



ROBERT BELL (1864-1934): Riveter and Geologist

Robert Bell was born in Ballycreen, near Ballynahinch, Co. Down on 29 Dec 1864 of working class parents. He was a riveter at Harland & Wolff's shipyard for forty years.

Bell first discovered rocks and fossils on walks with his mother, taking his finds to the Belfast Museum for identification. He began to explore the hills around Belfast and further afield for fossils and minerals. He remembered his first geological excursion as follows: "My first geological excursion from Belfast was to Hillsport on Islandmagee with some of my school chums. Here we found the Liassic and Cretaceous rock teeming with treasures of extinct life. Such was my first geological excursion. A simple enough event and yet the turning point of my life. Thenceforward the rocks and their fossil treasures formed the chief subject of my everyday thoughts — that day stamped my fate, and I became a geologist."

Harland & Wolff built ocean liners for the White Star Line for its north Atlantic route. Bell was a riveter on the building of the Oceanic, the first large passenger ship built by Harland & Wolff, begun in 1897. On the day of a launch, the riveters were given the day off. Bell seldom attended these events, preferring instead to go off collecting fossils and minerals.

Black Mountain is in the high ground that overlooks the western edge of Belfast. Bell explored this area looking for fossils and minerals. In 1922, he noticed flint fragments on the eastern slope of Black Mountain. They were discarded chippings from the making of flint implements by early man. The flint came from nearby chalk outcrops. Bell had discovered a pre-historic 'flint factory'. Bell specialised in collecting zeolite minerals from the Ulster basalts. He also sold these to collectors and dealers, universities and museums. The famous Ashcroft Collection of Irish zeolites in the Natural History Museum, London is formed mainly from his specimens. For his knowledge of zeolites, Bell was made a Life Member of the Mineralogical Society of London in 1912. It was said of him "He knows more about the geology of Ulster than the professor at Queen's University!"

Bell joined the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club in 1893 and became a prominent member of the Club's Geological Section. He put on, at the Club's annual social evening, displays of specimens that he had collected during the year. These included not only fossils and minerals but also prehistoric flints, another of Bell's interests. He won the Club's prize for the best exhibition on several occasions. In 1925, the Club made Robert Bell an Honorary Member and in the following year it bestowed on him the Club's Commemoration Medal, awarded for important scientific work in Ireland.

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

Bell was laid off by Harland & Wolff in 1924, at the age of 60, and retired. This gave him more time for his interests and his retirement was a busy period of geological excursions, specimen labelling and reading.

Like all shipyard workers, Robert Bell had no pension and he was without a regular income. In 1930, thirty of Northern Ireland's leading figures in the academic world, including five professors of Queen's University, presented a petition to the Northern Ireland Minister of Finance, requesting that he grant a Civil Pension to Robert Bell in recognition of his services to science. The Minister agreed and awarded Robert Bell "a Civil Pension at the rate of £75 per annum in recognition of your services to Geological Science."

During his lifetime, Robert Bell collected and exhibited thousands of geological and archaeological objects. Yet today there is no 'Robert Bell Collection' in any museum. The Ulster Museum has just over one hundred Robert Bell specimens, which were acquired piecemeal over many years.

Patrick Devlin