

Minutes of the William Herschel Society Annual General Meeting held at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution 16 Queen Square, Bath on Saturday 7th March 2020 at 2pm.

Present: President, Dr Allan Chapman; Vice President, Dr Mike Edmunds; Chairman, Charles Draper; Treasurer, Rachel Holbeche; Membership and Observing, Simon Holbeche; Editor and Meetings Convenor, Tony Symes; Jim Foreman, Secretary, Website Manager and Minutes Secretary. Non-Office: Michael Tabb; Dr Bob Fosbury; Claire Dixon, BPT Deputy Chief Executive and Head of Museums; Joe Middleton, Herschel Museum Administrator. Members: William Herschel-Shorland, Cassie Herschel-Shorland, Amanda Herschel-Crofts; Rachel Chapman, Dr Amy Frost, BPT Senior Curator, Deepali Gaskell, Prof Stephen Lillicrap, Dr Peter Ford, Ron Lewin, Jonathen Hall, Dr Roger Moses, Mike Perkins, Stephen Macgillivray, Denis Lewis, Geraint Day and Andrew Watkinson-Trim.

1. Chairman's Opening Address

The Chairman welcomed those present and added that he was delighted to see our President and his wife, Allan and Rachel Chapman, Vice President Mike Edmunds and members of the Herschel family. There followed introductions by those present.

2. Apologies

Brian Robertson, Peter Rea, Dhyan Ahado, Deb Perceval, Bennet Cecil, Paul Leonard and Susan Bennet.

3. Minutes of the AGM of 2 March 2019, Matters Arising

These minutes were published in the Autumn 2019 Issue of the Journal and on our website www.williamherchel.org.uk. The Chairman added that there were some hard copies available in the room. There being no objections or matters arising, the Minutes were approved.

4. Chairman's Report for 2019 (will include WHS Lecture Report, Starlit Skies, and Herschel Musical Activities)

The Chairman began by saying that the year had been sadly marked by the deaths of both Francis Ring and Fred Schlesinger. They had each contributed a great deal to the Society and its aims and would be greatly missed. There were appreciations of those contributions in the in the last two Journals.

The Chairman then summarised the remainder of his report and its attachments. They had been published on the website and some copies were available at the meeting.

The Chairman asked for any comments. A member remarked that the Journal was published for the membership and suggested that it should be more widely available and added that collaboration with the Bath Central Library for its availability would be advantageous. The Chairman replied that the Journal was in his view less useful, for the purpose of publicity than the various brochures that were available in the Museum that could be picked up and taken away. A member spoke of the Octagon Chapel in Milsom Street where Herschel would have played his music and where today his music could be played again highlighting the musical connection. The Chairman acknowledged the point and mentioned the concert of Herschel's music that would be held in July as part of the RAS 2020 National Astronomy Meeting.

A member made a general view about the Journal and commented that paper versions were more durable than electronic versions and important records of historical information. The Chairman replied that this topic could be further discussed under the Agenda item on membership fees. The Report was endorsed by the AGM.

5. Annual Accounts

The Treasurer presented the Statement of Receipts and Payments for the Year Ending 31st December 2019 and the Income/Expenditure comparison for 2019 and 2018 and its accompanying notes. She added that she would be present afterwards to answer any questions. The Report was endorsed by the AGM.

6. Bath Astronomers Report – Simon Holbeche, Chairman of Bath Astronomers

Simon presented the Report.

Dr Peter Ford mentioned that Bath University used to have a telescope some 15 years ago. Simon replied that this had been moved to a University facility by Bath Sulis Meadow.

7. Herschel Museum of Astronomy Report, Claire Dixon, BPT Deputy Chief Executive and Head of Museums

Claire summarised the Herschel Museum Report.

Dr Peter Ford spoke of the Wine and Cheese events that took place in the summer some years ago and which were very successful and provided an opportunity to meet fellow members and also visit the garden. Amy Frost said that during the National Astronomy Week, there were going to be some late opening evenings. Wine and cheese events had not been planned although they were worth considering. She added that she had been talking to the public relations team at the University with regard to some University people getting involved with short talks as part of the evening.

