

EARTH SHAKING EVENTS AT SHIDE

John Milne 1850 – 1913

The Shide world famous Earthquake Observatory

[Return to Contents](#)

Anyone responding to the placard and paying their halfpenny for the Daily Mirror on Friday 1st August 1913 would have read the headline

“Death of Professor John Milne, the famous English inventor of Instrument to detect earthquakes and register their movement.”



In fact the whole front page was dedicated to a man who had put the then sleepy hamlet Shide on the map. The page had a montage of photographs followed by a short account. Underneath the headline and stretching across the whole page were four seismogram traces of recent devastating earthquakes together with the equipment he may have recorded them. Bottom left was a photograph of his petite Japanese wife, Toné, standing outside the front door of Shide Hill House that had been their home since 1895. Bottom right and taking up nearly a quarter of the page John Milne himself wearing what had by then become his famous trilby hat.

It may be hard to realise that in the quiet leafy lanes of the hamlet of Shide, at the end of the nineteenth century, John Milne had established the world's foremost earthquake observatory and put modern seismology on the map. The Shide Circulars, the first published records of all earthquakes occurring around the world, were to become the longest printing contract the IW County Press ever had. Fellow scientists visited him regularly as well as other eminent personalities. Japanese visitors were frequent, a little less frequent were the press corps except when a major earthquake had occurred. Then the Professor often tried to escape by slipping away to have a quiet round of golf. It may have been right over to Chale or just up the lane to George's Down the club of which he was the founder captain and which still is proud to have a cup in his memory.



John Milne was born in Liverpool at the end of 1850. He grew up in Rochdale and attended the Liverpool Collegiate Institute. After that he studied at the then recently founded King's College in London and the Royal School of Mines, gaining further experience at the Camborne School of Mines as well as in Europe. As a young geologist, then aged 21, he travelled with a friend to explore Iceland. The journey diary he re-wrote on his

return to Richmond is, with other items such as his school reports, in the *IW Record Office at Newport*. John Milne was the geologist and artist on the Charles Beke biblical exploration to the Arabian Gulf. Beke thought that Mount Sinai was not where it was traditionally supposed to be sited. John Milne made no comment on the theory. In 1873 and 1874 he was a field geologist with the prospector, Cyrus Field, working in Newfoundland. The discovery of coal and other minerals was the aim of the surveys but Milne also found time to write a report on the now extinct Great Auk

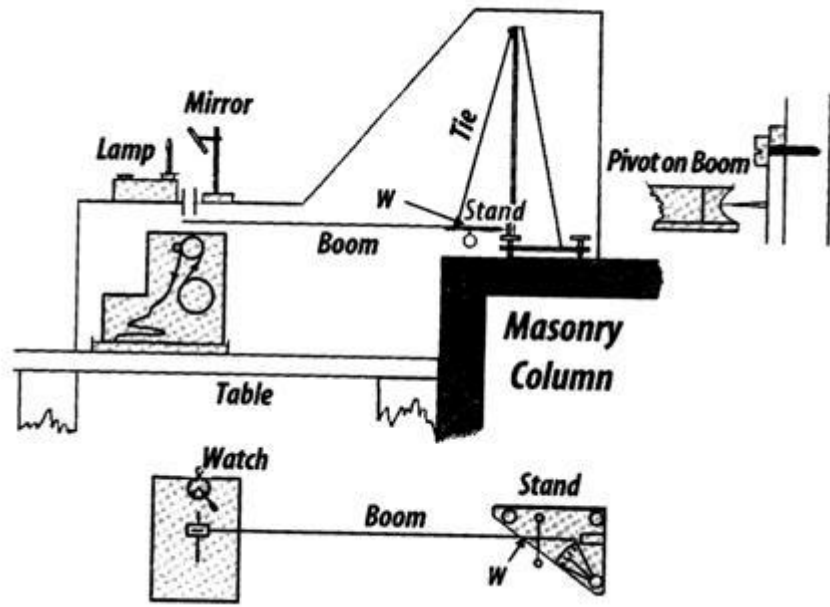


On the 3rd August 1875 John Milne left Hull on his way to take up his appointment as a geology and mining lecturer at the then Imperial College of Engineering at Tokyo. Perhaps because of sea sickness he went overland taking the opportunity to travel across Russia, Mongolia and China. Much of his journey was by sleigh in the depth of winter and long before Trans-Siberian Railway. The reports in his many published papers make fascinating reading. On the Mongolian boarder he was advised that the quickest way to Japan way to return via London!

On the first night in Japan, in 1876, he experienced an earthquake and his determination to understand their mechanism commenced. He travelled widely in Japan, visiting the Kurile Islands, Hakkaido and Hakodate where he met his future wife Toné. She was daughter of the pro western abbot of the Ganjo-ji Temple where he often stayed. At that time he wrote numerous technical works varying from '*Notes on Crystallography*' to '*The Stone Age of Japan*'. But it was the Tokyo-Yokohama earthquake on the 22nd February 1880 the completely changed his life.

