

AHS London Lecture Thursday 10 March 2022

Daniel Belteki, **Chronometric Challenges:** **George Biddell Airy's Greenwich staff and horology**

After George Biddell Airy became Astronomer Royal in 1835, he immediately began reorganising the management of chronometers at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. His surviving letters and reports depict a site in disorder. He criticised the Admiralty's use of the Observatory as a storehouse for chronometers. He repeated rumours about the assistants engaging in bribery and misconduct. He noted the chronometer makers disturbing the daily work of the Observatory. He criticised Francis Beaufort (Hydrographer of the Navy) for assigning to the Astronomer Royal clerical letter-writing duties. In Airy's eyes a new order was needed to be imposed on site and he was willing to be the one to enforce it. Unsurprisingly, his next two decades of governing the Observatory have been characterised by historians as a dictatorial directorship guided by discipline, order, and a factory mentality.

The talk examines the origins of disorder prior to Airy's arrival and charts the history of new regulations that he introduced at the Observatory during the first ten years of his directorship. It will do so by exploring an important set of manuscripts held in the archives of the Observatory, which were titled by Airy as *Chronometer regulations*.

The documents shed new light to several key questions. Who were the main 'troublemakers'? What regulations did Airy introduce? How did chronometer makers and

the Admiralty perceive the changes? How successful were the new regulations? By exploring these questions and guiding the audience through the manuscripts, the talk offers new insights into the management of the chronometers at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich during the nineteenth century.



Sir George Biddell Airy. Stipple engraving by G. Cook. Wellcome Collection. Public Domain.

Daniel Belteki is an ROG350 Sackler Research Fellow at the Royal Museums Greenwich. His research investigates the working history of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich under the directorship of George Biddell Airy. His doctoral research revisited the history of the Airy Transit Circle, which instrument was used to define Greenwich Time and the Greenwich Prime Meridian. He has also published articles about histories of scientific instruments and the management of observatories.

Attending London Lectures

We hope to run our 2022 London Lecture Series as hybrid events, available live both online via Zoom and in-person at St Mary-at-Hill Church, Lovat Lane, London. However, the in-person element will be subject to short-notice change or cancellation, and capacity is likely to be lower than before the pandemic. Whether online or in-person, those wishing to attend lectures must register in advance at www.ahsoc.org/events/london-lectures. If you have questions or difficulties please email events@ahsoc.org.