

REPORT

Robert Boyle for the twenty-first century

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, major steps have been taken in terms of understanding and exploiting the vast archive of Robert Boyle (1627–91), which was presented to The Royal Society in 1769. The collection was first catalogued in the 1980s; since then, it has been extensively used in preparing the definitive editions of Boyle's *Works* (14 vols, 1999–2000) and *Correspondence* (6 vols, 2001), both published by Pickering & Chatto, and the edition of his 'workdiaries' (figure 1), which has been available online since 2001.¹ Now, thanks to a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, various steps have been taken to enhance access to the archive—particularly by electronic means, and especially through the provision of high-quality digitized images of its key components—and thus to increase understanding of Boyle and his significance for the origins of modern science. The project, entitled 'Robert Boyle for the twenty-first century', is a joint initiative between Birkbeck (University of London), The Royal Society and Access to Archives. It has three main components: first, the revision of the catalogue of the Boyle archive and its presentation in online, searchable form; second, the creation of digitized images of the entire content of the core volumes of the Boyle Papers and the publication of these on the World Wide Web, some as illustrations to an updated edition of the workdiaries; and third, the provision of introductory material on Boyle aimed at schools on the Boyle website at Birkbeck.

REVISED, ONLINE CATALOGUE OF THE BOYLE PAPERS

A catalogue of the Boyle Papers, Letters and associated manuscripts was first published in 1992 in conjunction with the issue of a microfilm edition of the archive by University Publications of America.² This made possible the extensive work that has since ensued in terms of identifying material in the archive, linking it with Boyle's published works, and, where appropriate, publishing it. Ironically, the result was that the catalogue had itself become very out of date, and its revision essential to do justice to the extent to which material in it had been identified and/or published. Perhaps the most important feature of the new version is that it has been completely updated from this point of view. Hardly less crucial is the fact that it has been inputted into the CALM database used for The Royal Society's archive as a whole, meaning that it is fully searchable. It is now

available online on the website of The Royal Society (www.royalsociety.ac.uk/library); it will also be available through Access to Archives (www.a2a.org.uk).

NEW EDITION OF BOYLE'S WORKDIARIES

This crucial set of documents—in which Boyle recorded his experiments and observations, and information he received from others—was long overlooked because it was so widely and randomly scattered among the Boyle Papers. However, in recent years it has been brought to light, transcribed in full, and published on the web, as was explained in an article in *Notes and Records* in 2001.³ All this was paid for by the Wellcome Trust, which has now made a further generous grant towards the enhancement of the resource, in conjunction with the Heritage Lottery Fund. Thanks to this aid, a greatly improved version of the edition is being launched on the website of the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters (CELL) at Queen Mary, University of London. This is one of several centres set up by the Arts and Humanities Research Board to act as a focus for innovative research in the humanities, and it is avowedly devoted to the study and dissemination of early modern texts in the most up-to-date electronic form. In 2003 it was agreed that the Boyle workdiaries should become a pilot project for the Centre's website, and, over a period of several months during 2004, Alison Wiggins and Jan Broadway of CELL have completely transformed the edition, updating and streamlining its encoded data and improving its presentation.

Although divulging the same corpus as the edition that has been available for the past three years, the new edition differs from the old one in the following, crucial respects. Most importantly, the transcribed texts are accompanied by a full set of colour facsimiles of the original manuscripts. In addition, the complete redesign of the interface has made it much more efficient and interactive; there is also a proper search mechanism. Lastly, the introductory material has been revised, and various ancillary tools have been provided, including a key to Boyle's references to his own works and a register of place-names. The edition is now available at www.livesandletters.ac.uk.

