



Figure 1: Portrait of Thomas Thomson © Wikipedia

## THOMAS THOMSON

(1773-1852)

Crieff, which is located in Tayside, can lay claim to the pioneering geochemist Thomas Thomson. Thomson was born here in 1773 and attended the Universities of St Andrews and then Edinburgh, graduating in medicine in 1799. During his studies, a course of lectures on chemistry given by Joseph Black determined the direction of his future career. Although largely self taught he started lecturing on chemistry in Edinburgh in 1800 and continued until he moved to London in 1813 as a scientific editor. In 1817 he returned north to Glasgow University first as lecturer and later as Regius professor of Chemistry in which he remained for the rest of his career.

At the time Thomson was starting work, geology in Britain was split between two major camps, those of Werner and Hutton. Robert Jameson, the Regius professor of Natural History at Edinburgh University, was an enthusiastic disciple of Werner and recruited Thomson into a rather select group of scientists: the Wernerian Natural History Society, founded in 1808. Jameson was a passionate mineralogist who probably encouraged Thomson's developing interest in this field. As time went on, however, it became obvious that many aspects of Werner's teaching were untenable and both men moved progressively to a more Huttonian view of geology.

That Thomson became a formidable naturalist and field geologist is obvious from his writings, in particular his travelogue on a trip to Sweden which he made in 1812 to meet the local scientific community and to investigate some of the principal Swedish metal mines. In this volume he displays a wide ranging curiosity with regard to everything and everyone he encountered.

Whilst today Thomson's more mainstream chemical studies are more remembered than his mineralogy; his early promotion of Dalton's atomic theory and coining the name silicon are two examples; between about 1825 and 1835 he devoted himself to collecting or purchasing a specimen of every mineral available. Each of the many hundred acquired was analysed chemically by Thomson himself or one of his students. In the course of this study at least 50 new minerals were discovered. The results of this massive work were published in his 1836 tour de force 'Outlines of Mineralogy, Geology and Mineral Analysis'.

The Geology section of this book demonstrates a remarkable grasp of geological knowledge and also reveals that he enjoyed expeditions in the Scottish Hills with family and friends. He always maintained a special affection for his Perthshire birthplace as he writes: "From the village of Crieff...when we turn our eyes around, we see ourselves surrounded, on the south west and the north, by an amphitheatre of little hills, which, varying each in size and in shape, and being covered to the summits with wood, while the prospect is closed on the west by the Grampians, constitute one of the most lovely landscapes any where to be seen."

References:

Directory of Eminent Scotsmen, 1875. Vol 3, p452-5. Glasgow: *Blackie and Sons*.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Thomson\\_\(chemist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Thomson_(chemist))

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*This is part of a series of Tayside Geodiversity biographies. Who have we missed? Please contact us if you would like to see someone included in the future.*

