

## **An Exceptional Assembly of the Buist and Goodsir Families of Fife**

**By Michael T. Tracy**

On Monday, 4 March 1839 in the library of the University of St. Andrews at St. Andrews, Fife, there occurred a unique meeting of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews in which members of the Buist and Goodsir families were in attendance. The members of the Buist family whose interests included geology and mineralogy met members of the Goodsir family who were distinguished surgeons of Anstruther and Largo and whose interests embraced anatomy, zoology, natural and human history. The two prominent Fife families were linked by the marriage of George Buist (1750-1797)<sup>1</sup> a tenant farmer of Orkie, Kettle Parish, Fife and Christian Ballingall (1756-1834) a daughter of Christian Goodsir (1717-1760) whose brother Dr. John Goodsir (b 1719) was a prominent surgeon of Largo Parish, Fife. It was an extraordinary gathering of Fife intellectuals all in one room and never occurred again in their lifetimes. This is an account of the early origins of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews in 1838 and of that remarkable meeting in 1839.

### **Origins of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews**

A group of distinguished gentlemen met on Monday, 16 April 1838 at St. Andrews University library to discuss a proposal that a Literary and Philosophical Society should be formed.<sup>2</sup> One of those present was the Reverend Dr. George Buist,<sup>3</sup> Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of St. Andrews. The Reverend Dr. Robert Haldane, principal of St. Mary's College and professor of theology at the University presided in the chair. The meeting resolved to establish a Literary and Philosophical Society.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, these gentlemen were anxious to receive the names of others who were 'disposed to countenance' such an Institution. Beside the general object of promoting literary and philosophical research, the Society would especially have in view the establishment of a museum in the University.<sup>5</sup> Thus the new society was founded, with the Reverend Dr. George Buist a Founding member. Of the others present Sir David Brewster (Fig 1), mathematician, physicist, philosopher, and historian of science was probably the driving force behind the society's creation. Brewster had been responsible for setting up the Society of Arts in Edinburgh to promote Scottish inventions, the Edinburgh School of Arts and the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

---

<sup>1</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collections Ref UYUY/M/Biog/BuistG

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 16 April 1838, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.2

<sup>3</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collections Ref UYUY/M/Biog/BuistG

<sup>4</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 16 April 1838, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.2

<sup>5</sup> Biography of Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, National Archives of Scotland, Person Code STA81, Source ID S303



*Fig.1. Sir David Brewster (1781-1868) taken circa 1850s, Photograph Credit [www.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Brewster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Brewster)*

The Literary and Philosophical Society provided an excellent forum for general engagement with the latest scientific developments by involving increasing numbers of interested members of the local community. Literary and philosophical societies were groups of individuals who shared common interests in science, history, literature and art. These societies offered lectures, and often acted as museums by establishing, and preserving collections for the local residents.

Brewster was involved from the earliest days of photography having stayed with William Henry Fox Talbot in 1836 and, by maintaining the link, he ensured that Talbot's calotypes were first displayed at the Society and that St. Andrews was the first place outside England that the calotype was produced.

Also present at that first meeting was Dr. John Adamson (1809-1870), another son of Fife and a local physician. (Fig 2) Inspired by Brewster, and no doubt stimulated by discussion at the Society, he would produce the first calotype in Scotland in 1841. Adamson trained his brother Robert in the new science of photography and Robert Adamson (1821-1848) along with David Octavius Hill (1802-1870) were to become important pioneers in the early history of photography. John Adamson became the Curator of the Society's Museum.



*Fig.2. Scottish pioneering photographer Dr. John Adamson, a physician and lecturer of St. Andrews, taken in circa 1865, Photograph Credit [www.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Adamson\\_\(physician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adamson_(physician))*

There is a plaque in his honour on his home at 127 South Street in St. Andrews, where he lived from 1848 to 1865. It reads: "He was a physician and pioneer photographer."



