

The Airys at Greenwich

Frances Ward

*Greenwich Local History Library, Woodlands, 90 Mycenae Road,
Blackheath, London SE3 7SE*

Abstract

George Airy and his immediate family lived in Greenwich for over half a century, and were much involved in local affairs. A selection of water-colours by his daughter Christabel show the surroundings amid which he lived and worked.

Key words: *Airy family, Greenwich Observatory.*

Professor George Airy was 34 when he was appointed Astronomer Royal in 1835 and took up residence with his family in the Royal Observatory, and 80 when he retired. Six of his nine children were born there, and for most of that time his sister Elizabeth also lived there. When he retired he moved with his two unmarried daughters into the White House, just outside one of the gates of Greenwich Park. His son Wilfrid records that "The house suited him well and he was very comfortable there: he preferred to live in the neighbourhood with which he was so familiar and in which he was so well known, rather than to remove to a distance. His daily habits of life were but little altered: he worked steadily as formerly, took his daily walk on Blackheath ..." (Airy, 1896:347). His daughters continued to live there after his death ten years later; the Airy family were thus prominent citizens of Greenwich for over half a century.

Christabel Airy was born at Greenwich Observatory in 1842, the third daughter of the Astronomer Royal and his wife Richarda. With her younger sister, Annot, she devotedly nursed her mother after a paralytic stroke until her death in 1875 when she assumed the duties of housekeeper and companion to her father, moving with him on his retirement in 1881 to the White House at the top of Crooms Hill. With him she travelled extensively all over the British Isles but still found time to be actively involved in church activities and many of Greenwich's good causes. At the Provident Dispensary in Nelson Road, she was described as a powerful influence and was responsible for much valuable work. She was also involved with the Children's Country Holiday Fund, the Boys' Orphanage on Blackheath Hill, the Metropolitan Association for Befriending Young Servants (which always commanded her sympathy), the Bluecoat School and the Roan Schools, the YMCA Hut for Soldiers on Blackheath, the Jubilee Almshouses and the Miller Hospital. Most important however was her work on the Greenwich Board of Guardians where she took a close interest in the Calvert Road Children's Home and the schools at Sidcup. Her hobbies included campanology, cycling, gardening, and sketching. She died after an apoplectic fit in 1917 June.

The 12 water-colours reproduced below are drawn from a collection of 22 now held by Greenwich Local History Library. They were all executed by Christabel Airy when the Observatory was her home, and were painted between 1866 and 1880. They all portray scenes that her father knew well, whether looking out from the Observatory or on his daily walks in Greenwich Park or Blackheath. They have been reproduced by courtesy of the Greenwich Local History Library.

Figure 1 is the view to the west from Observatory Hill, showing the spot where, today, the Meridian Line emerges into the park. The fence borders the path which the young Martial Bourdin took in 1894 when the home-made bomb he was carrying exploded. It was widely believed at the time that he was an anarchist bent on blowing up the Observatory, but the real reason for the tragedy will probably never be known. The event did inspire Joseph Conrad to write *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907.

Figure 2, Greenwich Observatory from One Tree Hill. When Christabel painted this, it was really No Tree Hill, the great tree for which it was named having been blown down in the

terrible gale of 1848 August, but the original name is still used today. Until its suppression in 1857, Greenwich Fair would have disturbed the Astronomer's family when thousands flocked to spend the Easter and Whitsun holidays in Greenwich Park. One Tree Hill was a favourite spot for the dangerous game of "tumbling" in which lines of boys and girls raced down the steep slopes in the Park to the great amusement of onlookers.



Figure 1.

