

# LESLIE OWAIN FORD (1913-1990) MINERAL COLLECTOR AND JOINT FOUNDER OF THE PEAK DISTRICT MINES HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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**Abstract.** Leslie Ford was born in Chester and grew up in Devonshire. During ten years' residence in Sheffield, he became one of the most prominent collectors and preparators of Peak District minerals in the years after the Second World War. He was a founder member of the Peak District Mines Historical Society and prominent in the Geological Section of the Sorby Natural History Society. His discoveries contributed considerably to our knowledge of the topographical mineralogy of the Peak District.

Early in 1954 Mr. Jeffrey Arnold, brother of one of the partners in the firm of solicitors for which my mother worked, unexpectedly called me on the telephone. Knowing my great interest in geology, he was eager that I should meet his friend Leslie Ford, then manager of Messrs. R. Orme & Co's. grocery store at Nether Edge, Sheffield who, Jeffrey told me, was an extremely keen amateur geologist. A little reluctantly, I phoned Mr. Ford and was invited to meet him on the evening of 15th February that year. Thus began a friendship which was to influence strongly my own geological career and the genesis of this Society. It was brought to an end only by Leslie's death last year, at the age of 77.

Leslie Owain Ford was born in Chester on the 11th June 1913, the third child and second son of Francis Ford and Jessie Agnes Ford (neè McCulloch). When he was six or seven, his parents separated. His father and elder brother Colin continued to live in Chester, but his mother, his sister Patricia (13 years older than Leslie) and he moved down to Devonshire, where his mother took up a position as schoolmistress in the village of South Milton. Not long afterwards, his sister married Frank Moore and went to live in nearby Frogmore.

Leslie's childhood was a difficult and very lonely one. His mother was extremely possessive, but also very strict and not one to demonstrate love or affection. However, she imparted to him her taste for good music and taught him to read well. Leslie had a retentive memory and read very widely; anything that interested him would be given his most avid attention. Although, in due course, he studied at Dartmouth Grammar School, it was from the books read outside classes that he gained his principal education.

In particular, Leslie developed a passion for two fields of science: microscopy and geology. He bought himself an excellent microscope and, over the years, built up a remarkable collection of slides. These included such rarities as slides of 'xanthidia' (dinoflagellate cysts contained in flint), made commercially only in the late 1840's; several of the meticulous arrangements of diatoms and radiolaria that were the highest artistic products of the Victorian microscopists; and the very earliest of microdot photographs.

His other great interest was in part derived from books, in part from his explorations of the countryside about his Devonshire home. A general concern with geology soon

became focussed in particular upon minerals and, during his late childhood and teens, he built up a substantial collection. Because of the difficulties in maintaining this collection during a peripatetic career, Leslie donated it to Dartmouth Castle in 1928. Unfortunately it was to be destroyed by bombing during the Second World War.

When Leslie left school, he took employment with the International chain of grocery stores, which operated under a variety of names in different parts of England. While in training, he worked successively in Dartmouth, Brixham, Torquay and Plymouth before being promoted manager of a store in Cheltenham. His career was interrupted by wartime service in the Royal Air Force: he served on ground staff from 1940 to 1945 and attained the rank of Leading Aircraftman (L.A.C.). Romance came during a visit to Birmingham and, on 9th October 1943, he wedded Mary Evans. They were to have three children: two sons, Stuart and John, and a daughter, Margaret.

After completing his war service in 1946, Leslie returned to the managership of the Cheltenham store. It was in 1952 that he was appointed manager of Ormes in Nether Edge, this being the only Sheffield branch of a Derbyshire group of grocery stores taken over by the International chain. He and his family moved into the two-storey flat over the store (No. 2 Machon Bank Road).

Soon Leslie came to love Derbyshire almost as well as Devonshire. During a succession of expeditions, he collected minerals from the old mine tips, many of which were then being dug over in quest for the gangue minerals discarded by the lead miners but now of value as sources of chemicals (especially barytes and fluorspar). Leslie had a percipient eye for promising specimens and took delight in cutting and polishing them. From want of better equipment, he did his cutting laboriously with a hacksaw and his polishing, often of undulating surfaces, with progressively finer grades of sand and emery paper. A fine "wet-and-dry" paper was used last and the surfaces were given gloss and hardness by the application of clear nail varnish.

When I met him first, Leslie was tall and lean, with sleeked-down dark hair and heavy horn-rimmed spectacles; his accent attractively betrayed his Devonshire upbringing. I was impressed from the outset by his enthusiasm for geology - an enthusiasm for which his wife Mary displayed an uncomprehending toleration - and by the generosity of



**H. Raymond Singleton, Director of Sheffield City Museums examining Peak District Minerals collected by L.O. Ford and W.A.S. Sarjeant on display at the British Association Meeting in Sheffield, September 1956. The group includes W.A.S. Sarjeant (third from left), Leslie O. Ford (third from right) and amateur geologist Harry Cantrill (extreme right). [Photograph by courtesy of Sheffield Newspapers Ltd.]**

his hospitality. In particular, though, I was impressed by the quality of the polished specimens he displayed to me; he was a master of that craft and I have never seen his work surpassed.