*Fig.3. John Adamson's Home and Family in St. Andrews, 1862, Photograph Credit [www.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Adamson\\_\(physician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adamson_(physician))*

2

1838

A General Meeting of the Subscribers to the Proposal of forming a Literary & Philosophical Society in St. Andrews was held in the University Library on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April at One O'clock

Present

The Rev<sup>d</sup> Principal Haldane  
 Principal Sir David Brewster.  
 Professor Duncan  
 J. Adam Anderson  
 J. Thomas Gellerpie  
 J. James Hunter  
 J. George Jook  
 J. George Beust  
 Provost Patrick Wallace  
 Mayor H. L. Hayfair  
 J. Robert Dain  
 J. Patrick Mudie  
 Mr. John Adamson  
 Rev<sup>d</sup> Mr. G. I. Lyon  
 William Arnott Esq.  
 Benj. Broughton Esq.  
 Rev<sup>d</sup> Will<sup>m</sup> Lethian  
 Rev<sup>d</sup> Thomas Withen

The Rev<sup>d</sup> Haldane in the Chair

The meeting resolved to form themselves into a Literary & Philosophical Society and the following Gentlemen were elected Office Bearers for the ensuing year -

President. The R. Hon. Lord W. Douglas  
 Vice President { Sir David Brewster K.H. &  
 Rev<sup>d</sup> Haldane  
 Rev<sup>d</sup> J. Jook - Council

Fig.4. Minutes written by Dr. P. Mundie, First Secretary of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 16 April 1838, Photograph Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) © University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department

A towering figure in natural history, Edward Forbes (1815-1854) was also present at the meeting. Forbes was a naturalist and pioneer in the field of biogeography, who analyzed the distribution of plant and animal life of the British Isles as related to certain geological changes.<sup>6</sup> Forbes became curator at the Museum of the Geological Society of London and a professor of botany at King's College London and a paleontologist to the British Geological Survey.

Other gentlemen expressed an interest in joining the newly formed Society and were subsequently voted as "Ordinary Members" or "Honorary Members," among them being the following:

<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. Assessed at: [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/213008/Edward-Forbes](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/213008/Edward-Forbes)



James Buist,<sup>7</sup> Esquire of Kirktonbarns (Ordinary Member, 5 November 1838)  
 John Goodsir, Jr.,<sup>8</sup> Surgeon of Anstruther (Honorary Member, 7 January 1839)  
 George Buist, Bengal Calvary (Ordinary Member, 7 January 1839)  
 William Fernie Buist, Airdrie (Ordinary Member, December 1841)

