

The Administrative Staff of the Royal Society, 1663-1861

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## THE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY

1663-1861

THE Charter of the Society not only charged the Officers and the other members of the Council with the duty of administering the affairs of the Society, but, recognizing that a permanent staff to assist them would also be necessary, authorized in addition the employment of 'two or more Operators of Experiments, and two or more clerks.' As time went on and the collections of books such as that given in 1667 by Mr Henry Howard, afterwards sixth Duke of Norfolk, and that given by Sir George Ent in 1679 were added, a librarian became necessary; and from the time when Mr D. Colwall's gift of £100 in 1665 enabled the Council to buy Mr Hubbard's collection of rarities the Society's own repository of such things increased so rapidly in size and importance that a curator had to be provided, though such charges for additional staff salaries could only be met with great difficulty from the Society's slender resources.

The administrative staff, which at first numbered but one or two members, was gradually increased as the work to be dealt with became heavier and as the financial position improved, but for many years it remained small, and the salaries paid to its members were low. The part that these men have played in the history of the Society is an important one though little about it has been published and references to it are infrequent. Weld in his *History* gives the names of the clerks but omits two of the most prominent, Wanley and Thorpe; he gives no details of their services to the Society while they were in its employment. Most of them were applicants recruited from outside the Society and they were selected as having had previous experience in such work. From time to time we find among them Fellows of the Society, who on accepting such posts were required to resign their Fellowship. Some joined as boy-helpers and spent their whole lives in the service

of the Society, being promoted as they gained experience and showed that they had ability and resource. Many of these rendered it valuable and devoted service.

The history of the Society's administration is bound up with that of its Officers and of its administrative staff working in close co-operation, but unfortunately the accounts of the latter are meagre, and what has been preserved makes us regret that so much has passed away without having been placed on record. Nevertheless what does remain deserves careful study since it contains the names of several able men, some of whom became prominent in other spheres of learning. Biographical notices of some of them appear in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but even these are in places incomplete and contain some errors which can be corrected from particulars recorded in the Council Minutes and other documents in the possession of the Society. In this way a fairly complete history of the staff can be obtained which it may be possible to amplify as material becomes available from contemporary diaries, letters and memoirs.

In the following pages enough has been brought together to show how useful a part the Clerks, Curators, Librarians and others played in the administration of the Society even though there are still many gaps which cannot yet be filled.

The first salaried appointment which was made by the Council was that of Michael Weeks or Wicks who was appointed the Clerk of the Society on 13 May 1663; it appears that he had previously acted as an assistant to Dr Jonathan Goddard who had a laboratory at Gresham College where his stills were looked after by Weeks.<sup>1</sup> It was no doubt Goddard, an original Fellow of the Society, who recommended him for the post. The duties assigned to Weeks were arduous, for although Oldenburg, the Secretary, conducted the correspondence of the Society, all the incoming and outgoing letters had to be copied by the Clerk; in addition, the rough minutes of the Council meetings and the Ordinary meetings had to be fair-copied into the respective registers, and the communications received by the Society transcribed in the Register Book; he was also required to attend all meetings. Weeks was paid £10 per annum for this and 6d for every

<sup>1</sup> Aubrey's *Lives* i. p. 268

folio page he copied. He seems to have accomplished his work well for many years, but in November 1683 he was dismissed. No details of his shortcomings have come down to us but probably he did not give satisfaction to some of the members of the Council, perhaps to the Secretary Francis Aston, who, even with Week's assistance, was finding the first Secretary's duties to be more than he could effectively discharge. Somewhat later Weeks was paid one and a half years' salary which was then due to him, a clear indication of the financial stringency which prevailed in those years.

It was then ordered 'that enquiry be made for such a Clerke for the Society as may perform the laborious part of the Secretary's office' and 'that Mr Weeks be told his attendance is of no further use.' On 5 December Mr Cramer was appointed Clerk at £30 per annum. On 12 December 1683, however, his election was declared void, because, according to the Charter, the Clerk 'ought to be chose by the whole Society in the same manner as the Treasurer and Secretaries.' Weeks therefore continued in his office of Clerk until December 1684, after which he seems to have been employed by the Society at odd times for copying work, being paid at the rate of 6d. per page. The last time that any mention of him appears in the Council minutes is on 13 November 1695, when a gratuity of £20 was voted to him for the services which he had rendered to the Society.

During 1685 the post of Clerk remained vacant and the Council ordered that Mr Aston and Mr Musgrave, the Secretaries, should take charge of all the books. This was a heavy addition to their duties and may well have been the cause of the sudden resignation of the Secretaries on 5 December 1685 since nothing had been done at the Anniversary Meeting to lighten their duties, or to increase their remuneration.