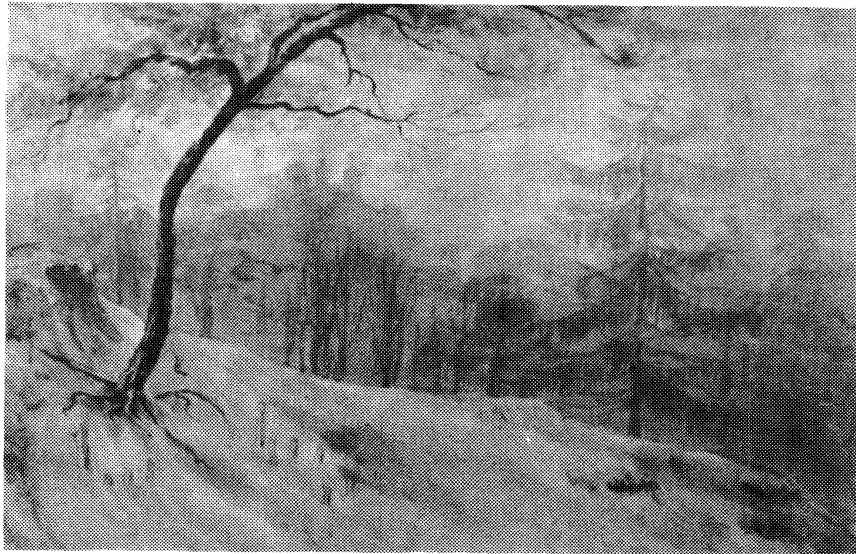


Figure 2.

Figure 3 shows Greenwich Observatory from the north in 1873 with, on the left (beyond the tree), the wooden drum dome built in 1857 to house the Great Equatorial Telescope. This dome can also be seen at left in Figure 2. It was replaced by the more familiar onion dome for the new 28-inch refractor in 1893. The Great Equatorial was a 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch refractor in a massive

mounting designed by Airy, based upon his design for the Northumberland refractor at the Cambridge Observatory. The success of the mounting may be judged from the fact that it was re-used for the much larger 28-inch telescope. The present dome was erected in 1975, the previous one having been severely damaged in the Second World War.

The main building is the original Observatory of 1676 built by Wren "for the observator's habitation and a little for pomp". The upper floor, with the deep windows, was the famous Octagon Room, the original observing area. The dwelling house, on ground and basement levels, was several times extended on the far side. The final extension, in 1835-6, was to accommodate Airy and his growing family.

Airy's Transit Circle of 1851, which defines the Prime Meridian, is behind the trees approximately mid-way between the drum dome and the Wren building. The Meridian runs down the park towards the bottom left-hand corner of the picture.

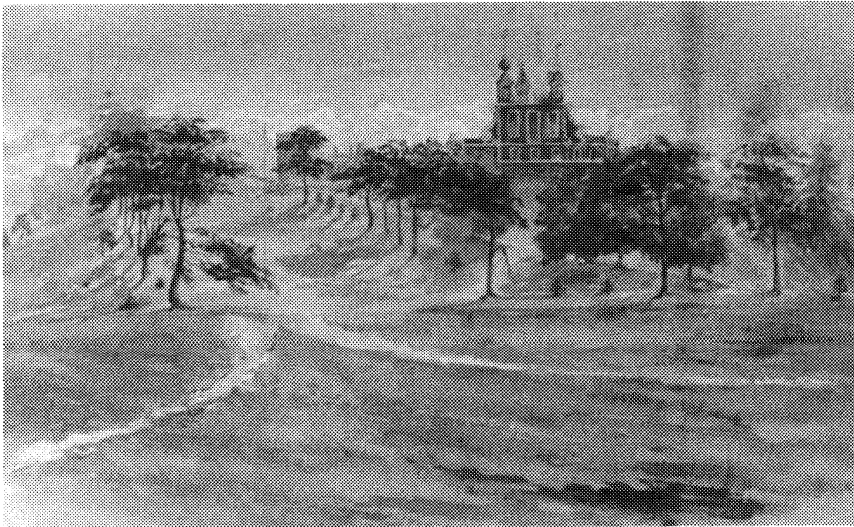


Figure 3.

Figure 4, a view from the Observatory north to Greenwich Peninsula (1866). In the foreground can be seen the east wing of the Royal Hospital School with its own observatory on the right. The small tower in the centre is Trinity Hospital, almshouses founded in 1614 by Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, for the relief of poor and indigent men. Today the attractive buildings are overshadowed by Greenwich Power Station. Further north can be seen the factories on the Isle of Dogs to the left, and to the right on Greenwich Peninsula, its tip still undeveloped – awaiting the arrival of, first, the South Metropolitan Gas Company and, more recently, the Millennium Dome. The Prime Meridian crosses the extreme tip of the peninsula.