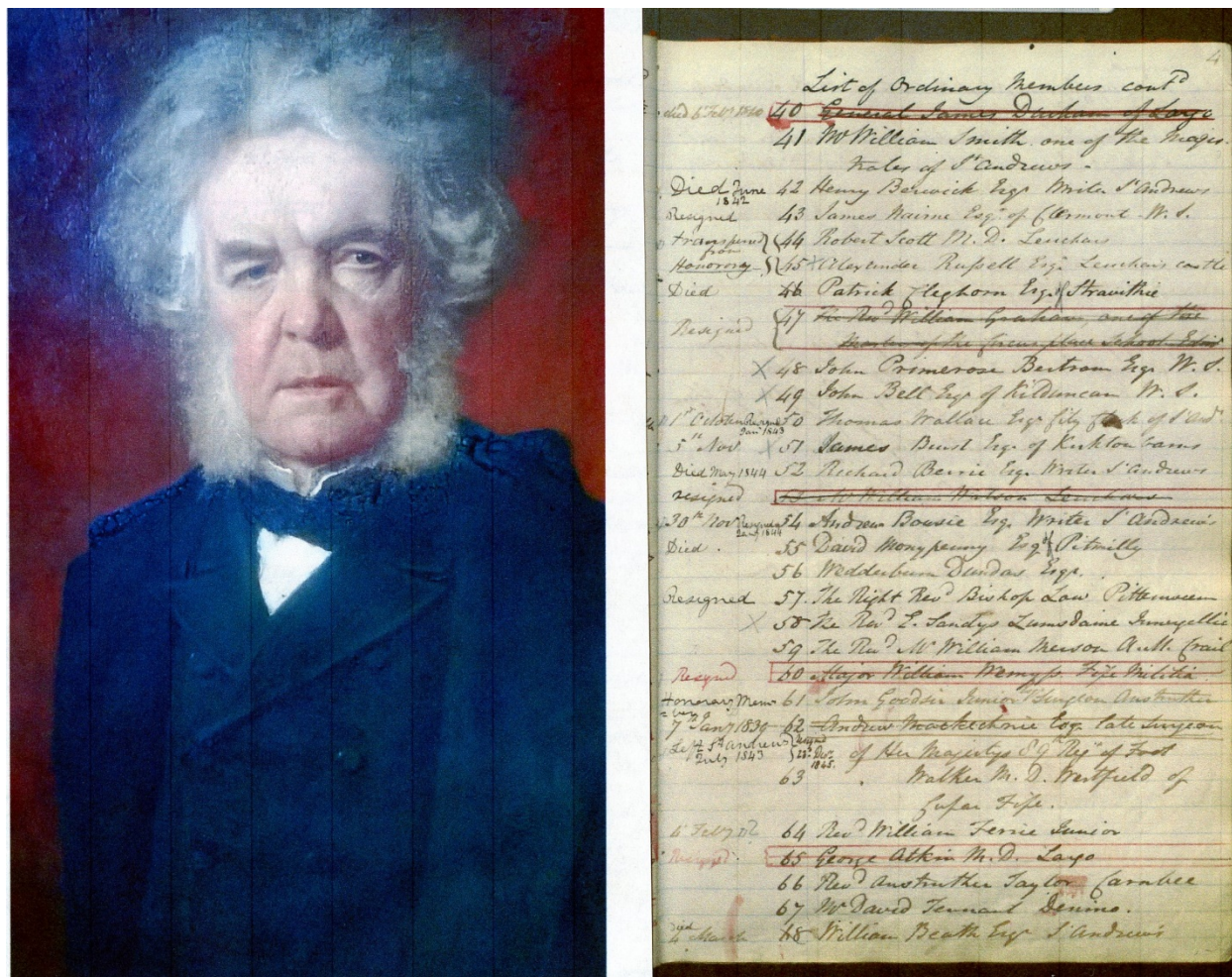


Fig.5. (Left) Portrait of James Buist (1795-1880) of Kirktonbarns, Forgan Parish, Fife, 1870s, Photograph Courtesy of The Church of Scotland © The Church of Scotland (Right) Ordinary Members Lists, featuring James Buist, Esquire of Kirktonbarns, Photograph Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) © University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department

There were two types of membership, ordinary, paying a subscription of half a guinea (10s 6d) and honorary.<sup>9</sup> The laws of the Society also stated: “None but Ordinary members are to bear office in the Society or to vote; number of Ordinary members to be unlimited; and ordinary meetings of the Society will be held during the winter session on the first Monday of every month at 12 noon.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collection Ref UYUY/M/Biog/BuistJ

<sup>8</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collections Ref UYUY/M/Biog/GoodsirJ

<sup>9</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 16 April 1838, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.9

<sup>10</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 16 April 1838, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.9



## Early Minutes

The St. Andrews Society settled into a regular pattern of regular meetings and agendas. The Society collected objects for a museum, noted publications by their members and read publications on a variety of topics of the day. The Society also wanted to be associated with the leading scientific figures of the time. One such example was Charles Darwin who was listed as an “Honorary Member” and Secretary to the Geological Society of London.