On 16 December 1685 the Council decided to choose another Clerk 'for the use of the Society and the ease of the Secretaries.' There were four candidates for the post, namely: Dr Hans Sloane, Dr D. Papin, Mr Salusbury and Mr E. Halley. Halley was duly elected by the Society at its meeting on 27 January 1685/86, receiving twice as many votes as Dr Sloane who was afterwards to become Secretary and later President of the Society. The life of Edmond Halley, who

eventually became the second Astronomer Royal is well known; as Clerk he was paid at the rate of £50 per annum, although he did not always receive this sum. He carried out his duties very satisfactorily for just over ten years, besides finding time to conduct various scientific experiments and investigations, the results of which were published in the *Philosophical Transactions*. Moreover he edited and published thirteen numbers of the *Transactions* during his tenure of office.

Upon his appointment as Deputy-Comptroller of the Mint at Chester by Lord Halifax in 1696, Halley obtained the services of Dr Arbuthnott as his deputy at the Society. Arbuthnott had recently come to London where he was teaching mathematics, and he continued to act as Halley's deputy until 1698.

Halley, on his return to London, was required to undertake a scientific voyage to investigate the variation of the magnetic compass, and the Council on 8 March 1698/99 appointed Mr Jezreel Jones to be Clerk in his stead. Jones served the Society for nearly two years and then left to go on an expedition for the Society to the Barbary Coast. It has been stated the Society gave him £100 for the expedition but this does not represent accurately the arrangement which was made; the Council declared that they were unable to support him financially but would encourage him in any other way. The Society did, however, pay him £100 for his two years' work as Clerk to the Society.

From the early days of the Society down to the end of the seventeenth century various Fellows had taken charge of the collections of curiosities in the repository and of the books forming the library, but in 1696 the Council decided to appoint a permanent official to carry out this work. Henry Hunt was therefore appointed on 25 November 1696 to be the Keeper of the Library, and he subsequently became also Keeper of the Repository and Housekeeper. Hunt first entered the employment of the Society on 9 January 1672/73 as a boy to assist Robert Hooke with his experiments. From then onwards for forty years, until his death in 1713, he always lived with the Society and was one of its most loyal and efficient workers. Hooke records in his *Diary* on 4 June 1672 the arrival of Hunt from the country, and again on 9 January that he 'first came to stay.' Subsequent entries

throughout the *Diary* tell of much of the work he did in his early years. In 1676 Hunt was appointed Operator to the Society in succession to Richard Shortgrave, who had held the post from 1663. It is recorded in the Council Minutes of 2 November 1676 that 'Mr Henry Hunt being proposed to succeed in Mr Shortgrave's place, the Council having heard the several good testimonies given him of his ability and honesty, received him to be Operator to the Royal Society.' His work in this capacity and in that of Keeper of the Library and Repository was highly commended and he earned the respect and esteem of all the Officers and Fellows with whom he came in contact. Hunt was paid at first £20 a year as Operator and then £40 a year as Keeper of the Library and the Repository. In addition, he engraved plates for the *Philosophical Transactions* and other works. Some of his drawings, which are excellent, are in the possession of the Society and others are in the British Museum. He was careful in the management of his own affairs, and when the Society was moving from the rooms which it had occupied at Gresham College to its new quarters in Crane Court he was able to lend the Society the sum of £462 to assist in paying off the mortgage on this new property. Soon afterwards many gifts of money were received from Fellows for the Society's house and this enabled the Council to repay Hunt £262 together with the interest due. By the following January, however, the Treasurer was again in difficulties and Hunt advanced another £200 to pay bills which had fallen due. Two years later when the Council decided to repay Richard Waller £300 of the amount which he had expended in building the Repository at Crane Court, Hunt again came to the Society's assistance and lent it another £250 on 26 July 1712. Altogether the Society then owed Hunt a sum of £650 and interest. It is doubtful whether this was ever repaid, as no mention of it occurs in the Council Minutes; the Society was not then, nor was it for some years to come, in a position to repay that amount.

Hunt, whose death was reported to the Council on 29 June 1713, had spent his whole life from boyhood onwards in the Society's service. He was probably an orphan and he never married. Hooke until his own death in 1703 had befriended him constantly and always treated him more like a son than a subordinate or an assistant.