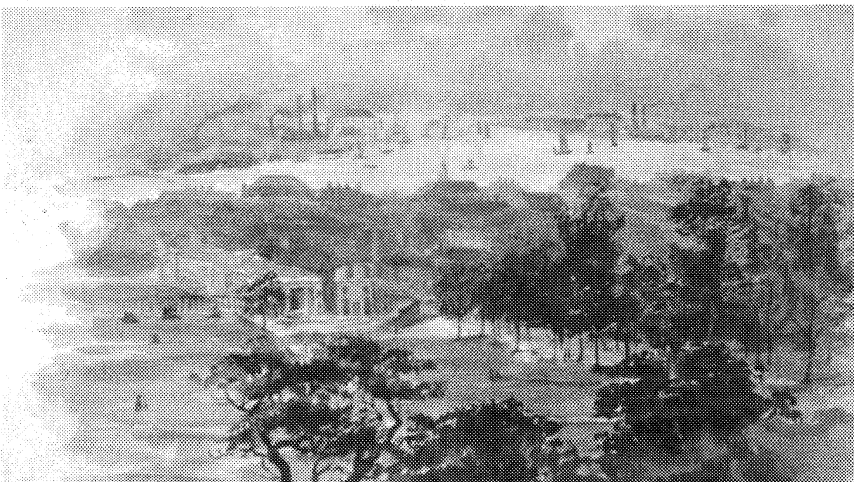


Figure 4.

Figure 5, a similar view painted in the same year (1866). Christabel (like many other Victorians) may have had a special interest in this area as among the factories are the premises of Glass, Elliot and Co. who, combined with the Gutta Percha Co. to form the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Co., made the transatlantic cable which was finally successfully laid by the *Great Eastern* in 1866. George Airy had taken a great interest in the development of the electric telegraph and was a pioneer in its use, notably for the distribution of time; he was consulted during the planning of the transatlantic cable.

The forest of tall chimneys on the north bank of the river stand testament to the increasingly rapid eastward progress of riverside industries (and pollution) in the mid nineteenth century. It must have already been clear that the location was becoming less favourable for astronomical observation.



Figure 5.

Figure 6. Another view to the north, but painted four years later on 1870 February 15 when the bitterly cold weather caused the Thames to freeze. Christabel inscribed the picture "Showing the ice in the Greenwich Reach". Earlier in the month, continuous rain and a succession of high tides on the river had caused flooding on both banks, and a sudden drop in temperature during the second week brought snowstorms and widespread misery as flooded roads and fields turned to ice.

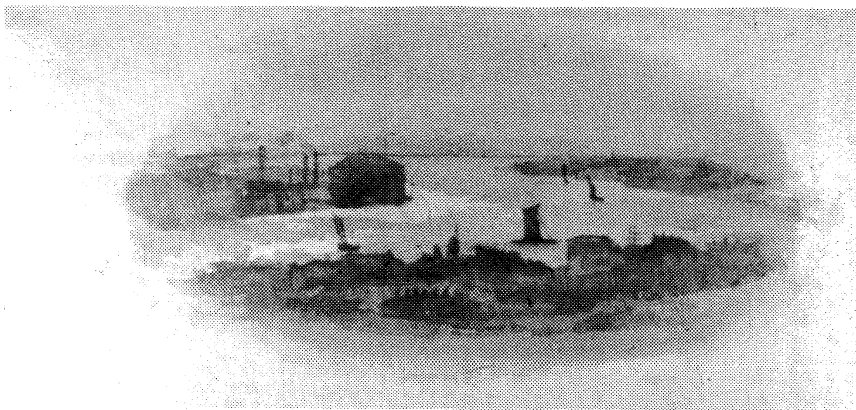


Figure 6.

Figure 7. View over a wintry Greenwich Park to the town, painted in 1866 February. The tower on the left belongs to the parish church of St. Alfege, traditionally said to stand on the site of the martyrdom of Alfege, Archbishop of Canterbury, by the Danes in 1012. The church, rebuilt by Hawksmoor in 1714 with a steeple by John James (1730), is the burial place of James

Wolfe, hero of Quebec, and Thomas Tallis, the Tudor musician. Christabel had a lifelong association with this church. On the evening of his ninetieth birthday, 1891 July 27, Sir George was invited to turn on the gas-lighting which illuminated the church clock for the first time, and spoke for about a quarter of an hour on the importance of time and its dissemination.



