

WHS AGM 7 March 2020

PROPOSED CHANGE TO THE SOCIETY'S NAME

Issue: Should we change our Society's name?

Recommendation: We should change our name from the "William Herschel Society" to the "Herschel Society".

Discussion: When our Society was founded in 1977 to rescue the house in New King St Bath where William Herschel discovered the planet Uranus, and to turn that house into a Museum, it seemed natural to name the Society and proposed Museum after William himself. However, the Museum changed its name to the "Herschel Museum of Astronomy" many years ago in order to broaden its appeal. The Society's name was not changed, but since at least 2003, its constitution has made it clear that its purpose is "education of the public in the life and work of William Herschel (astronomer, scientist and musician) and his family", and it has looked to organise its activities accordingly.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in Caroline Herschel's story, as part of the wider picture of exploring the history of women in science. Several new books about Caroline have appeared, and of course she featured prominently in the very successful Wonder Women of Science exhibition mounted in 2017 by the Museum in the gallery named after her. 2017 also saw an enterprising social media campaign by one of the Society's members in favour of changing the Society's name to the "William and Caroline Herschel Society". We were clear that this particular proposal would not be attractive, but it gained wide interest in the USA in particular, and in several ways helped the development of the Caroline Herschel Prize Lectureship that we launched the following year.

Our main objection to the "William and Caroline" idea was that it prioritised Caroline's role over that of William's son John, but we accepted that we would have had no objection in principle to our name being simply the "Herschel Society" to clearly reflect our interest in the family as a whole. Indeed many of us often refer to it in this way. However, we already had a well-developed brand under our current name, and there was a risk of confusion with another society, the "Herschel Astronomical Society", based in Slough.

These matters rested at the time, but in the past year or so we have begun to wonder if we are missing an opportunity in attracting new members. One of the ways this happens is through visitors to the Museum which in 2019 had another record year, many of whom had a particular interest in Caroline. These particular individuals may not see joining a society called the William Herschel Society as a natural way of pursuing that interest.

One measure of this is the gender balance of our society membership of about 240. Five years ago, our membership was about 13% female. In recent years, recruitment has been about 30% female, bringing us to a current proportion of about 19%. This is a welcome change, but does suggest that we should encourage the trend towards more women joining our Society.

We have also consulted the Herschel Astronomical Society in Slough. They have been in existence longer than us, and regard themselves as an amateur astronomers club with local membership. They do not think there would be any risk of confusion between our two societies, and our changing our name to something like the "Herschel Society" would not be an issue for them. We therefore propose to make this change.

Since our stated Objects as a charity are already sufficiently broad in our view, the proposal would simply be to change our name as proposed, which also appears in Article 1 of our Constitution. We are required to consult the Charity Commission before making such a change, and their response will be reported at the AGM.

Charles Draper

Chairman