John Playfair was born on March 10, 1748 in Benvie, Scotland to Reverend James Playfair. While he is most known for contributions to the physical sciences, he started his academic studies with the intention of entering the church at the University of St. Andrews where he graduated in 1765 at the age of 18. He then went on to study theology at St. Mary’s College, St. Andrews, where he graduated in 1769. From 1769 until 1773, Playfair made efforts to secure a position in the academic field. He was eventually ordained as the Minister of Benvie; however, after his father passed away in 1772. Playfair had one son, William Henry Playfair, whom he adopted after the sudden passing of his brother James Playfair in 1793.

John Playfair died on July 20, 1819 after battling a month long illness in Edinburgh, Scotland. He is buried at an unmarked grave in Old Calton Cemetery; however, a monument designed by William Henry Playfair was built on nearby Calton Hill in his honor.
John Playfair worked within the Church until 1792, when he accepted a tutoring position from Ferguson of Raith. Finally, in 1785, Playfair’s efforts to join the academic field were successful when he was selected as Joint Professor of Mathematics at the University of Edinburgh. He held this appointment for 20 years, and in 1805 he became the Chair of Natural Philosophy, when his lectures became focused primarily of the study of physics and astronomy.

John Playfair traveled frequently with close friend James Hutton during his geological studies. Upon Hutton’s passing in 1797, Playfair began work on *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth*, which he worked on until 1802. The work focused heavily on what are now known as the Principles of Uniformitarianism. This publication served to present Hutton’s ideas from his previous publication *The Theory of the Earth*, in a clear and simple manner, with which Hutton had always struggled. Because of Playfair’s work and presentation of Hutton’s theories, Hutton is now known as the first great British geologist as well as the Father of Modern Geology.

Playfair made many of his own contributions to *Illustrations*, based on observations he made while traveling through Britain to find supporting evidence of Hutton’s theories. Some of these contributions include bringing attention to the significance of unconformities, the development of many modern geologic vocabulary terms, and the introduction of Playfair’s Law of Accordant Junctions which basically states that all rivers consist of a main trunk with water supplied from various smaller branches. He also made observations regarding the presence of fossils in local limestone, fractures in sandstone, directional trending of structures, sills, and various types of metamorphism.

In 1815, John Playfair took advantage of the peaceful times in Europe and set out on a 17 month, 4,000 mile journey to complete additional geological studies. His travels took him to France, Switzerland, and Italy, and he had planned to include his new observations in a second addition of *Illustrations*; however, the final product was never completed.

References:

