WHITE WATSON  by George Challenger

White Watson (1760-1835) was Bakewell’s most famous inhabitant. He was nationally important as one of a group of geologists including J Mawe, J Whitehurst, William Martin, John Farey and William Smith - the ‘Father of English Geology’- who established the fundamental law of stratigraphy, the branch of geology which deals with the nature and order in which rocks were laid down. Indeed, a 1973 exhibition on the subject in Derby Museum by M F Stanley put ‘the heroic age of geology’ as starting in 1773 when Watson probably began collecting fossils. Watson wrote his book ‘A Delineation of the Strata of Derbyshire’ in 1811, which described in detail the various rocks and the fossils in them. He was unique in producing geological cross sections using many of the actual rocks. One of these sections is displayed in Bakewell’s Old House Museum. It follows the section described in his book from Coombs Moss beyond Buxton to Bolsover beyond Chesterfield and going through Bakewell.

Several other of his sections are in Derby Museum.

Trevor Brighton describes White Watson as a polymath: Like his uncle and grandfather before him he was a monumental mason and carver, but was also an antiquarian, museologist, silhouette artist, writer, gardener and plantsman. His botanical and horticultural pursuits earned him election as a fellow of the Linnaean Society. At the Duke of Rutland’s Bath House, where he lived in Bakewell, he not only revitalised the town’s bathing facilities, but laid out the grounds to establish a botanical garden. Within his house he had created, by his death in 1835, a museum of geology, natural history and archaeology. He made notes on a great variety of subjects, including Bakewell’s social life.

A self portrait silhouette of White Watson,
His calling card and one of many cabinets made for the sale of geological specimens.

His early activities centred on the local black marble industry producing ornaments in what is usually called Ashford marble, as Ashford-in-the-Water, close to Bakewell, was a centre of production. Buxton Museum has a large collection of the products. Bakewell’s Old House Museum has an inlaid table top, other finished items and a display showing how they were made. Black marble is actually a grey limestone from the upper beds of the local Carboniferous limestone, coloured by bitumen-like material which oozed down from higher beds. When polished it goes black. It was inlaid with other local minerals (some with fossils), marbles, mother of pearl and even coloured glass.
The remains of the Ashford Marble Works can be seen (but not entered) on the left of the A6 beyond the village going towards Buxton. Henry Watson, White’s uncle, had set up and patented water-powered cutting and polishing machinery in 1748. By 1774 he had sold the Ashford Marble Works and then came to live at the Bath House in Bakewell. White moved in with him in that year, having earlier helped him at Ashford during school holidays (where his interest in geology presumably developed by exploring the mines). White’s father, Samuel (son of the famous carver at Chatsworth) and uncle Henry rented the Bath House from the Duke of Rutland and had a mason’s workshop in Bakewell. Inlaying was carried out in many workshops in Ashford, Bakewell, Matlock and elsewhere until there was a change in taste after Queen Victoria died. Black ornaments had been in favour since her beloved Prince Albert died.

For most of his life, Watson lived in Bakewell’s Bath House where he kept a museum and reading room and his wife, Ann, managed the warm bath after it was restored in 1817. Watson wrote: ‘The Bath was uncovered until about 1705 when the present elegant ashlar arch and rooms were built over it upon its ancient walls. It was much frequented until about the year 1767 when the modern baths at Buxton coming into vogue, this ancient bath … became neglected and … was converted into a dwelling, the bath being covered with a boarded floor supported by sandstone pillars. On examining the walls of the Bath at the time of the repairs in 1817, a spring of cold water was discovered under the steps, which being taken away, the water of the Bath remained at 60 degrees as is the spring.’

It was restored by the Duke of Rutland with the addition of two shower baths and pump.

A printed notice of 1st May 1817 announced the re-opening of the ancient bath.

"Mrs. Watson has a complete assortment of linen and dresses and she begs to assure those ladies and gentlemen who may intend to use the Bath that every attention shall be paid to their convenience and comfort"

Many visitors to Bakewell called on him. He corresponded with notable people, such as Sir Joseph Banks, Dr Samuel Pegg, John Sneyd, Sir Joseph Paxton and academics in Britain and abroad. No doubt many of them visited the Bath House. Brigg’s 1858 ‘Worthies of Derbyshire’ stated that ‘his conversational powers made him a welcome guest’. Watson was invited to the Duke of Devonshire’s birthday dinner in 1806. He taught children of the Duke’s family.

Towards the end of his life Watson had financial problems and sent unsolicited geological specimens in the hope of being paid for them. In a draft of a letter of 1833 he pleaded with D’Ewes Coke to buy a cabinet of fossils as he needed money to avoid arrest for debt.