8. Proposed Change of the Society's Name

The Chairman presented the paper explaining the proposal for the name change to become the "Herschel Society". A member suggested that the word "Astronomical" should be included so as to make the purpose of the Society clearer. The Chairman replied that as noted in the paper, the existing Herschel Astronomical Society located in Slough, prevented such a change. A member commented that the name alone, for the majority of people, did not convey its purpose. The Chairman replied how we brand the Society would be an important consideration. Another member remarked that the name change would also require a change to its logo. The Chairman said how we branded the Society in future would be an important consideration as we implemented the change. The Chairman went on to say that he was seeking agreement to the name change but it would not be implemented immediately, for a number of practical reasons.

A member raised the matter of including "The" in the title. After some discussion it was agreed that this would not be attractive.

The proposal for the name change was put to the vote. There were 19 in favour, and 1 against. The change of name was therefore approved.

9. Proposed Changes to the Society's Membership Fees

The Chairman summarised the paper proposing the change to Membership Fees. A member commented that if circulation of the Journal went up, then the cost per copy

reduced. On the other hand, if printed circulation dropped, cost would not go down much. The Chairman replied that as long as those who wanted the Journal are above 100, the situation would remain reasonably economic. A member asked how many people accessed the Journal on-line compared to those who received a copy. The Treasurer replied that 17% had opted out. The Chairman then put the proposal to the vote. There were 17 in favour of the proposed fee changes and none against. The fee changes were therefore approved.

10. Plans for the Royal Astronomical Society's National Astronomy Meeting in Bath in July, and other events associated with RAS 200 marking the bicentenary of its founding.

The Chairman spoke of the RAS 2020 National Astronomy Meeting that was coming to Bath from Sunday 12th July to Friday 17th at Bath University. Preparations were underway and being organised by a University committee. There would be a concert of Herschel's music that week. They were trying to pin the date down as this would help Matthew Spring book the players.

A discussion on Starlit Skies had also been proposed for the NAM. This followed three recent Bath Outreach Sessions on the topic. (Post AGM Note. The Starlit Skies session was accepted, but subsequently the NAM itself was deferred to 2021 because of the Coronavirus crisis).

11. Election of Officers

The Chairman advised that the current committee was standing as follows: Charles Draper, Chairman; Rachel Holbeche, Treasurer; Simon Holbeche, Membership; Anthony Symes, Editor and Lecture Meetings Convenor; Matthew Spring, Music; Jim Foreman, Secretary; Michael Tabb and Robert Fosbury. The election of the foregoing was agreed by the AGM. The Chairman added that the Committee was aware of the need for more committee members and in particular for a new local Dark Skies representative.

Simon Holbeche commented that co-option of more members to non-officer roles would help strengthen the committee. The Chairman remarked it would also be helpful to have volunteers for non committee roles such as taking money at events. He added that if members knew of anyone who would be interested in joining or helping, he would be glad to know. A member commented that somebody with an historian focus would be a useful addition to the committee.

12. Any other Business (to include Japan Society Report)

The Chairman referred to the Herschel Society of Japan Report. One member who is a cloisonné artist had held two exhibitions of her works. There had also been a viola and piano concert held in Japan that featured a variety of musical works including some by William Herschel. It was good they stay in touch with us.

The Chairman reported that Michael Tabb had recently been contacted by a craftsman in Poland who had been making very impressive replica Herschel telescopes. Michael had put together a collection of pictures of what had been done which he would pass around.

Dr Peter Ford offered a vote of thanks to the Chairman, this was seconded by Dr Roger Moses who commented that the Society worked well as an "umbrella" organisation relating to the Museum, observers and the outside world. This worked really well now and this was down to the Chairman. The Chairman commented that

one key enabler had been passing full responsibility for the Museum to BPT. This was a very fruitful collaboration.

He was grateful for the vote of thanks. He much enjoyed his role in chairing the Society. One of the many pleasing things about it was, the more you got to know about the extraordinarily talented Herschel family, the more you also got to like them.

Closing remarks by President, Dr Allan Chapman

It is truly an honour to serve you as President, especially with Mike Edmunds and Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell as Vice Presidents. This year, I have been asked to talk to the Society about Alexander Herschel. A member of the Herschel family to whom Michael Hoskin, in his seminal 2004 paper, described as “Alexander Herschel: The Forgotten Partner” *. Indeed, Michael Hoskin, who has performed by far the biggest body of primary research on Alexander and the Herschel family, was also founder editor of the prestigious *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, which contained his paper on Alexander. Michael Hoskin further discussed Alexander in his book *The Herschels of Hanover* (2007). **

So who was Alexander Herschel? Well, he was born in Hanover in 1745, and after many years living in England, returned and died there in 1821. He lived to 75, which was well beyond the normal life expectancy for that time. Brother William and sister Caroline were also very long livers, Caroline reaching the grand old age of 98.

