

Professor Francis Ring, DSc, FIPEM, FRAS, FRPS

Francis Ring died peacefully in his sleep on 15 July 2019 aged 83 after a long battle with cancer. He had a long and distinguished international career as Head of Medical Physics at the RNHRD (the “Min”) in Bath, and latterly at what is now the University of South Wales. However, this appreciation will focus on the key role he played in establishing the William Herschel Society and Herschel Museum of Astronomy in Bath, and in helping both to thrive.

In the late 1970s, the 18th Century home of William and Caroline Herschel in Bath from which William discovered the planet Uranus was falling into disrepair, and in danger of demolition. Two local doctors, Leslie and Elizabeth Hilliard, with the support of Patrick Moore and others, set up the William Herschel Society in 1977, initially to gather support for the house’s rescue, and they themselves purchased the house.



The house was successfully restored and opened to the public in on 13 March 1981, the 200th anniversary of the discovery of Uranus. Initially the Museum was run by volunteers as an outstation of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. As the Hilliards were advancing in age, they agreed that the Herschel House Trust (HHT) should be formed to accept the legal ownership of the property, and the Trust was formed accordingly in 1987.

Francis had become Chairman of the William Herschel Society in 1987, leading the Society’s work in arranging lectures, research, and other activities in support of the Museum. Patrick Moore continued to be a very active supporter. A particular highlight was the 1988 celebration for the 250th anniversary of William Herschel’s birth, including a civic reception during which Herschel family members played Herschel’s music to the assembled company. Other highlights were the Bicentenary of John Herschel’s birth, celebrated at the Royal Society in 1992, and the Bicentenary of William’s paper on infrared radiation in 2000.

In 1992 the Society had become one of the HHT Trustees, with Francis as the Society’s nominated Board Member. In 1995, the Bath Preservation Trust, which ran three other Bath historical Museums, also became a Trustee, and gave increasing help and support to the Herschel Museum. Francis later became Chairman of the HHT Board which involved him in the many managerial issues involved in running a small museum with a mix of paid and volunteer staff, and all the complexities of modern legislation to comply with. Life in this respect became simpler when it was agreed in 2015 that the BPT should become the sole HHT Trustee, and thus assume full responsibility for the management of the Museum, with the Herschel Society and other previous Trustees taking instead an advisory role. This new arrangement has been a great success, to the benefit of all parties, and is one of the reasons why the Herschel Museum is now so popular and successful.

Francis gave up the Chairmanship of the Society in 2007 after 20 years in the role, and took on the Editorship of the Society’s Journal, then titled the Speculum (a reference to the reflective metal alloy used by Herschel so successfully to make the giant mirrors in his telescopes). Francis applied his customary energy and persistence to this new role, and a regular biannual stream of lecture reports and other varying articles and reports emerged for the interest and entertainment of our membership.

I myself came to know Francis when I joined the Society's Committee in 2011 as its Observing Member. I soon came to appreciate Francis's great depth and breadth of knowledge about all aspects of the Herschels' lives and achievements, and his enthusiasm for promoting them to audiences old and new. When Dr Peter Ford, Francis' successor as Chairman, announced in 2015 his intention to stand down, Francis strongly encouraged me to put myself forward as his successor. Once I took on the role in 2016, Francis continued to be full of helpful advice and good sense, and also gracious when I wanted to do things a little differently. Even in recent months, as his illness increasingly took its toll, Francis was eagerly working with me to ensure that the many historical documents, images, and books in his possession relating to the Herschels went to good homes.

The Herschels were truly an amazing family, and in Francis Ring they had a wonderfully energetic, thoughtful, and kindly advocate who deserves his own place in history for all he has done over many decades to ensure their stories are told.

Charles Draper

Chairman

William Herschel Society.