

HERSCHEL SOCIETY AGM: WHERE NEXT WITH THE HERSCHELS' STORIES?

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate a discussion at our AGM on the future focus of our promotion of knowledge of the Herschels' stories.

NOW

Our website is now an important resource and directory on the Herschels and their work. These are also important themes of our Lecture programme and Journal content. The Caroline Herschel Prize Lectureship, now in its eighth year, has proved an effective promoter of Caroline's story in addition to the benefits it has provided to early career women astronomers. The Concert and Conference in 2022 that we organised to commemorate the bicentenary of William's death brought stimulating material on his work to wider attention. The Conference on John Herschel that we organised in 2024 on the back of the publication of the CUP Companion, the associated RAS event in London marking the digitisation of their archive on John's work, and the follow-up discussion at the Herschel Museum, were reminders of the sheer range and scope of his importance. We worked as usual in collaboration with RAS, the Herschel Museum, and BRLSI on many of these events. We have also over the years supported the Museum's production of Herschel related material, particularly Lubbock's Herschel Chronicles, Caroline's Memoirs, and a range of pamphlets on aspects of the Herschels' stories.

THE FUTURE

When planning future events, we have sometimes been driven by purpose, sometimes by the calendar, and sometimes by opportunity, as the previous paragraph indicated. So, where should our focus lie over the next few years?

Starting with the calendar, March 2031, as the 250th anniversary of William's discovery of Uranus is the next obvious big date to mark. We have begun discussions with our colleagues at Armagh about working together on this. April 2033, when Uranus returns for just the third time to its discovery position, is another important date. The 200th anniversary in February 2028 of Caroline's RAS Gold Medal is another. Any others?

Turning to family members, William's overall story is well covered in many single volume biographies. Wolfgang Steinicke's magnum opus- (William Herschel – Discoverer of the Deep Sky) provides an analysis of his astronomy in great depth and breadth leaving few stones unturned. William's earlier life in England, and his music, have not been covered in the same detail, but the book being worked on by Woody Sullivan and Sarah Waltz should fill that gap, and may in due course provide the basis for a Society event.

We have been working to make William's music more available. Matthew Spring obtained copies of a comprehensive collection of manuscripts from Universities in the US and UK which should become accessible from the Bath Spa University website. Society member Alex Voice continues to edit and publish in performable form scores Herschel's Symphonies and some other works. We regularly hear of Herschel's music being performed in concerts and broadcast on radio programmes, and the Dionysus Ensemble continues to perform and record Herschel's solo sonatas.

Caroline's story is also now the basis of many recent biographies, including at least one children's picture book. William and Caroline's joint stories have also been the basis of a dance performance, and plays, and there is an operatic libretto in the making.

Hoskins gives a substantial account of their brother Alexander's life, and those of their other siblings, in his "The Herschels of Hanover". Should we encourage more effort here?

Mary(Pitt), William's wife from 1788 and John's mother, features frequently as a thoughtful and warm presence in the stories of both father and son, and of course brought wealth to the family for the first time. Should we encourage the production of an account of her life?

John until recently has been a rather forgotten figure; the sheer range of his activities and achievements having posed a daunting challenge to potential biographers. There has been no lack of potential granted the availability of a mass of correspondence from this most diligent letter writer. The South African period has been something of an exception, thanks largely to the efforts of Brian Warner and others there in the early 1990s. Steven Case also produced his book on John's astronomy in 2018.

We can hope this neglect has begun to change with the publications and events of 2024, including the discussion at the Herschel Museum on the myriad ways in which they could teach John's story through science and experiment.

More recently, Steve Case's recently published "Creatures of Reason" offers the first in-depth attempt to bring together all the various strands on John's life up to the publication of his seminal book on the philosophy of science in 1830. Let's hope there will be a volume 2!

We also know that Wolfgang Steinicke is looking at John's observing records with a comparable focus to that he applied to William's in his earlier work.

So, what should we seek next in the stories of John and his family? Some suggestions could be:

- John's contributions to the development of photography, geology and meteorology.
- John as a Humboldtian traveller in Europe
- Further focus on John's endeavours and legacy in South Africa?
- John's role in the evolution and development of the RS and RAS
- John's time at the Royal Mint, and the impact on him
- Family life in the Herschel household
- Margaret's story
- The stories of William James and fingerprinting; and Colonel John in colonial India. We have a useful picture of this Alexander as a Herschel Museum pamphlet
- The differing stories of the 3 boys and 9 girls of John's family in the context of Victorian societal norms.
- John's role in the encouragement of female scientific/academic endeavour
- The story of Observatory House from 1786 to its demolition in 1963. Other Herschel Houses, in Hannover, North of England, Datchet, Windsor, Kent and London.
- The Herschels as artists – via camera lucida, watercolours, sketches, paintings, photographs etc produced by John, Margaret, and various creatively talented offspring. The connections between arts and science in their work.

Other ideas also welcome. We hope to have a wide-ranging discussion, but do not expect to end up with a definitive list! Discussions on how to pursue the most promising ideas will be for later.

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