We may now return to the Clerks of the Society where a vacancy caused by Jezreel Jones's departure on an expedition to the coast of Barbary had to be filled up. At the Council meeting on 5 November 1701 'Dr Hans Sloane, the Secretary, told the Council that he had employed Mr Humphrey Wanley in doing the business of a Clerk since Mr Jones's departure but withall he had told him that he must not expect any certain salary.' However, we find that the Council did vote each year a sum of £15 to be paid to Humphrey Wanley, who continued to serve the Society until the end of 1706. Wanley was a man of wide learning; he went to Oxford in 1695, and was an assistant in the Bodleian library in the following year. He prepared the index to Bernard's Catalogue of Manuscripts in 1697 and one to Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in 1700. In the latter year he became Assistant Secretary of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, and from 1702 to 1708 was the Secretary of that Society. He was an enthusiastic archaeologist and became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries when it was formed in 1717. Wanley resigned from the clerkship upon receiving another appointment in 1706, perhaps a more permanent post on the staff of the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, and he was immediately elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. He was subsequently employed to catalogue the Harleian Manuscripts and later became Librarian to the first and second Earls of Oxford. He died in 1726.

Although Dr John Thorpe's appointment as Clerk was not recorded until 4 February 1707/08, he had carried out the duties of the office since November 1706 when Wanley left. He had been elected F.R.S. in 1705 but resigned the Fellowship on taking up the post of Clerk; in 1713 when he gave up the Clerkship he was reinstated in his Fellowship. From June 1713, when Hunt died, until the following November, Thorpe was appointed to perform the additional duties of Housekeeper and Keeper of the Repository and Library. For this extra work his salary of £40 a year was increased to £60, but he resigned before the end of the year. He then went to live in Rochester where he soon built up a very successful practice as a physician. He assisted Sir Hans Sloane in some of his work.

At the Council Meeting on 7 December 1713 it was resolved

‘that the same person should officiate as Clerk who should now be Housekeeper, Keeper of the Repository and Library.’ The salary of the person chosen was to be £30 per annum and 6d for every page he copied of minutes, papers and letters. At the same meeting Mr Alban Thomas, who was then twenty-seven years of age, was appointed. He was the son of the Rev. Alban Thomas, Rector of Blaenporth in Cardiganshire, and he matriculated at Jesus College, Oxford. He was an intimate friend of Edward Lloyd the antiquary, and in 1708 became librarian of the Ashmolean Museum. He is said to have had a mastery of French and Latin as well as a good knowledge of mathematics and experimental philosophy. Thomas was also, for a time, a reader to the University Press at Oxford. While still in the service of the Society, he received, on 9 June 1719, the degree of M.D. from Aberdeen University. Early in 1723 he was implicated in some way in the Jacobite plots of that time and had to go into concealment. His enforced absence from his work at the Society led to his dismissal in March 1723, and as he saw no hope of advancement if he remained in London, Thomas returned to his birthplace in Cardiganshire where he settled down to the life of a country doctor. He died in 1771.

From the many candidates who applied for the vacancy caused by Thomas’s dismissal Francis Hauksbee, junr., was chosen. His uncle had for many years past been a curator of experiments to the Society and also possessed a shop in Crane Court where he made air-pumps and other scientific instruments. The nephew had worked with his uncle for some years and had, no doubt, assisted him with his experiments shown to the Society. A specimen of his work is preserved in the air-pump which Francis Aston had ordered from Hauksbee, but which had not been completed when Aston died in 1715. The Society acquired the instrument paying for it out of Aston’s estate which had come to the Society under the terms of his will. Hauksbee, junr., carried out his duties as Clerk to the Society with great care and diligence throughout the forty years which he spent in its service until his death in 1763.

The Council’s choice of a successor to Hauksbee was most unfortunate. On 3 February 1763 they selected E. M. da Costa, who