There was a return visit, when Leslie came to 47 Milton Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield (my parents' home) to see my own collection; and after that, a series of joint forays into Derbyshire and the Manifold Valley area, made by bus since neither of us owned a car. At first, my own concern was exclusively with fossils, but progressively my interest in minerals was aroused. Soon I found myself striving to match Leslie's feats in polishing; but never successfully, for I lacked his patience and skill.

On my urging Leslie joined the Sorby Natural History Society, of which I was already an enthusiastic member. His interest was specifically in the Geological Section; and on 26th January 1956 he was elected Secretary of that Section. Unfortunately, ill-health during the ensuing month forced him to resign from that position; nor could I assist him, for I was in the final year of study for the Honours B.Sc. in Geology at Sheffield University. Instead the Section's President, Dr. Derek W. Humphries, performed those duties in addition to his own.

By the summer, however, I had begun postgraduate research and the pressures on me had eased. Leslie and I were continuing our mineral-hunting trips whenever we could, usually accompanied now by my father, Harold Sarjeant (see Sarjeant 1968). A number of particular incidents crowd into my memory. One was Leslie's finding a block of apple-green calcite in an overgrown mine tip at Brightgate, near Winster; when polished, this was to prove perhaps the most beautiful of all his specimens. Leslie was with me also when I discovered the pseudo-stalactitic barytes unique to Masson Hill, near Matlock (see Sarjeant 1958; Ford and Sarjeant 1964a) but was less enthusiastic about that discovery, for it was grey in hue, crusted with limonite, and could not be effectively polished! Together

we collected from Derbyshire toadstones samples of the fibrous chlorites then miscalled "asbestos"; their intermittent study was to occupy almost ten years of my research time (see Sarjeant 1957; 1967a). While exploring the Calton Hill road metal quarry near Buxton for amethysts and for the speckled quartz found only in that quarry (under magnification, the speckles proved to be of haematite), we discovered columnar basalts in the newly-opened lowest level - the first Derbyshire example of this form of jointing and quickly hidden again by dumping, long before the quarry closed down (Sarjeant 1967a).

There were several visits by the three of us to Crich; the associations of tomato-red or orange barytes with purple or yellow fluor spar, then to be found about the Glory Mine, provided further fine specimens for polishing. At Millclose Mine, we searched the tips for ruby-red blende crystals (sphalerite) and rarer zinc compounds, on one occasion happening upon a superb mass of tufa from a mine-shaft; this was subsequently mostly carted away by the Fearn brothers to use as background for cactus displays! The Hope Valley was another frequent haunt. Our questing for Blue John fluor spar resulted in our being appointed Honorary Wardens of Treak Cliff; and there was the finding of nailhead calcite crystals in a cavern above Pindale, in the extraordinary company of an abandoned aeroplane propeller!

When the British Association for the Advancement of Science held its annual meeting in Sheffield early in September 1956, Leslie and I put on a joint display of local minerals, mostly from the Peak District (see Plate). This attracted much attention and caused us to meet several other enthusiastic amateurs of Derbyshire geology. Already during that summer we had met Michael E. Smith, about to become a technician in the Sheffield University Geology Department, and David A.E. Spalding, who was beginning undergraduate studies in botany and geology. Both were to become close friends. Soon Mike was a regular companion in mineral collecting expeditions and beginning to involve

himself in speleology - not an interest of Leslie and I, since mineral collecting underground in caves was properly regarded as contemptible!

During the autumn of 1956, Leslie and I discussed the vacant Secretaryship of the Sorby's Geological Section. We agreed that Leslie should become again its titular Secretary, but that I should serve jointly with him. At the Society's Annual General Meeting on January 26th 1957, this was formalized and I was elected to the Society's Council, so that we would have an equal voice in its affairs. Shortly afterwards, Leslie was partially incapacitated by an injury that cost him the use of one arm for several months; but this did not diminish his enthusiasm. Our joint service was to last almost two years, during which time the Society's journal *The Sorby Record* was to be launched (Sarjeant 1990a, b).

It was during those two years that the discussions took place which were to bring into being the Peak District Mines Historical Society. A new friend introduced to us by Mike Smith, James H. Rieuwerts, was the prime instigator of its foundation, the story of which has been told in an earlier article (Sarjeant 1967b). Though Leslie's daytime job had prevented his participation in the planning sessions beforehand, he attended and spoke at the inaugural meeting on Saturday 14th February 1959. Along with my father, he was elected to the Surface Exploration Group set up at that meeting. Like me, he was most interested in the distribution of the minerals through the limestones and beneath the 'toadstones' of the Peak District; and he was hoping, through our joint collecting and the perusal of reports by H.M. Geological Survey and other papers and documents, to attain a better understanding of the genesis of the ore and gangue minerals.

