalid.

A new impetus was given to the Society's affairs in 1911, with the election of Earl Curzon, the former Viceroy of India, as the Society's President (1911-1914). The premises in Saville Row were sold and the present site, Lowther Lodge in Kensington Gore, was purchased and opened for use in April 1913. In the same year the Society's ban on women was lifted.

Lowther Lodge was built in 1874 for the Hon William Lowther by Norman Shaw, one of the most outstanding domestic architects of his day. Extensions to the east wing were added in 1929, and included the New Map Room and the 770 seat Lecture Theatre. The extension was formally opened by HRH the Duke of York (later king George VI) at the Centenary Celebrations on 21 October 1930.

The early history of the Society enshrines such famous names as Livingstone, Stanley, Scott, Shackleton, Hunt and Hillary – and is, in fact, the history of British Geography, exploration and discovery. Information, maps, charts and knowledge gathered on expeditions was sent to the RGS. The Society was also pivotal in establishing Geography as a teaching and research discipline in British universities, and funded the first Geography positions in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The Society published its first journal in 1832 and from 1855, accounts of meetings and other matters were published in the Society *Proceedings*. In 1892, this was replaced by the *Geographical Journal* which is still published today.

By the late 1920's there was growing discontent among young academic Fellows of the Society who found it difficult to publish or present their papers to the RGS. Consequently, a group finally broke away in 1933, to form the Institute of British Geographers. Their activities included organising conferences, field trips, seminars and specialist research groups.



The RGS and IBG co-existed for 60 years until 1992 when a merger was discussed. In 1994, members were balloted and the merger agreed. In January 1995, the new Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) was formed.

Today the RGS-IBG is a voice and home for Geography, both nationally and internationally. It is the largest Geographical Society in Europe and one of the largest in the world. It operates on a regional scale, with eight branches in the UK and one in Hong Kong. It supports and promotes many aspects of Geography including geographical research, education and teaching, field training and small expeditions, the public understanding and popularisation of Geography, and the provision of geographical information. The Society also works together with other existing bodies serving the geographical community, in particular the Geographical Association and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society

In 2004, The Society's historical Collections relating to scientific exploration and research, which are of national and international importance, were opened to the public for the first time. In the same year, a new category of membership was introduced to widen access for people with a general interest in geography. The new Foyle Reading Room and glass Pavilion exhibition space were also opened to the public in 2004 – unlocking the Society intellectually, visually and physically for the 21st century.

Further Reading

To the Ends of the Earth: Visions of a Changing World – 175 years of exploration and photography, published by the RGS-IBG, 2005.