had been a Fellow of the Society since 1747, as his father, Moses da Costa (elected 1736) had been before him; a progenitor of the latter is said to have been a physician in the suite of Catherine of Braganza when she came to England from Portugal to be the wife of Charles II. Emanuel Mendes da Costa is described as a naturalist who studied conchology and collected fossils on which he published several treatises. He appears to have been an able man with various interests, and among other things his opinion on old silver and jewellery was held to be of value. A memoir on the Seymour family recently published mentions that one Aaron Lazarus, a jeweller who specialized in old trinkets and valuable silver, was in the habit of dealing with Lord Francis Seymour about 1761. Lazarus consulted da Costa on the age of the Bodleian bowl in the Ashmolean Museum, and the probable use to which it was put. Able though he may have been in other fields, his duties as Clerk to the Society were very negligently performed. It appears that at this time the arrears of subscriptions due from a number of the Fellows had been mounting up though there was no reason why this should have been allowed; the Council, therefore, ordered that defaulters should be more strictly treated and sued if payment was not promptly and regularly made. It instructed da Costa to this effect and agreed to pay him a commission of one shilling in the pound on all the arrears that he recovered. Almost immediately after his appointment as Clerk he had commenced to misappropriate the money entrusted to him and on 10 December 1767 considerable deficiencies in his accounts were discovered and reported to Council; he was therefore suspended from duty and on 17 December 1767 was dismissed from his employment with the Society. The total deficiencies were found to amount to more than £1,492, but one thousand pounds of this sum was repaid to the Society by his guarantors, who sued him for the amount. His collections and library were seized and sold, and he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. After his release he eked out a living by lecturing, but died in a state of poverty in 1791.

Da Costa's successor was another Fellow of the Society and on this occasion the Council was more fortunate in its choice. John Robertson, who was appointed Clerk, Housekeeper and Librarian

on 7 January 1768, had previously been Master of the Mathematical School of Christ's Hospital and First Master of the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth. He gave of his best in the service of the Society and was respected by all, Officers and Fellows alike. Unfortunately he only lived to work for the Society for nine years, dying on 11 December 1776 while still in his employment. The Council who held Robertson in much esteem then appointed his eldest son, John, as his successor, and his widow was made Housekeeper.

John Robertson, junr., took over his duties as Clerk on 19 December 1776, but he did not discharge them in the loyal and diligent manner that his father had done. For a few years he attended to the business of the Society to the Council's satisfaction, but after a time he was so frequently absent from the Society's house that many complaints of the neglect of his duties were received from the Fellows. He was reprimanded by the President from the Chair for his slackness and although he promised to improve his ways he did not do so. Further complaints led to his resignation being accepted on 27 January 1785. His mother, who had been Housekeeper since the death of her husband, resigned at the same time, but she was granted a pension of £50 per annum in recognition of her and her husband's past services.

George Gilpin was elected Clerk and Housekeeper on 3 March 1785 in the place of John Robertson, junr., and he continued to hold these posts until his death in 1810. It had been decided by the Council that the Clerk should be paid a certain fixed salary which would include the allowances for copying, etc., which had been paid to his predecessors, and that he should devote the whole of his time to the service of the Society. Gilpin's salary was therefore fixed at £120 a year, but it was eventually increased by instalments to £250 before his death. He had had no further education after he left school at the age of fourteen, but professed to have a knowledge of Latin, Italian and mathematics; he had been employed for some years in practical astronomy before coming to the Society. He performed his duties well and diligently besides carrying out many experiments and observations, the results of which were published in the *Philosophical Transactions*. Gilpin's 'Tables' were used for many years by the

Excise Office and elsewhere, and his *Observations of the Variation and the Dip of the Magnetic Needle between the years 1786 and 1805* afford evidence of his careful and methodical work. On 10 May 1810 the President reminded the Council of the loss lately sustained by the Society of its Clerk, Mr Gilpin. It was reported that he had left a wife and family wholly unprovided for, and on 7 June 1810 it was resolved 'that the Council being assured that Mrs Gilpin was left destitute and unable to maintain herself and family, and being impressed with the meritorious services of Mr Gilpin in his unremitting attention to the duties of his office, resolved to give Mrs Gilpin the sum of £100 annually.' Members of the Council and many of the Fellows subscribed to a fund and in this way a considerable sum of money was collected for the benefit of his family.

Dr Jonas Dryander, a Swedish botanist, was a graduate of Lund University and at the age of thirty-seven was appointed Librarian to the Society at the same time that Gilpin was appointed Clerk. Before this he had been Librarian to Sir Joseph Banks, of whose library he had compiled a valuable catalogue between 1796 and 1800, which was afterwards printed and published in five volumes. He was one of the founders of the Linnean Society and for some time served as a Vice-President and also as the Librarian of that Society. He died in 1810.

Gilpin was succeeded as Clerk by Stephen Lee who occupied the post from 1810 to 1826. During this period Sir Joseph Banks's presidency came to an end and a period of administrative reform began but no record has been left of any special services which were rendered by Lee in the execution of his duties. In 1823 when Sir Humphrey Davy was President, the Council resolved that the title of the head of the administrative staff should be Assistant Secretary instead of Clerk. The holder of the post would then be appointed by the Council and could be dismissed at its pleasure, whereas by the Charter the Clerk must be appointed by the Society as a whole. At the same meeting greater facilities for the use of the library by the Fellows were granted.

