

## The life and times of Sir George Biddell Airy: a symposium

*Papers presented at an Open Museum meeting held on 2001 January 4 and 5 at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, U.K., in association with Goldsmiths College, University of London, to celebrate the sesquicentenary of Airy's Transit Circle.*

The Transit Circle designed by Airy, the seventh Astronomer Royal, was erected at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, during 1850 and was scheduled to come into use on 1851 January 1. In the event no observations were possible until January 4, when the transit of a single star was obtained, and January 5. The symposium was thus held exactly on the 150th anniversaries of the first observations. Among those present were members of the Airy family and several former observers with the transit circle.

Airy's design for the transit circle was to have a lasting influence on the design of instruments for positional astronomy. The instrument itself was to have a working life of more than a century, for much of that time providing the basis for Greenwich Time, and in 1884 it came, by international agreement, to define the Prime Meridian of longitude for the world. Airy's design of this and other instruments formed but a part of his total overhaul of the Royal Observatory, which ensured its continuance at the forefront of fundamental astronomical work for a further century and beyond. His influence was still felt long after the Royal Observatory moved from Greenwich in the 1950s.



Sir George Biddell Airy (Royal Astronomical Society Library).

Airy held the post of Astronomer Royal for 46 years, and continued to reside in Greenwich until his death ten years later. He and his family were notable figures in Greenwich life at a time of considerable social change. The symposium was arranged to examine his contributions to astronomy, and positional astronomy in particular, and also the vast contributions he made in other fields of science and technology, especially as a trusted government advisor. It also sought to assess him as a man, and place him in the context of his family, his colleagues and his peers, against the background of Victorian Greenwich, as illustrated in water-colours by his talented daughter Christabel. Due to the pressure of other commitments all the symposium papers were not available for publication at this time; however, readers may find the references listed below useful. These cover much of the missing material presented at the symposium.

During the symposium a reception was held in the Octagon Room of the Royal Observatory, part of the original building designed by Sir Christopher Wren and the scene of Airy's presentation of his Annual Reports to the Board of Visitors of the Royal Observatory. A small exhibition in one of the adjoining buildings included Airy's Reflex Zenith Tube and his Barrel Chronograph, beautifully refurbished for the occasion.

The Transit Circle was demonstrated to all the participants at the symposium. It is still in place on the Prime Meridian, a source of much interest to the many visitors from all nations who come to stand with a foot in each hemisphere. It also serves as a fitting memorial to the man who led the Royal Observatory through almost half a century of its distinguished history, and who was such an outstanding man of his time.

#### References

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- Chapman, A., 1998. *The Victorian Amateur Astronomer. Independent Astronomical Research in Britain 1820-1920*. Chichester, Wiley.
- Chapman, A., 1988. Private research and public duty: George Biddell Airy and the search for Neptune. *Journal for the History of Astronomy* **19**:121-139.

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