Figure 7.

The other tower is that of St Mary's Church, built as a chapel of ease by George Basevi in 1825. It stood by the Park gates in King William Walk, closed in 1919 and was demolished in 1936. A fine statue of William IV marks the site.

Figure 8, a view north-west from the Observatory towards the river with the hospital ship, *Dreadnought*, in the centre of the picture. The hospital, for sick seamen, was moored off Greenwich for nearly half a century, originally on board the *Grampus* and from 1831 on the *Dreadnought*, until it came ashore in 1870 when it moved into the old Greenwich Hospital Infirmary. It closed in 1986 March. The dome of St Paul's Cathedral can be seen against the sky – one of Wren's masterpieces seen from another.

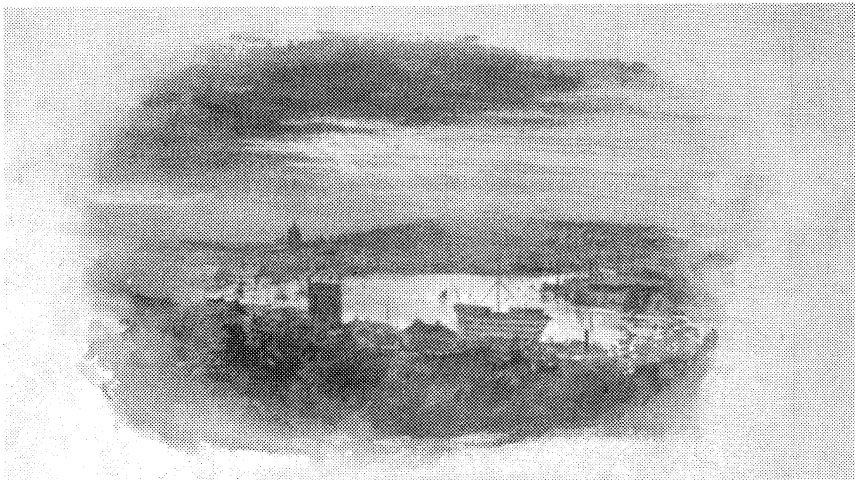


Figure 8.

Figure 9 is a view in the west side of Greenwich Park with the tower and steeple of Our Lady Star of the Sea above the trees. This was the first Roman Catholic church built in Greenwich since the reformation, and was erected in 1851 on a piece of land given by the North family in Crooms Hill. The architect was W.W.Wardell and the beautiful interior is by Augustus Pugin. The Sacred Heart Chapel with its magnificent ceiling is by Edward Pugin. The water-colour is dated 1868.

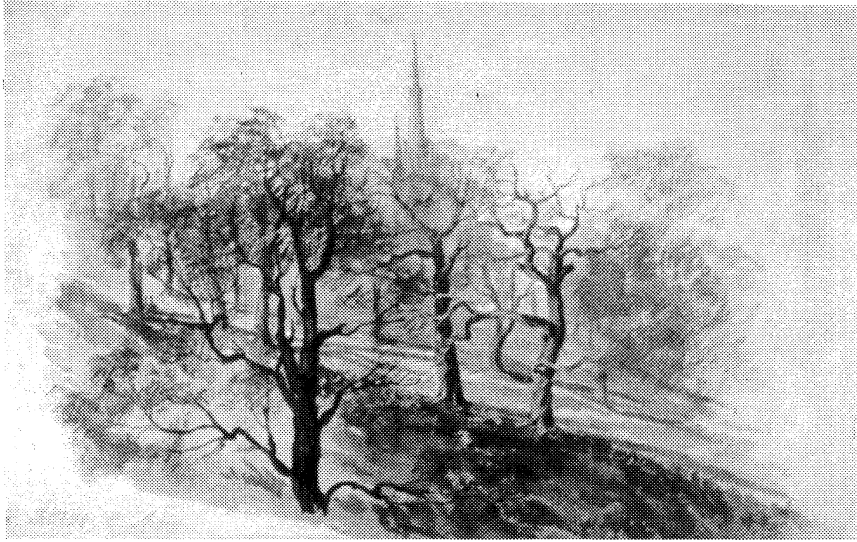


Figure 9.