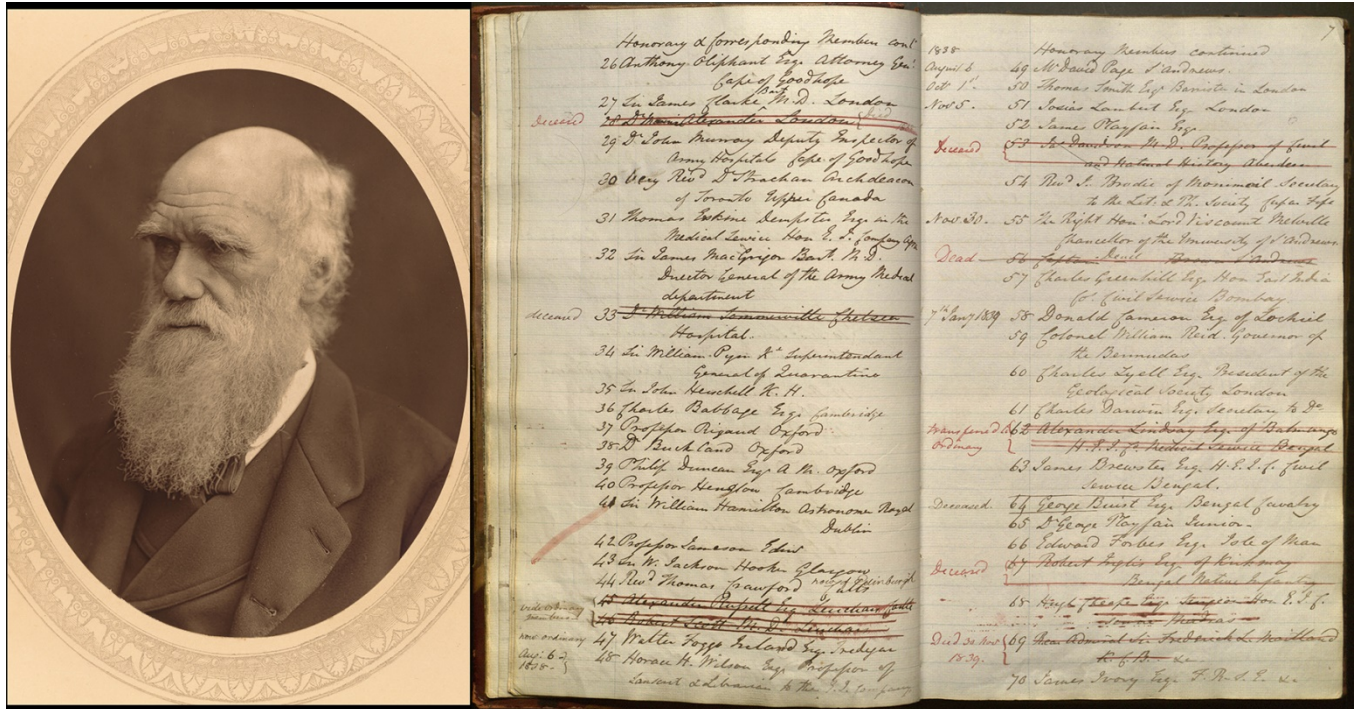


Fig.6. (Left) Charles Darwin, Woodbury type from Thompson Cooper, *Men of Mark*, 1878. (CT782.C7-vol-3-36) (Right) Honorary Members List, featuring Charles Darwin, Esquire, Secretary to the Geological Society of London, Photograph Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department, (UY8525/1 & 2) p.7 © University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department

Another distinguished “Honorary Member” of the Society was Professor John Goodsir who was given “Honorary Member” status after having left St. Andrews in July of 1843 for Edinburgh.<sup>11</sup> Darwin and Goodsir had both developed their interest in natural history around the shores of the Firth of Forth during their times as medical students in Edinburgh. Although not contemporaries there, both were inspired by Robert Jameson, the professor of natural history at Edinburgh University. In later life, when Darwin and Goodsir had become famous, Darwin wrote to Goodsir asking him to analyze some stomach content for the presence of an organism first described by Goodsir.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 16 April 1838, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.9

