

REPORT

Robert Hooke revived

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The tercentenary of the death of Robert Hooke in 1703 has seen a marked increase in interest in this hitherto neglected and often maligned figure. Between September 2002 and September 2003 no fewer than four books entirely devoted to Hooke were published, as many as had been published over the previous 30 years. The climax of the celebration of his life and work was arguably reached with an international conference held from 6 to 9 July 2003 under the auspices of Gresham College and The Royal Society, and with the support of the Royal Academy of Engineering. The main proceedings took place on 7 and 8 July in the highly appropriate surroundings of The Royal Society. Over those two days, a cornucopia of new findings were offered on a range of aspects of Hooke's activities and his intellectual achievement. The conference was opened by Michael Nauenberg, who revisited the issue of how much Newton owed to Hooke in realizing that the elliptical nature of planetary motion was the crux in solving the problems of celestial mechanics (a topic on which there was subsequent debate with another of the speakers, Ofer Gal, who dealt with what he described as 'Hooke's programme'). Other keynote speakers included Jim Bennett, who brought out the strong moral element in Hooke's conception of how the senses were used to understand nature, and Mordechai Feingold, who vindicated Hooke's personal life against the insinuations to which it has been exposed, illustrating how much of the recent emphasis on his supposed lowly status has been based on misunderstanding of contemporary definitions and norms.

Other speakers dealt with a range of different facets of Hooke's science. These included Allan Chapman and Hideto Nakajima on his ambitious astronomical programme (with Jaroslaw Wlodarczyk dealing specifically with his lunar observations); Ellen Tan Drake on his pioneering geological views; and Douwe Draaisma and Nick Wilding on different facets of his theory of memory. In addition, Robert Purrington surveyed Hooke's relations with The Royal Society in his later years; Allan Mills proved that, contrary to scepticism sometimes expressed in the past, his design for a driven equatorial mounting did indeed work; and Stephen Joseph offered a fascinating and highly accomplished appraisal of Hooke's achievement from the point of view of a practising scientist.

Other talks reinforced the view of Hooke as a polymath. Jacques Heyman, Alison Stoesser and Henti Louw all dealt with facets of his architectural practice, considering both individual buildings such as Bedlam and Montagu House, and Hooke's innovative role in architecture more generally. Other papers dealt with such matters as the links between *Micrographia* and contemporary consumerism (Maria Zytaruk); Hooke's role in the evolution of diving gear (Peter Dick); his assiduous book-collecting (Giles Mandelbrote); his links with John Evelyn (Gillian Darley); and his lifelong connection with Westminster School and its indomitable headmaster, Richard Busby (Edward



Figure 1. Bust of Robert Hooke by Zöe Schieppati-Emery. Photograph © Richard Valancia.

Smith). The proceedings were rounded off by an arresting talk by Lisa Jardine, in which she argued that Hooke's sense of injustice was initially triggered by the well-intended but insensitive promulgation of his ideas by such allies as Sir Robert Moray.

The conference was enlivened by various ancillary activities. One was the performance of a specially written play about Hooke by John Sansick; another was a conference dinner in the memorable surroundings of College Hall at Westminster School. There were also guided walks around places in the City associated with Hooke, and an expedition to two surviving buildings that he designed, Ragley Hall and Willen church. An exhibition of books and manuscripts relating to Hooke was put on in The Royal Society's library, while adjacent to this was a further exhibition, of five striking 'portraits' of Hooke, using a variety of media from screenprint and linocut to a bust covered with fabric printed from pages of *Micrographia*. These resulted from a competition in which various current or former students of the Royal College of Art and the London College of Printing were invited to produce an evocation of Hooke to make good the lack of any portrait of him. The entries, by Guy Allott, Guy Heyden, Rika Newcombe, Jonas Ranson, Chris Roantree and Chris Wraith, and Zöe Schieppati-Emery (who created the portrait bust shown in figure 1), were adjudicated by a panel of judges chaired by David Powell,

who represented the donor of the prize, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. The judges' decision was announced at the end of the conference: the winner was the photo-montage *The Scientist* by Guy Heyden, a copy of which fittingly now graces the Robert Hooke Science Centre at Westminster School. Lastly, the Dean of Westminster made the announcement that Hooke is to be memorialized at Westminster Abbey, for whose fabric he was responsible and adjacent to which he spent some of his formative years: this fitting culmination to the meeting was greeted with a spontaneous show of appreciation by those present. In all, the conference was a memorable occasion, leaving those who attended speculating not whether Hooke was a great man, but just how great he was.