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.

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Attending London Lectures
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