

Visit to British Library, London, September 2007

As a LIEM/British Library/ CILIP bursary winner for the East Midlands I recently spent four days researching the history of astronomy at the St Pancras site. I am actually a medical librarian by profession, at present working at Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust in Nottinghamshire. But astronomy is also a major interest of mine, and I was keen to use this opportunity to further my ongoing research into the subject.

The Society for the History of Astronomy (for our website see [www.shastro.org.uk](http://www.shastro.org.uk)) was set up in 2002. We started out as simply a UK based society but now have personal and institutional members throughout the world. The Society's main aim is to record the fast-disappearing history of UK astronomy in particular.

I am the Librarian for the Society, as well as the representative for Nottinghamshire, my home county. I had in fact been researching Nottinghamshire's astronomical past long before the Society was set up and have published several articles about it, in both local history and astronomical journals. I gained a lot of information simply by talking to amateur astronomers and local historians, as well as doing research in public libraries. I have also broadcast on local radio. My visit to the British Library has enabled me to augment this information considerably.

A skit in a local newspaper dated 1864 first roused my curiosity several years ago. This skit referred to an old observatory in Beeston, now an area of southern Nottingham. This observatory turned out to belong to a Victorian grandee and amateur astronomer by the name of Edward J Lowe. In the manuscripts collection at St Pancras I was able to inspect a collection of Lowe's letters. Many of them concerned observations of the aurora borealis (the northern lights), of which Lowe was one of the leading observers of his time. His drawings of the aurorae were of particular interest to me.

The letters also revealed details regarding the proposed setting up of a public observatory in Nottingham, around 1850. Plans were well advanced when the government of the day suddenly decided to withdraw funding, and it was never built.

The most interesting letter was one of Lowe's to the British Association for the Advancement of Science regarding a "Blue Mist" he had seen one summer's evening over Beeston. He described it as "like a faint bloom on a painting". I have since discovered it was also observed by a leading meteorologist of the day but so far I have no idea what caused it. I shall certainly be following this up as part of my further research.

One fascinating bound manuscript I found was called "Letters on astronomy presented to a Lady 1746, 1747". According to the catalogue entry they were written by a William Melmoth, but simply addressed to "My Ladyship" throughout. At first I imagined some romantic tryst but on closer reading I deduced it was written on the instruction of the Lady's husband – I still have no idea who she was. Science for ladies was very fashionable in the eighteenth century and I am guessing it was one husband's attempt to show that his wife could hold her own in polite conversation in the drawing room.

One of the key figures in astronomical history was John Michell, who first predicted the existence of black holes, way back in 1784. It has only recently come to light that Michell was born in Eakring, central Nottinghamshire, in 1724. No known portrait of him exists, but I found a letter in his handwriting addressed to the Trustees of the British Museum, and also his letter of appointment advising the Government on how to find longitude at sea. This was a major problem for navigators of the age and caused a great loss of life to sailors who frequently became shipwrecked in rocky waters. The problem was eventually solved by the invention of the marine chronometer, and Michell was instrumental in testing this life-saving device.

John Russell Hind was a well-known professional astronomer born in Nottingham in 1823. The British Library holds copies of most of his publications, including a fascinating book on comets, written in 1857. In it, he tries to re-assure people that comets do not pose any threat to us here on Earth, even when their tails may pass quite close to us, astronomically speaking. Superstitions regarding these celestial visitors still exist today, incredibly enough.

In Hind's *Introduction to Astronomy*, written in 1863, there is an interesting comment about the Sun, which is worth quoting:

Astronomers generally regard the Sun as a habitable globe, probably peopled by intelligent beings though of a differently organised race to ourselves. This appears far more likely than that it should be a vast orb of fire, as the ancients supposed, but, without doubt, erroneously.

This just goes to show that scientists don't always get things right!

Almanac writing was always a good source of income for astronomers. Almanacs go back to at least the sixteenth century and were extremely popular amongst the literate population. Robert White (1694-1773) of Bingham, near Newark, was a compiler of almanacs for the Stationers' Company in London for many years, and in the British Library I was able to consult his publication for 1750. As well as giving rising and setting times for the Sun, Moon and planets, he also explains the two different calendars then in use – the Julian and the Gregorian - but refuses to include what he calls “fallacious prognostications”. Predictions about the future were a popular feature of almanacs (remember *old Moore's*?) but White dismissed them as nonsense.

Thomas Wright of Durham (1711-1786) was not only an astronomer but a competent architect, and the British Library holds a copy of his drawings for Nuttall Temple, a Nottinghamshire country house which was demolished in 1929. Other non-astronomical items of local interest that I consulted included correspondence between the Reverend White Almond (1786-1853), Rector of St Peter's Church in Nottingham from 1819-1853, and Charles Babbage (1791-1871), the inventor of the principle of the analytical engine, the forerunner of the modern electronic computer. Babbage evidently asked Almond to obtain some stocking-loom equipment for his “adding machine”, presumably to examine its mechanism. The other major, non-astronomical work I consulted was a fabulous collection of pen and ink drawings of Nottinghamshire churches dating from the 1770s. (*Grimm's top drawings*).

This was a fabulous week for me and I would like to thank Libraries and Information East Midlands, the British Library and the East Midlands branch of CILIP for generously funding my visit. I hope to present the results of my findings at the 2008 AGM of East Midlands CILIP, as well as in any future publications about the history of astronomy in Nottinghamshire.

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