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/entry-4272>

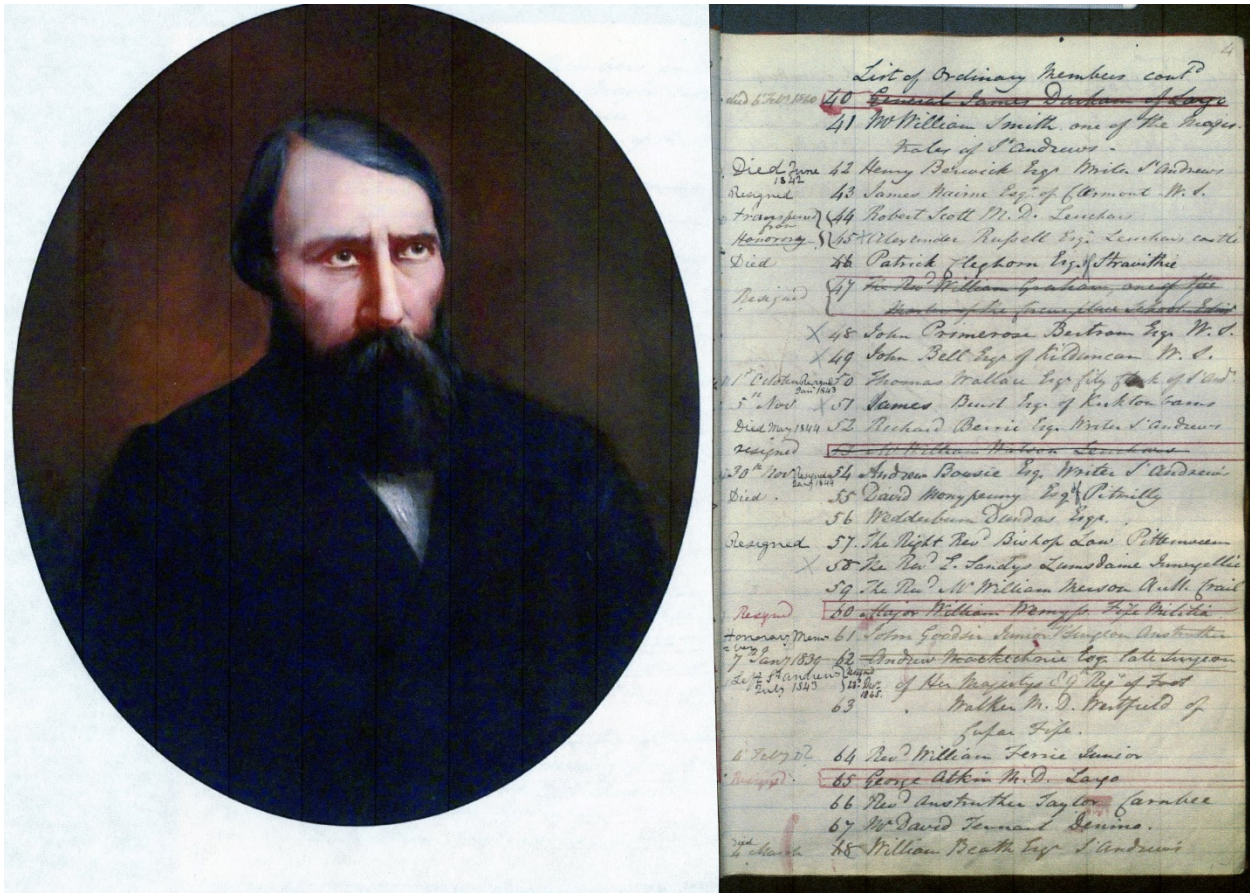


Fig.7. (Left) Professor John Goodsir (1814-1867), Portrait as Conservator of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, Photograph Courtesy of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (Right) Honorary Members List, featuring John Goodsir, Surgeon of Anstruther, Photograph Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.4, © University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department

According to the Society minutes of Monday, 4 June 1838: “Mr. George Buist [1809-1890] read a paper on an ancient monumental stone found in the churchyard of St. Andrews, which he illustrated by a series of drawings; after which it was moved by Sir David Brewster that a committee of the Society should be appointed to look after antiquities, and to take means for their preservation. The following were appointed to the Committee for Antiquities: Reverend Dr. George Buist, Dr. James Hunter, Dr. Gillespie and Reverend McLyon.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 4 June 1838, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.10