ENHANCEMENT OF THE BOYLE WEBSITE

The third component of the 'Robert Boyle for the twenty-first century' project has been the complete redesign of the Boyle website at Birkbeck, www.bbk.ac.uk/Boyle. This has been in existence since 1997 and has become established as a leading international resource for those interested in Boyle. Now it has been streamlined and enhanced. In addition to the resources that it has long offered to researchers on Boyle, the updated website has more introductory material on him than hitherto, including a timeline and a life in pictures. It also has a whole section aimed at schools, largely written by Dr Fiona Kisby of Queenswood School, Brookmans Park, Herts. This offers a set of 12 illustrated lessons on various aspects of Boyle aimed at students studying for Key stage 3 of the National Curriculum—from his biography to his experiments, his religious outlook and his posthumous reputation. The aim is to use Boyle to instil some of the skills of empathy,

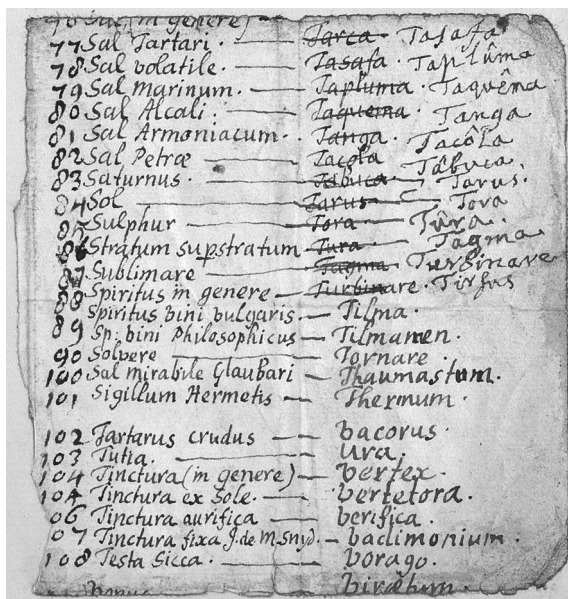


Figure 1. A fragment of the code that Boyle used to disguise the names of chemicals in his experimental notes, written by an amanuensis and corrected by Boyle himself. One of the digital images produced as part of the the 'Robert Boyle for the 21st century' project. From Boyle Papers 28, p. 333. (Copyright © The Royal Society.)

comprehension and criticism that are required at that level in the curriculum. The website also has materials aimed at students studying for the GCSE course 'Medicine through time', focusing on Boyle's aborted plan to publish a critique of medical practice in his day.

Equally importantly, the Boyle website has been enhanced by placing complete sets of images of the core volumes of the Boyle Papers online. The interface for this has been designed by the research officer on the project, Stella Wong, who has also been responsible for the redesign of the website as a whole. The images are accessed through an index page which gives the titles of the documents in each volume. Users are then offered a full description of each item, in the form of the entry relating to it from the revised catalogue of the archive, together with a set of facsimiles of the original manuscript. Also included are notes giving guidance to this material for the benefit of students doing project work, which will in turn interrelate with the research materials already available. In all, the aim is to raise Boyle's profile so that in the twenty-first century he will receive the acclaim that he deserves as a pioneering experimenter, profound thinker, and figure-head of the new science in its formative years.

NOTES

- 1 M. Hunter and E. B. Davis (eds), *The works of Robert Boyle*, 14 vols (Pickering & Chatto, London, 1999–2000); M. Hunter, A. Clericuzio and L. M. Principe (eds), *The correspondence of Robert Boyle*, 6 vols (Pickering & Chatto, London, 2001); M. Hunter and C. Littleton (eds), *The*

workdiaries of Robert Boyle, hitherto available online at www.bbk.ac.uk/Boyle, but now moving to www.livesandletters.ac.uk

- 2 M. Hunter, *Letters and papers of Robert Boyle: a guide to the manuscripts and microfilm* (University Publications of America, Bethesda, MD, 1992).
- 3 M. Hunter and C. Littleton, 'The workdiaries of Robert Boyle: a newly discovered source and its Internet publication', *Notes Rec. R. Soc. Lond.* **55**, 373–390 (2001).