

London Meeting Lecture Thursday 10 January 2013

‘James Short, telescope-maker, and his support for chronometer-maker John Harrison’

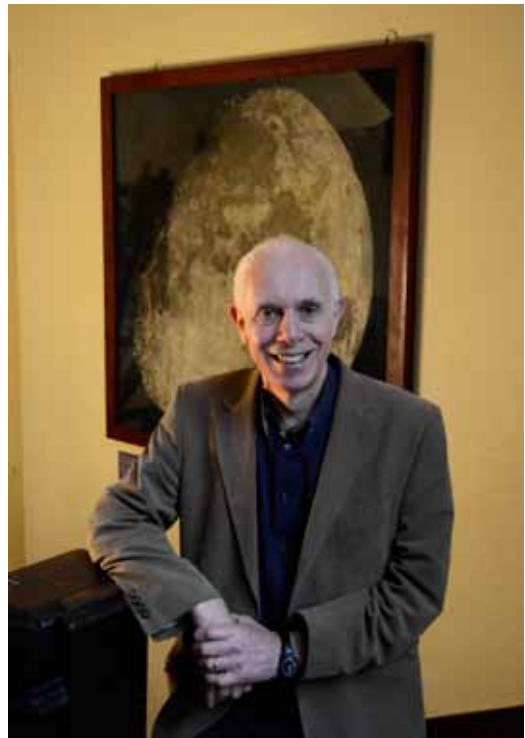
by Professor Jim Bennett

James Short was an exceptional instrument maker at a time when London was becoming the most important centre in the world for scientific instruments. He was an extreme example of a specialist in an era when makers were generally more concerned to stress their command of a wide range of instruments. While they can scarcely have made all the stock they advertised, and for much of it they were retailers rather than makers, advertisements for ‘makers of mathematical, optical and philosophical instruments’ were becoming commonplace, at a time before the term ‘scientific instruments’ had been coined. Short, by contrast, described himself as ‘optician, solely for reflecting telescopes’.

Short’s support for John Harrison is well known and, despite the lack of formal acknowledgement in publications where Short was involved, his helpfulness towards Harrison was recognised at the time. How did it come about and why did Short espouse Harrison’s cause? He can hardly have been motivated by self-interest, as it was a hindrance to his career. Two factors at play were the socio-scientific standing of the reflecting telescope and contemporary attitudes to the nature of ‘genius’. Thinking about the relationship between Short and Harrison can enrich our understanding of how Harrison himself was viewed in the eighteenth century.



This fine telescope, with its altazimuth stand was donated to Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1755. It was made by James Short (1710-68), ‘optician, solely for reflecting telescopes’. Primary and secondary mirrors in speculum metal. Focus by screw moving secondary, long rod and knurled knob at eye-end. Museum of the History of Science, Oxford, lent by Magdalen College.



Jim Bennett has recently retired as Director of the Museum of the History of Science, University of Oxford. Two of the most memorable exhibitions there during his tenure were collaborations with the Antiquarian Horological Society.