## When two Distinguished Fife Families Met

The meeting of prominent members of these eminent Fife families is an important moment in the genealogical history of the two families. On Monday, 4 March 1839 in the library of the University of St. Andrews, members of the Buist and Goodsir families were assembled for the meeting of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews. The minutes of the Society recorded those present: “Dr. George Buist; [his son] William Fernie Buist; Henry Buist of Berryhill;<sup>14</sup> [his sons] George and Henry Buist; Dr. John Goodsir, Surgeon of Anstruther and [his son] Dr. John Goodsir, Jr., Surgeon of Anstruther and Dr. Edward Forbes.”<sup>15</sup> A reporter for the *Fife Herald Newspaper* was also in the room taking notes.

The significance of this meeting was that not only were the two families present but also they gave presentations on that day. The *Fife Herald Newspaper* on Thursday, 28 March 1839 stated: “Mr. Goodsir [John Goodsir, Jr.] read a paper which he illustrated by anatomical preparations on certain peculiarities in the eye of the cephalopod mollusks [sic]. The first peculiarity consists in the exposed condition of the lens, which instead of being enclosed in the centre of the eyeball, is in contact with the medium in which the animal lives. The second peculiarity is the glandular body behind the eyeball.”<sup>16</sup> The minutes of the Society reflected: “Mr. Goodsir then read a paper on the cephalopod mollusks eyes and illustrated his views by anatomical preparations. He also stated that his observations would be published.”<sup>17</sup> Dr. Forbes of Edinburgh would also make a presentation during the meeting. He stated: “that on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December last, Mr. Goodsir and he observed a great number of Asclepius animals of the genus cydippe thrown ashore by the waves on the beach of St. Andrews.”<sup>18</sup> Forbes was one of the greatest naturalists of his era, second only to Darwin.

John Goodsir, Jr.,<sup>19</sup> was a distinguished Scottish anatomist of his era, and pioneer of the study of the cell. Professor Goodsir was acknowledged by many to be one of the most original and distinguished anatomists of the nineteenth century. Goodsir was also an investigator in cellular physiology and pathology who insisted on the importance of the cell as the centre of nutrition and declared that the cell is divided into a number of departments.<sup>20</sup> He was described as “one of the earliest and most acute observers of cell life” by the noted physiologist Rudolf Virchow, who dedicated his *Cellularpathologie* (Eng. Trans., 1858) to him.<sup>21</sup> Two years after this meeting of 1839, Goodsir was appointed conservator of the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. The remarkable point in history of the life of Professor Goodsir is that a country doctor, should have left the long rides of rural practice to become one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, professors of anatomy in one of the greatest medical schools in the world. This was due to his earnestness of purpose and pure devotion to his profession. As a scientific observer and inquirer he had few equals.

---

<sup>14</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collections Ref UYUY/M/Biog/BuistH

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 4 March 1839, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.27

<sup>16</sup> *Fife Herald Newspaper*, 28 March 1839, p.20

<sup>17</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 4 March 1839, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.29

<sup>18</sup> *Fife Herald Newspaper*, 28 March 1839, p.20

<sup>19</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collections Ref UYUY/M/Biog/GoodsirJ

<sup>20</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. Assessed at [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/238835/John-Goodsir](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/238835/John-Goodsir)

<sup>21</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. Assessed at [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/238835/John-Goodsir](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/238835/John-Goodsir)



The Goodsir family members were well educated and went on to become surgeons of Anstruther and Largo Parishes of Fife for at least two generations. John Goodsir, Sr., (1746-1816) was also a Surgeon of Largo and tended to the sick on his rides throughout the parish.

The Buist family members also were well educated. James Buist (1795-1880)<sup>22</sup> of Kirktonbarns who was educated at the University of St. Andrews and like many of his family was a farmer in Fife and was also a philanthropist throughout most of his life. His brother Henry Buist (1770-1865)<sup>23</sup> of Berryhill farmed many properties and had a great interest in the Society. His son, George Buist (1809-1889) also a member of the Society was a farmer and philanthropist and donated to many causes and institutions.