Alas, that future work was never to be done. The summer and autumn of 1959 were to prove, for both Leslie and me, the swan-song of our work in the Peak. My Chairmanship of the PDMHS made an uneasy combination with the joint Secretaryship of the Sorby's Geological Section; moreover, I was engaged in writing my Ph.D. thesis and grudged the time spent on other concerns. As for Leslie, his managership of Orme's was causing him such severe overwork that he was appealing in vain to International for an assistant manager; he was left with too little time and energy for his hobbies.

With my Ph.D. thesis successfully presented, I went with Michael and David to Weardale and Teesdale. That was a splendid week, at the end of one of the driest summers in Britain's history; and it was to be effectively that last of my mineral-collecting travels. Already I had accepted a position at the County Technical College, Kings Lynn, Norfolk; and upon return I resigned from the PDMHS Chairmanship on Friday 23rd October, Jim Rieuwerts being elected as my successor.

Shortly afterwards, Leslie was transferred temporarily by International to a grocery managership at Alton in Staffordshire, which placed him out of easy reach of the Peak. He spent rather more than a year there, then was transferred back to Ormes and, on December 2nd 1961, was elected Treasurer of the PDHMS. Alas, matters had not improved at Orme's and, by March 1963, he had given up an impossible task, moving with his family back down to Dartmouth.

(Following Leslie's departure, International appointed two managers to succeed him; but the task proved too much for them also. Within only a few more months, the Nether Edge grocery store, which had flourished for over 60 years, was closed down.)

Back in Dartmouth, the Fords lived briefly at 113 Victoria Road and more lengthily at 27 South Town before settling in their last home together at 75 Britannia Avenue. His daughter has told me that: "Whenever we were on family outings, father could always give an account of the structure of the surrounding countryside, give a reliable report on calcite veins etc. In retrospect I do wish I had been able to retain all the knowledge father was imparting. I am, however, more practical than academic."

Indeed, none of the children shared their father's interests. Elder son Stuart became a sales representative; he had two daughters, Tracey and Josephine, by a first marriage, but has now remarried and lives in Chesterfield. Younger son John joined the Royal Navy; following a brief and disastrous marriage, he severed all contact with his family. Daughter Margaret became a nurse and married Peter Preece, then a Chief Petty Officer in the Royal Navy; they had three sons, Nathan, Kristian and Samuel. Following Peter's retirement from the Navy after 21 year's service, Margaret and he opened a private nursing home at Chelston, Torquay where her mother, after 21 years as a nursing auxiliary at Dartmouth Cottage Hospital, now helps her.

Leslie's concern with minerals had essentially ended when he left Sheffield. He worked for a short time with a Dartmouth family grocer, Cundell's, and enjoyed the slower pace there. However, without a car, the mines of southwestern England were not readily accessible to him. He was not greatly interested in his grandchildren until they were of an age to communicate, but thereafter found a new companion in his daughter's eldest son Nathan, who developed an early interest in natural history and fossils, Margaret remembers Nathan "and my father, heads together, along Lyme Regis Bay." Though Nathan is now a chef by profession, he has never lost those interests.

After his final retirement, photography became Leslie's greatest concern. Sadly, a deterioration of sight, caused by cataracts in both eyes, progressively robbed him first of all of his ability to enjoy his microscope and then even of the ability to take photographs. The microscope, together with most of his slides, was given to elder son Stuart and a few of the slides, including the micro-dot photograph, to grandson Nathan. During Leslie's last years he suffered from a very cruel disease which, with the support of his wife and in his daughter's care, he endured with great courage. By coincidence he died on my own 55th birthday, on Sunday 15th July 1990. His collection of minerals will eventually be fittingly lodged alongside those of my father and me, in Stoke-on-Trent Museum (see Steward 1985).

Leslie was not only my friend, but also a person to whom I am greatly indebted. Through his influence, I developed an interest in the mines and minerals of the Peak District which would never have developed otherwise. (Of my earlier geological papers, fourteen were to be devoted to Peak minerals and another to a mineral occurrence in Shropshire). Moreover, had it not been for Leslie, my own part in the genesis of PDMHS would never have been played; nor would the work I did with Leslie's near namesake Dr. Trevor D. Ford have been ever done. A

number of the occurrences reported in the Ford and Sarjeant mineral index (1964b) resulted directly from Leslie's discoveries; and there was a time when he and I could place almost any Peak district mineral specimen with a mile or so of its source, almost at a glance.

In his last long letter to me, dated 10th February 1985, Leslie wrote: [Mary and I] "don't venture far from the house these days. Like many old folk we tend to live in the past, and it is good to have such good memories of our time spent in Sheffield. I feel proud to have helped lay a few bricks in the foundation of the Peak District Mines Historical Society."

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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