Figure 10. Blackheath from the south-west corner of Greenwich Park, the wall of which can be seen on the left, painted in the summer of 1880. A very short walk from the White House, and only half a mile from the observatory, Airy must have passed this spot almost daily for many years. Blackheath Village and All Saints Church occupy the middle distance with the wooded slopes of Shooters Hill beyond. This is one of the very few of Christabel's drawings to include figures; the man on the penny farthing may reflect her own interest in cycling. The Heath would have been very familiar to her too, as for many years she and her sister Annot exercised their dogs here.

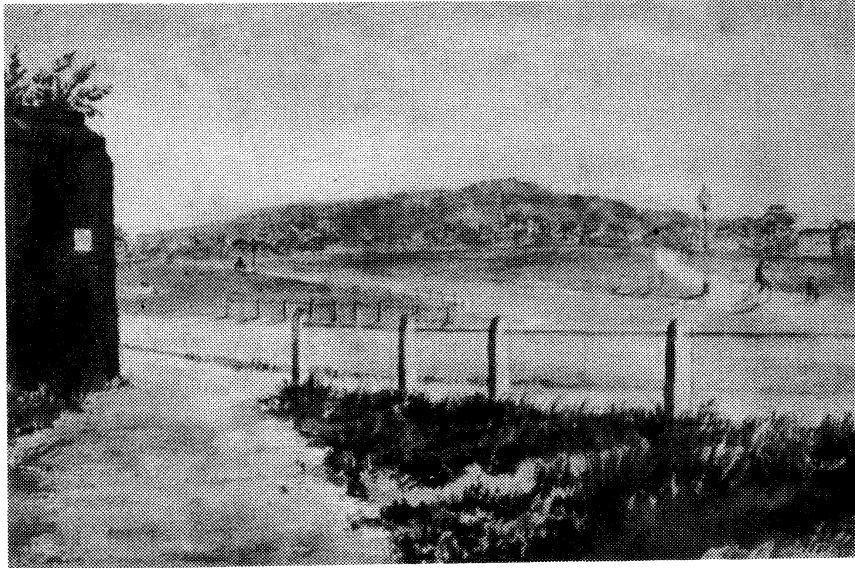


Figure 10.

Figure 11. Another view of Blackheath looking west to the grand houses in Dartmouth Row. In the foreground are Whitefields Pond and Mount. The Mount is almost certainly an ancient burial mound but has never been the subject of an archaeological excavation. The Pond is the result of digging gravel from the Heath. Both are named for the great Wesleyan preacher, George Whitefield, who, with other prominent Methodists, regularly gave open air sermons to vast crowds on Blackheath.

Figure 12. Another view of the Observatory, from the south. The structure in the bottom left is probably the Standard Reservoir which supplied water to Greenwich Hospital and the Hospital Schools. The beautiful old tree on the right may be one of the horse-chestnuts planted

in the 1660s when the Park was landscaped for Charles II. Many have been lost to weather and disease but a good number of the original trees still stand. Beyond is the Observatory with Pond's time ball, erected in 1833 to provide the first public time signal. It is surmounted by a wind vane. The ball was a wooden frame covered with canvas and leather, five feet in diameter; it was replaced in 1919 by the present aluminium one. The structures to the left, on the roof of the Wren building, carried other meteorological instruments.

Behind the tree was the area termed by Airy the 'Magnetic Ground', where he erected a magnetic observatory in 1836, and an office building for the Magnetic Department in 1862. The latter building was demolished in 1885 to make way for the 'new physical observatory', now known as the South Building, erected between 1894 and 1899. Airy died in 1892, but this typically Victorian terracotta building, designed by the architect Frank Crisp, would have been very familiar to his daughters. The largest building on the site, it is cruciform in plan, three storeys high with a basement, and surmounted by a telescope dome which since 1965 has housed the Greenwich Planetarium. All round the building are prominently carved the names and dates of the astronomers and instrument makers who had contributed to the success of the Observatory over two centuries – including Airy.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.

REFERENCE

Airy, W. (Ed.), 1896. *Autobiography of Sir George Biddell Airy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