A letter dated 9 July 1835 from James Taylor sadly announced his death the previous day. He had requested the solicitor, Mr. MacQueen, to make his will and write to his nephew in London. He and Ann had no children.
A 1970s painting by Udall from an old drawing but the stream is unlikely.

The bath in the basement of the Bath House.

**Watson’s Writings**

Extracts from Watson's writings were published under the title ‘Observations on Bakewell’ in the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal for 1889 and, in 1926, High Peak News published further material. The following are some examples.

Bakewell inhabitants 1412 in 1801. In 1808 there were upwards of 50 inhabitants in Bakewell upwards of 70 years old. 1821. Inhabitants of Bakewell May 28. Male 856, Female 926. Total 1782

Bakewell, 1829, population 1900 is a market town, township, constabulary and parish, and is esteemed the chief town of the High Peak Hundred. The population are employed in trade or handicrafts, 54 families employed at Arkwright’s cotton factory, 37 are shoemakers, 18 blacksmiths, 21 joiners and cabinet makers, 9 carpenters, 12 marble masons, and the rest are engaged chiefly in mining, agriculture, chertstone getting, professional pursuits and some living independent. The township of Bakewell is divided among 53 resident and non-resident freeholders. His Grace the Duke of Rutland's estate here being 1823 acres and a great part of the buildings of the town and, as Lord of the Manor, holds a court annually in the town.

The quarter sessions were held at this town previous to and in 1774. The gentlemen were always as well accommodated with beds, etc., as it was possible by the principal inhabitants, who spared no pains to oblige them. Though no pains were wanting from the inhabitants to make everything agreeable to the gentlemen who generally
attended these sessions, yet for a few years previous to 1797 some of the visitors made great complaints about their accommodations and in this year, there being a mob assembling about the Militia Act, they made such complaint as to remove the sessions to Derby, endeavouring to disgrace the town, from whom they had for many years received so many civilities, calling them riotous, etc. But, be assured, there was not one inhabitant of the town joined the mob, but to a man were against it. The gentlemen of the town behaved with great propriety, offering every assistance.

1807 October 3. The new coach called Defiance came from Ashbourne through Bakewell to Sheffield, to commence in the morning. I saw it and thought it very handsome.

1818 April the 16th. The Bruce Coach commenced from London to Manchester and Edinburgh.

1818 May 1st. The Peveril of the Peak Coach commenced from London to Manchester and Edinburgh.

1818 June 26. In the last seven days 655 passengers have passed through Bakewell by coaches.

Notice dated Bakewell News Room, Monday 3rd Jan. 1820:
The gentlemen interested in bringing the water from the Edge to the town are desired to meet in this room on Saturday next at one o'clock. N. B. It was understood that Robert Arkwright, Esq., would have superintended the business and lent the money.

Notice dated Bakewell May 2nd 1831:
We, the undersigned, request the freeholders and leaseholders of houses in Bakewell, to attend a meeting to be held at the Town Hall, on Thursday, the 5th inst. at 6 o'clock in the evening, for the purpose of taking into consideration the propriety of making an application to D'Ewes Coke, Esq., to supply such houses with soft water from the Duke of Rutland's Reservoir.

Notice of a public dinner to be held at the Rutland Arms Inn on Saturday the 28th May, 1831 to commemorate the birthday of the King. Mr. James Taylor acted as secretary, and dinner was to be on the table at five o'clock, tickets to be had at the bar of the Rutland Arms Inn. John Barker, Esq., of Burre House, was in the chair. He records that 26 other gentlemen were present, the Tideswell band attended and Mrs. Greaves furnished with a most excellent dinner. The toast list gives 13 toasts.

The waters of Bakewell were known to the Romans. The Saxon name, Baddecanwelle, is derived from the baths. The tepid chalybeate spring, the water of which, after being recently analysed, was recommended as a tonic and as a bath for chronic rheumatism. A large bathing house was erected over this spring in 1697 and was re-opened by direction of His Grace the Duke of Rutland. Two shower baths of different powers have been added, and a newsroom established on the premises.

1829. Near the ramparts on Castle Hill was found a copper bolt head covered with green rust, and is supposed to be an instrument discharged from some engine.

Mr. Samuel Watson, of Baslow (my father), obtained a patent in 1774 for making a handmill of millstone, sandstone and Derbyshire burr, for grinding wheat and other grain into flour; and also for crushing malt, oates, beans, drugs, etc.
1800 Enclosing the Commons of Bakewell and Over Haddon. The Duke of Rutland’s precedent, by enclosing with quicksets (hawthorn hedges) in lieu of stone walls, will remove the dreary aspect of the country and yield a richer prospect to the traveller.