In addition to relevant material contained in Caroline Herschel’s diaries and journals, there are three surviving letters by Alexander, although otherwise, we don’t we hear so much about him. But he pops up here and there in the family correspondence. Yet while not an astronomical observer, Alexander was an extremely fine practical craftsman; he was also a very pleasant, courteous, and kindly gentleman.

As a boy of 11 years old he was taken in by his sister and brother and law, Sophia and Heinrich Griesbach, though it was not a happy relationship. Brother in law Heinrich was apparently jealous of Alexander who, even as a boy, showed extraordinary talent as a musician. Heinrich was the Copenbrugge town musician and blew trumpets and

performed public music at certain times of the year. But Heinrich was something of a brute who would beat and kick Alexander; an experience that probably effected Alexander for life.

As I said above, Alexander was an generous-hearted chap. At Coppenbrugge, he had a nephew whose life he saved. The lad was suffering from a violent fever, so Alexander wrapped him up in a blanket and carried him on his back all the way to Hanover and paid a doctor to nurse him back to health.

In spite of his apprenticeship to elder brother in law Heinrich Griesbach, Alexander's formal musical training appears to have been "scratchy" for he did not receive the systematic training his brothers received; this was partly due to the bad relationship with his brother in law, although as a young man, he had various jobs as a town musician. Alexander was, however, an extremely fine violin, cello and clarinet player, and these were the key instruments in the bands and orchestras of the day. He also succeeded in getting occasional jobs in the German court ensembles.

At this time William invited brother Alexander to England. Indeed, this would be a career move taken at various times by all the Herschel brothers, and then finally, in 1772, by sister Caroline. So many German, Italian, and French musicians were coming to England in the 18th century, as England became the first commercial music 'capitol' of the world.

For while the German and Austrian Royal Courts, along with the Courts of Italy and Versailles hosted great musical occasions, and musical ensembles played at different times in a monarch's ceremonial day, these performances were held in royal palaces and nobleman's house to which only the elite had access. In commercial and essentially middle class England, however, there were pretty well daily musical occasions of one kind or another that were open to the public; in Vauxhall and Ranelagh Gardens, public theatres, up-market taverns, and concerts given by various bands, and which were open to anyone could who could afford a few coppers, or shillings, admission.

The very entrepreneurial William would invite Italian and German impresarios over to perform in Bath and sometimes Bristol, as he organised public concerts, and no doubt,

enjoyed a nice cut of the box office profits. For this was commercial and 'democratic' music. And the Herschels knew that commercial market and the opportunities that it offered. Caroline had a very fine soprano voice and it was William's original intention that she become a singer; that was, however, before astronomy made other claims upon her life.

Alexander came to Bath in search of career opportunities as a musician, and would become a member of the the Orchard Street Theatre orchestra for 45 years. And when William and Caroline moved to Datchet, and then Slough, following the discovery of Uranus, Alexander took over 19 New King Street, and continued to live there between 1783 and 1788, during which time he was married to one 'Mrs Smith', a widow. But sadly, she died, and Alexander moved into a smaller establishment elsewhere in Bath, while spending his summers with William and Caroline, at Slough.

But not only was Alexander a fine musician, but was also a highly skilled, albeit self-taught, master craftsman, with a love of all things mechanical. He did a lot of work on the telescopes which William manufactured for the commercial telescope market, as well as for the 20 and 40 foot great reflectors used by William in deep-space research. For after the discovery of Uranus, everybody wanted a Herschel telescope, and clients were willing to pay handsomely for them. William's surviving account books show that prices ranged from £105 to over £2,000, depending on the client and the instrument's size. Alexander was both a fine carpenter and an especially skilled precision brass worker, making high quality eyepieces, screw threads, and other delicate components for so many of the Herschel telescopes. He also designed and built what was styled a "zone clock", or a timing device, to measure the extent of the 'zones' of sky 'swept' by Herschel's large 20-foot telescope during a given observing session. It is now preserved in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

