



## ‘Ask a Geologist’ at Market Hall Museum, Warwick

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### Short Communication    Abstract

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‘Ask a Geologist’ is a regular Saturday morning event at a local museum where the general public meets geologists, learning about geology and the identification of rocks, fossils and minerals. The events are a collaboration between the county geoconservation group (Warwickshire Geological Conservation Group) and the local museum (Warwick Market Hall Museum). ‘Ask a Geologist’ is attracting many visitors and raising public awareness and appreciation for Earth science and Earth heritage.

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### Introduction

‘Ask a Geologist’ is a drop-in event for the general public held for two hours on a Saturday morning once every three months at Warwick Market Hall Museum in Warwickshire. The event was proposed by and is run by Warwickshire Geological Conservation Group (WGCG). It provides an opportunity for visitors to come and chat with a geologist, learn about the local geology and bring their rocks and fossils for identification.

The venue of the Market Hall Museum is a vibrant place situated in the center of Warwick, with free access for the public, which was refurbished in 2017 (<https://www.visitwarwick.co.uk/market-hall-museum/>). There are permanent and

frequent new exhibits that explore the culture and heritage of Warwickshire. WGCG is a local charity with >100 members that was established to manage and conserve geological sites, both Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and Local Geological Sites (LGS), and to educate people about the geology of the county.

The geology of Warwickshire is varied but poorly exposed. In the 1900s, the Warwickshire Natural History and Archaeological Society collected geological specimens and documented local geological sites, but their activity declined after about 1880 (Radley 2008). The WGCG was established in 1990, and in partnership with the Warwickshire Museum, established a Regionally Important Geo-

logical/geomorphological Sites (RIGS) network, now known as the county LGS network.

WCGC offers an extensive calendar of events including evening lectures, workshops, field trips and active conservation work throughout the county. WCGC maintains some 100 LGS sites and several important SSSIs. The WCGC has an office in Kenilworth where a large collection of geological samples and educational materials are archived.

### The Offer

At each ‘Ask a Geologist’ session, several WCGC members, including at least one or more geologists, set out several tables of samples and specimens from the WCGC collection (Fig. 1). These are mostly from the county of Warwickshire, but also include examples of particular rocks, minerals or fossils from elsewhere for demonstration purposes. Hand lenses are available, and a small handheld microscope is linked to a tablet so that visitors can see the petrological composition of the rocks, and their grain size or crystal size.



**Figure 1.** WCGC members Kathrin Schüttrumpf, Peter Hawksworth, Gareth Jenkins and Anthony Allen preparing for the event in March 2023.

A PowerPoint presentation runs nearby showing a selection of the many field outings held by WCGC in the county. Leaflets and guides are available, published by WCGC, about the geological history and the influence of geology on the landscape, wildlife, industry and settlement of the county (Fig. 2). The guides also discuss the building stones and materials used in the towns in the county (such as Warwick, Kenilworth, Stratford-upon Avon and Royal Leamington Spa), giving them their character and ‘sense of place’.

‘Ask a Geologist’ started in the summer of 2023

and has been a great success, with enthusiasm from visitors of all ages, including young children, teenagers, and adults. Much interest comes from young children who have been studying related topics at school. One excited young boy, who came with his family, brought a large treasure bag of fossils from their holiday in Dorset, including magnificent ammonites from his trip to Charmouth beach. Some adults have brought rocks from their garden or from family outings to be identified. The highlight of the display, particularly for the children, is the microscope and all that it reveals (Figs. 3-5).



Figure 2. Leaflets and guides written and published by WCCG about the geology and landscapes of Warwickshire.



Figure 3. Peter Hawksworth and Gareth Jenkins discuss how to use a hand lens.



**Figure 4.** Anthony Allen demonstrates the properties of magnetite.

The initiative began through some suggestions welcomed by a member of WGCG who is also a curator at the museum. It was known that similar events had been very successful for county geoconservation groups in other counties and that Warwick Museum already held a regular Saturday session where the public could consult an archaeologist. The Museum welcomed the offer from WGCG and now supports the event by including it in all of its publicity, online, at the Museum and with posters outside the building. WGCG also



**Figure 5.** ‘Ask a Geologist’ events draw visitors of all ages.

promotes it through a range of social media, including Facebook, X (Twitter), LinkedIn and Instagram. Publicity is started as far ahead of each event as possible, to ensure maximum exposure and the widest possible reach.

The established footfall at the Museum, with visitors going there throughout each week for many other purposes and events, expands the publicity and reach of ‘Ask a Geologist’. Some people may see the event itself in passing and stop on the day, whilst others may see the publicity on a previous

visit and make a mental note of the ‘Ask a Geologist’ date and return with a purpose.

In the coming months, WGCG also hopes to draw in more visitors by linking up ‘Ask a Geologist’ with the Museum’s ‘Make and Create’ arts and craft activities. There is also a plan to link with the Museum’s 2024 theme of ‘Tales from the Riverbank’ about life on and in Warwickshire’s waterways – fitting well with recent conservation and research (Burley *et al.* 2023) that has been undertaken by WGCG members on the Arden Sandstone and the story that can be told of its lacustrine and fluvial origins.

### Discussion

The mission of the Market Hall Museum is designated as ‘Heritage and Culture’ and the Museum ‘tells the story of Warwickshire, and how the shifting natural, built and human landscapes have shaped the county to the present day.’ The mission of WGCG is to explore ‘Hidden wonders in the landscape of Warwickshire’ and it is a charity promoting geoconservation and public education about geology throughout the county (<https://www.wgcg.co.uk>). ‘Ask a Geologist’ is a partnership between the two organizations, helping them both to fulfill their aims.

The title of the event is shared with a similar initiative from the United States Geological Survey that began in 1994 (Spikes 1999). This operated online, and the public could email in questions and, for example, 35 volunteer scientists answered 127 questions in its first month of service. This was one of numerous such online initiatives on offer at the time, covering all branches of science.

Warwickshire’s ‘Ask a Geologist’ event benefits both the visitors and those presenting it. It is hoped that it may also lead to more people joining WGCG as members who will help perpetuate the work of the organization. A recent new member of WGCG, Anthony Allen, an early career geologist

who helped present the most recent event, said:

‘The Market Hall Museum in Warwick buzzed with excitement as geology enthusiasts gathered for the ‘Ask a Geologist’ event in March. Hosted by the Warwickshire Geological Conservation Group (WGCG), this engaging affair provided a unique opportunity for visitors of all ages to delve into the fascinating world of rocks, minerals and ancient landscapes.

It was fantastic to engage with so many members of the public of all ages who share a passion for geology. It was a blast putting my geological knowledge to the test by helping people identify rocks they had brought to the museum. Rock and fossil specimens from the WGCG collection on display were outstanding and it was great to showcase these. The WGCG’s impressive collection took center stage ranging from sedimentary sandstone to mammoth tusk to a rugged igneous volcanic bomb, each rock whispered tales of our planet’s history.

The enthusiasm and curiosity, particularly from the younger generation, was truly inspiring. These interactions solidified the importance of fostering an interest in geoscience and I felt humbled by the opportunity to potentially spark a passion for Earth Sciences (and our Earth heritage) for all those who attended.’

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