Under his influence within weeks the '*Seismological Society of Japan*' had been established demanding a massive work-load. Still he found time the next year to marry Toné and after a short visit home he returned to publish the first edition of '*Earthquakes and Other Earth Movements*'. From then on earthquake investigation, establishing building regulations, and running the seismological society dominated his life. By 1888 he was perhaps the most prominent of the remaining foreign teachers and had been decorated by the Emperor and elevated to chokunin. Still he found time to write '*Colonial Facts and Fictions*' an entertaining piece of fiction based on his travels and a best seller on the British railway station bookstalls, invent his famous horizontal pendulum seismometer together with other instrumentation and publish a '*Miners Handbook*'- for he was still teaching geology and mining at the college - as well as writing hundreds of thousands words for dozens of technical papers. His horizontal pendulum seismometer, which could detect and measure quite small earthquakes occurring anywhere in the world, allowed him to return to Britain. Before departure in 1895, the Emperor again decorated him with the '*Order of the Rising Sun*' and awarded him a life pension of 1000 yen a year.

He chose to live with his mother and stepfather at Shide Hill House. This stands on the edge of the chalk layers which are massive and were ideal for his research as they are under tension. There with the a little financial support of the Seismological Committee of the BAAS (British Association for the Advancement of Science) he was able to build both an observatory and laboratory. It was to



become the most important earthquake centre of its time, with Milne continuing to research, write and develop his network of worldwide recording stations right up to his death. After he died the station was continued until 1819 when Mrs Toné Milne returned to Japan, the equipment was transferred first to Oxford and then to Eskdalemuir.



The Milnes played an active life on the Island. Amongst other things, he with his Japanese assistant, 'Snowy' Hirota, was fundamental in establishing an Island Photographic Society. Toné, always the perfect host, brought her Japanese culture to Newport. John, a man of great humour and vitality, devoted much time to delivering Oxford University Extension Lectures, forerunner of the WEA (Workers Educations Association) not only on geology and earthquakes but on his travels, art,

music, natural history and archaeology. He also found time to play golf, taking Captain Scott of the Antarctic to his favourite links when he visited Shide to be shown how to use the Milne pendulum seismograph he took with him to the base camp. John Milne's enthusiasm was contagious and it allowed him to use the skills of local experts such as F. M. 'Jonny' Walker of Newport Grammar School a good mathematician and natural history man, Sam Pring a local tradesman, Slavonic music .and language expert, William Bullock a builder who did much essential work, Howard Burgess who printed the *Shide Circulars* to name a few. Most also shared his love of music and golf. Even after his death he stimulated a number of local enthusiasts to take up seismology. E.W. Pollard of Binstead, a local pharmacist, was the best known. For many years as an amateur he wrote for national newspaper, undertook radio and later in his life television interviews on seismic events occurring around the world.

The watercolour by Miss Mimms, shown here with grateful thanks to Carisbrooke Castle Museum shows the front of Shide Hill House with the Pan Chalk Pit in the background. The main part of the house was built by a nephew of John Nash and was been pulled down for new housing in the 1970s. Now left standing is part of the annex on St George's Lane and the laboratory block facing the fields towards Blackwater. The extensive grounds fronting the main road, where the actual observatory stood, were been built on between the wars and only the lodge at the bottom of St George's Lane still stands.



Mrs Lou Henry Hoover wrote in the Bulletin of the American Seismological Society after she had visited Shide:

“ It is a Quaint conceit that to the utter quiet of this pretty, tree-encircled old house, with its grassy stone-stepped terraces leading down towards the little valley, with the great peaceful downs rising at its back, should come the earthquakes of the world to be classified and studied. But come they do Some monthly, some twice yearly and some when a chance boat may bring them. These must all be carefully correlated and filed away This is practically a labour of love on Professor Milne’s part. He holds no official position ”

Little remains today on the Isle of Wight to remind anyone that one of the greatest Victorian geologists and polymath, *‘The Father of Modern Seismology’* lived there. There is a small cul-de-sac Milne Way and a small cairn with plaque by the river opposite his house with a cherry tree, from the grounds of the University of Tokyo, planted by the Japanese Ambassador nearly forty years ago in Milne’s memory. Another was also planted at the IW College in Newport.

When the Queen visited Japan a booklet *‘British Personalities 1600-1975’* was officially published by the Japanese government. It included a small number of short biographical sketches of British pioneers

“.... the Japanese people themselves are the first to recognise the importance of their work in the fields of science, technology and culture ... ”

It is fortunate they do, for here John Milne lies virtually forgotten with his mother and stepfather in St Paul’s Churchyard at Barton. Toné was buried back home in Japan. Milne’s gravestone was a gift from the Royal Society. He being one of the few great scientists who have received their coveted gold medal.



During his time at Shide Professor Milne became interested in how valleys and sea shores moved under the weight of precipitation or an incoming tide. For the former he chose to place a seismograph at Carisbrooke Castle and for the latter one at the Royal Victoria Yacht Club which then had its headquarters on Ryde seafront. It also specialised in a wide range of good whiskeys much to his delight! Missing is a set of seismograms which one can be certain he would not have thrown away. The story goes that

nearly every week at about the same time there was an unexpected trace. This puzzled Milne for some months until he realised that two of the staff shared the same time off during which they often frequented the room next to the recorder! Is this yet another first for Ryde?

A much fuller on-line account of the life of John Milne can be found at the Isle of Wight Society website which has a link from the home page of this site

[**Return to Contents**](#)

[**Bibliography and Other References**](#)