As mentioned above, Alexander continued in Bath following the decampment of William and Caroline to Datchet, and then to Slough, following William's appointment as the King's Astronomer. (NB., this was a personal Office to Herschel bestowed upon William by King George III, and was not the same as Astronomer Royal, which was the title of the Director of the Greenwich Observatory). Documentary evidence suggest Alexander spent part of the year in Bath, and part in Slough. For a working musician the best and most financially

profitable time of the year would most likely have been the winter period. For then the well-to-do classes left their lonely and winds swept remote country houses, and went to Bath, London, Tunbridge Wells or York for the winter "Season". If the weather during the winter was bad, then a visit to the theatre or the Pump Room, a ball, or a concert was the thing, providing plenty of employment for musicians. The summer on the other hand could be a thin time, as the wealthy returned home to enjoy the summer countryside, although the growing fashion for pay-at-the-gate pleasure gardens also created a demand for music and musicians in London and elsewhere, as the Duke and the successful master shoemaker in his 'Sunday Best' both enjoyed the melodious strains of fiddles and oboes as they strolled the 'fairyland' illuminated walks, and sat in the dining pavilions of Vauxhall or Ranelagh on a summer's night.

Mobility before the improvement of the roads system was slow. With stagecoach travel being 8 miles an hour at best, the 18 miles between Bristol and Bath could be a good half-day journey if all went well, while a public coach ride to London or Slough, was a 2 day 'round the clock' affair, so Alexander, like most musicians certainly moved about quite a lot.

Sadly for Alexander, his musical talents were never fully recognised – as was also the case with his optical and mechanical craftsmanship. As a musician, he was a good solid musical craftsman but no Mozart or Beethoven. Never fully recognised for his work on astronomy or instrumentation, he none the less he could make a decent living from music, although he was not an original creator. Caroline noted that when Alexander had money, it soon disappeared. Quite simply, he was 'no oeconomist' as Caroline put it, being a poor manager of money, and was often a bit hard up for cash. How unlike elder brother William, however, who was a born entrepreneur, be it from music, from telescope manufacturing - or even marriage - as William's future, younger wife Mary, was a rich lady, having both City of London, and Uxbridge land and property owning interests. Indeed, I suspect that William could have been quite a 'tough nut' when it came to business, and further research could, perhaps, be undertaken into William's business activities.

But Alexander, alas, did not share William's gift for enterprise, and I suspect, was too kind, generous, and gentle in many ways, for he seems to have been open handed, and giving

away money to people who needed it. Perhaps his lack of success in life, combined with the loss of his wife after a short marriage, only brought into sharper focus his contrast with brother William's consistent ability of succeed in whatever he did, and which, no doubt, only deepened his depressive nature, for as Caroline put it, Alexander was always inclined to look at the 'dark side', being 'a most simple minded creature, with a warm heart, but a contracted mind, and very taciturn'. William, it seemed, humorously referred to brother Alexander as having a "Dick Doleful" style, based, no doubt, on the fictional character of the name created by the novelist and essayist Oliver Goldsmith.

When a young man in Hanover, however, Alexander, was a very popular figure, and was said to often have several pretty girls around him. But there also seems to have been a shyness, or timorousness as well, for on one occasion, he proposed to a young lady, Miss Cohlman, gave her an engagement ring, and then saw her 'talking very familiarly with a former suspected lover'! Apparently doing nothing about it himself, it was left to William to confront the lady, and to retrieve the valuable engagement ring!

To sum up, Alexander Herschel comes over as a very nice, kindly, and generous to a fault, to say nothing about his skill as a precision craftsman. Yet he was not a natural winner in a hard world. And when William died in 1822, Alexander had pre-deceased him by a year. Even so he received a fine acknowledgement in the Bath paper, which recognised for his musicianship and his loyal service to The Orchard Street Theatre over 45 years.

So When we see a Herschel telescope in a museum collection, we might well wonder how much of its fine workmanship of was due Alexander? For while it was universally recognised that William possessed a unique skill in the figuring of fine parabolic mirrors, he often out-sourced the other parts to other craftsmen. William was, and always has been considered a scientific genius, whereas Alexander was the forgotten Herschel partner. And sadly, there is not even a surviving portrait of him.

With thanks to Michael Hoskin for so much information, although errors I accept as my own.

** Michael Hoskin, 'Alexander Herschel: The Forgotten Partner', *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, xxxv (2004) pp 387-420.

** Michael Hoskin. *The Herschels of Hanover* (Science History Publications, Cambridge) 'Alexander', pp. 77-92.

Allan Chapman, March, 2020.