Another Buist family member present at the meeting was Dr. George Buist (1804-1860) a distant kinsman of the Buist family who already had a distinguished career as editor of the *Dundee Courier Newspaper* and the *Fifeshire Journal Newspaper* and would later accept the post of the Editor of the *Bombay Times* in Bombay, India. Not only was he a journalist but also a scientist and geologist.

The minutes of the Society recorded the presentation of Mr. George Buist: "Mr. George Buist laid before the Society a skeleton of a *Fauna Fifensis*, with preliminary observations both drawn up by Mr. Henry Buist of Law Park, St. Andrews."<sup>24</sup> The *Fife Herald Newspaper* also reported on Mr. George Buist's presentation: "The importance of local catalogues being kept was pointed out, not only with a view of obtaining a register of the birds and animals properly belonging to a district, but to ascertain on what it depended that there were certain periods when animals, before scarcely if at all known, began to abound, as was the case with the common squirrel, the pheasant, the blackcock, the crossbill, the golden-crested wren, of late became numerous amongst us..."<sup>25</sup>

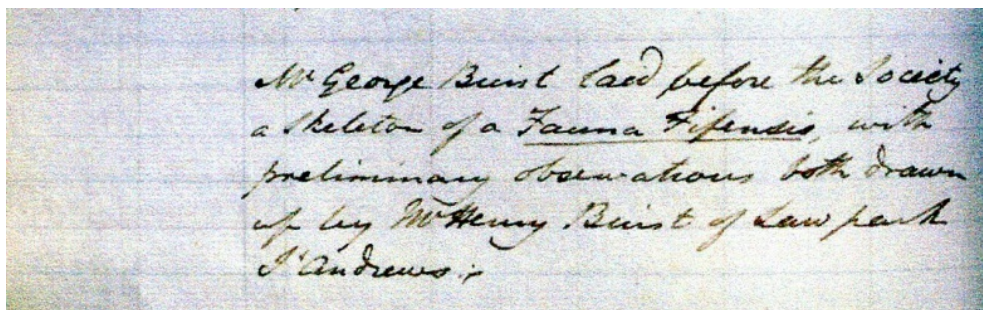


Fig.8. Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 4 March 1839, Photograph Courtesy of the University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2 p.29 © University of St. Andrews, Special Collections Department

This meeting brought together two families of the Fife area and provided a unique opportunity for engagement with the latest scientific discoveries and thought of the times.

<sup>22</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collection Ref UYUY/M/Biog/BuistJ

<sup>23</sup> St. Andrews University Special Collections Ref UYUY/M/Biog/BuistH

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews, 4 March 1839, University of St. Andrews Special Collections Department (UY8525/1 & 2) p.29

<sup>25</sup> *Fife Herald Newspaper*, 28 March 1839, p.20

The Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews greatly helped to bring out awareness and the thirst for new knowledge. However it also brought together two families of Fife who shared their interest, findings and presentations for the benefit of the Society and others. The Society would eventually have its own museum which was housed on the University premises. The Society was in decline in the 1870s, revived slightly but by the 1890s it ceased to function. The Goodsir and Buist families would never again meet in a formal setting as they did on Monday, 4 March 1839. However, for one brief shining moment they shared their discoveries and knowledge in the same room for the advancement of the Society. This group of gentlemen who shared a common interest in the Society left behind a great record of their discoveries, discussions and thoughts. The legacy of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews is found in the gentlemen such as Sir David Brewster and Dr. John Adamson who helped shape it and is also found today in the University's Museum Collections. Theirs is a legacy of which St. Andrews can be justly proud.

### **Acknowledgements**

With special thanks and appreciation to Mrs. Gabriel Sewell, Head of Special Collections, University of St. Andrews; Mrs. Rachel Hart, Deputy Head of Special Collections, University of St. Andrews who both aided me with the Minutes of the Literary and Philosophical Society of St. Andrews; and finally to Dr. Iain Macintyre whose help with this publication is gratefully acknowledged.

© 2015 Michael T. Tracy