The Rev. J. Browne (successor to the Rev. Mr. Chapman) intends to open his school on Monday, the 28th of July, 1806, and teach the following branches of literature, viz., English, Latin and Greek languages, grammatically; geography, ancient and modern; writing; in all its various, useful and ornamental parts; arithmetic, merchants’ accounts, and the mathematics systematically, -with the clearest demonstration in every brand thereof. Terms: entrance, 5/-; English and writing, 7/6 per quarter; Latin and Greek and writing, 10/6; arithmetic, 10/6; mathematics, 15/6. N. B. - The children of the inhabitants, when capable of reading the Bible, are taught English, Latin and Greek free.

Bakewell, June 27, 1806. Mrs. R. Pidcock begs leave to inform the inhabitants of Bakewell and its neighbourhood that she intends to open a school on Monday, the 6th of July, 1807, in Bakewell, for the instruction of young ladies, as day pupils, in the usual branches of female education on the following terms, viz. per quarter, instruction in reading, English grammar, writing and needlework, 10/6; children under five years of age, 7/-; entrance, 2/6. Mrs. R.: having endeavoured to qualify herself for teaching the above branches.

On Midsummer day, 1807, Mrs. R. Pidcock entered upon the rooms in my house to commence teaching a day school. - White Watson.

The Rev. J. Coates intends to open a school in Bakewell on Monday, the 3rd of January, 1814, and proposes to teach a limited number of young ladies and gentlemen in the following branches of literature, viz., reading, writing, and arithmetic, English grammar and geography, Latin and Greek languages, etc. Terms, one guinea per quarter. Entrance, 5 shillings. J. C. having been in the habit of educating youth a number of years in two very respectable academies, hopes, as he only intends to take a small number, he shall be able to give satisfaction to those parents who may entrust their children to his care.

Mary Hague’s School. - By will, bearing date 20th November, 1715, Mary Hague gave her house, garden, stable and nine square yards of land for ever, for teaching so many poor children belonging to the poor of Bakewell as the yearly rent would amount to, until they could read the Bible, and then to be removed and others supply their places. Ralph Bradbury, the parish clerk, was appointed schoolmaster by the vicar and parish officers. He received the emoluments and for them instructed seven poor children, boys and girls, of the township of Bakewell, appointed by the churchwardens.

Forming road surfaces in 1810. - Though various methods have been pursued in forming the surface of roads, that lately introduced into the neighbourhood of Bakewell has by much the preference, for ease of horse and carriage, for durability and the least expense. These roads are made of limestone, which is broken at the quarries to a circular, iron gage of 2 1/2 inches diameter within; and there is a forfeiture for each stone that will not pass the ring; in this state it is applied to the roads.

1791 Aug. 12. All persons who are desirous of coming forward in defence of their country are desired to meet at the Town Hall this day at 12 o’clock. I was at the meeting
when, with all the rest present- upward of 40, I signed myself a volunteer. On the Sunday a general meeting was called when papers were disbursed to every householder to give an account of himself. When I signed infirm … and delivered to Mr. Joseph Wilson, Constable.


1819     Gas lights first appearing in Sheffield in Oct.

1820. 3 Jan.     Meeting to form committee for relieving the poor.

**Watson's monuments**
Henry Watson's monument in Ashford church carved by his nephew White
Signed monuments can be seen in several churches in the area, e.g. Youlgreave, Hartington and Longstone. They are in black marble, are simple and elegant with a carving usually surmounting them. Stoney Middleton has a black inscription inside a severely plain border, presumably to match a similar, older one on the other side of the church. Tideswell has a small plaque curved to fit on a pillar. An inscription under the Foljambe monument in Bakewell Church bears his signature, as he restored it.

White carved a monument to his grandfather at Heanor and a most unusual one to Sir Sitwell Sitwell at Renishaw.

Charles Bradbury, writing in the 1950s, recorded that Watson carved the coat of arms above the door of the Rutland Arms.

**Watson's poems**

Watson wrote a number of poems, including on geological subjects. He was probably the author who cloaked his identity under the nom de plume ‘a gentleman of Bakewell’ for this saucy poem about covering the bath when the Bath House was built over it. It is a handwritten addition to Watson’s copy of ‘The Strata of Derbyshire’ in Derby Library.

*There erst from illness or perchance from whims,*  
*Our Peakrill ladies lav'd their tender limbs,*  
*No screen to keep them from the prying eye,*  
*Nor any covering save the ample sky;*  
*For here by modesty alone arrayed,*  
*Of shame unconscious they their frames displayed;*  
*But when refinement deemed it was unchased,*  
*In public thus to come and wash the waist,*  
*A mansion rose, where midst ear piercing gabble,*  
*Their snowy frames they unobserved might dabble.*

**Further reading.**