In April 1826 Lee was replaced by James Hudson. The number of scientific members on the Council had increased considerably and

it was clear that extensive reorganization of the administration could not be long delayed. A Committee to consider what reforms were desirable was appointed in 1827. J. W. Lubbock became Treasurer at the Anniversary Meeting of 1830 and at once undertook a thorough examination of the financial records of the previous twenty years. The classification and orderly arrangement of all documents was ordered in 1831 but according to Granville<sup>1</sup> they were tied up into bundles and nothing more was done; he also says that Hudson's work as Assistant Secretary was not satisfactory. It may have been that the reorganization which was necessary and which was long overdue was a task beyond his powers. Hudson resigned in November 1834 and in April 1835 was replaced by John David Roberton, who had been his assistant for some time past. Roberton's salary was to be £160 with quarters. At the same time the Council appointed W. E. Shuckard as librarian at a salary of £50. Apparently this arrangement was not wholly satisfactory to the Council though it continued in operation for eight years during which Shuckard compiled an alphabetical index of all the original letters in the possession of the Society. The resignations of Roberton and Shuckard were accepted in November 1843, and on 14 December 1843 the Council appointed Charles Richard Weld to be Assistant Secretary and Librarian. In February 1844 Weld was given an assistant, Walter White, who afterwards succeeded him as Assistant Secretary. Weld was thirty-two years of age when he became Assistant Secretary and Librarian; he had been educated in France and at Trinity College, Dublin; he became Secretary to the Statistical Society in 1839, and was called to the bar at the Middle Temple in 1844.

It is reasonable to conclude that the Council of 1843–1844 realized that the time had come when the business of the Society called for an administrative staff of wider experience than had usually been appointed in the past. There were very large arrears of documents, etc., to be sorted, classified and indexed, the amount of work coming to the office was increasing, and the changes in organization which many favoured, and which all the members of the Council were at this time prepared to support, would for a time at any rate cause a considerable increase

<sup>1</sup> *A History of the Royal Society in the nineteenth century*. London 1848.

in work. Weld seemed to meet all the requirements of the Council admirably and he carried out his duties efficiently and carefully.

In the preface to his *History of the Royal Society*<sup>1</sup> he describes the difficulties which he met with in replying to inquiries relating to the early years and to the constitution of the Society without making a laborious search through the archives and the Minute and Journal books. Shortly after his appointment he had occasion to visit the Society's estate at Acton, which was at that time becoming valuable. This suggested to him the idea of compiling a *History of the Royal Society*, a project to which Dr Peter Mark Roget, the Senior Secretary, gave every encouragement. Weld at once set to work upon it and in 1848 the only useful history of the Society which exists was published.

It was not perhaps the most suitable moment to undertake such a task, for the Council two years later took in hand the proposals for a revision of the Statutes with a view to limiting the elections to the Fellowship, and to ensuring a higher standard for candidates. The necessary amendments to the Statutes were approved and adopted in February 1847, and this for a while added considerably to the work of the Assistant Secretary. With the prospect of these important changes in the near future Weld decided to terminate his history with the year 1830 at the time when H.R.H. the Duke of Sussex was elected President.

A few years later, in 1857, a Fellow of the Society complained that the Library contained no volumes of the Minutes of Council since the year 1832. On enquiry it was found that the 'rough' Minutes of these years had never been fair-copied into the Minute Books. From this we may judge the shortcomings of the office procedure in those days, and also of the heavy accumulation of arrears which had to be sorted, classified and indexed before an orderly arrangement could be attained.

At the end of 1856 the Society took over rooms at Old Burlington House on giving up those which it had occupied for more than seventy years at Somerset House. The work of transferring the library, documents, registers and archives, fell to the lot of the Assistant Secretary to arrange and supervise.

<sup>1</sup> *A History of the Royal Society in the nineteenth century*. London 1848.

In May 1861 Weld resigned from the Assistant Secretaryship and shortly afterwards became a partner in a London publishing house. Later he travelled the country giving popular lectures at Mechanics Institutes and elsewhere. He had given to the Society eighteen years of devoted and valuable service, had done much to ameliorate the organization of the office and library and had introduced enlightened methods of administration such as the Society had not hitherto experienced, thereby greatly improving the conduct of its affairs.

This article was written in 1939 and is the one referred to on the slip which accompanied the issue of *Notes and Records* for September 1941. Much of this material was used by Sir Henry Lyons, with permission, for his book *The Royal Society* published in 1944.

H. W. ROBINSON.