

The Royal Society in Fleet Street

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The Royal Society, the oldest scientific academy in continuous existence, was founded on 28 November 1660 at Gresham College in Bishopsgate.

Other than a brief interlude following the Great Fire of London, the College continued to host the Society's meetings for the next 50 years. However, by the first decade of the eighteenth century, change was in the air: the Gresham Trustees wished to rebuild the College, and the President of the Royal Society, Sir Isaac Newton, sought to move away from a location he associated with his late, great rival Robert Hooke.

On 10 September 1710, Newton informed Council of the Royal Society that the house of the late Dr Brown was to be sold. Located at the north end of Crane Court, off Fleet Street, Newton considered that the building, 'being in the middle of the Town out of Noise ... might be a proper place to be purchased by the Society for their meetings.' An 'adjoining little House' was added to the deal, to be rented out, and in late October a price of £1450 was agreed for the purchase of both properties. The first meeting of the Fellows in their new Crane Court home took place on 8 November 1710.

The move was not universally popular. A contemporary pamphlet – by a Fellow who remained anonymous to avoid the wrath of Newton – complained that 'the House was mean and dark ... incapable of receiving either their useful and noble Collection of Books, or their Curiosities of Nature and Art'. As an additional drawback, the long courtyard leading to the Society's front door would mean that 'in heavy Rain a Man can hardly escape being thoroughly wet, before he can pass through it.'

Of course, if alterations are required to render one's new home fit for purpose, it helps to have the country's greatest architect on the team. Sir Christopher Wren, then aged 78 and a Founder Fellow of the Royal Society, gave advice to several Society committees dealing with the immediate refurbishment requirements.

Wren recommended eight workmen, including a carpenter, a bricklayer, a plasterer and a plumber, all of whom he had employed in the building of the recently completed St Paul's Cathedral.

Wren then turned his attention to the 'Curiosities of Nature and Art': the Society's museum, or Repository, which had previously occupied a spacious 90-foot gallery at Gresham College. In addition to commonplace items like seeds and seashells, this also included more extraordinary curiosities such as a crocodile skeleton and the leg of a dodo. The north side of the Crane Court property saw the addition of a two-story extension to house this collection, built to Wren's design with some later modifications by the Society's Secretary, Richard Waller, and costing a further £400. Demolished at the end of the eighteenth century following the Society's departure, the Crane Court Repository extension may well be the last building Wren ever designed.

With museum and library safely transferred from Gresham College, and with a lantern hung over the entrance to the Court from Fleet Street and lit during the weekly meetings, the Society embarked on a residency that was to last through most of the century. Discussions and experiments covered a wide range of topics, from smallpox inoculation and lightning conductor design to observing the transit of Venus across the face of the Sun, and illustrious names such as Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Priestley were added to the Fellowship.

In 1778, botanist Sir Joseph Banks became President of the Royal Society, a position he was to hold for nearly 42 years. One of

his first acts as President was to accept an offer from the Government of accommodation in the newly refurbished Somerset House, setting in motion the Society's removal from Crane Court. The final meeting took place there on 23 November 1780, after which the property was sold to the Scottish Corporation, the Fellows decamped half a mile or so to the south-west, and the association between Fleet Street and the country's leading scientific academy came to an end.



A meeting of the Royal Society in Crane Court



The Royal Society in Fleet Street Additional notes

Prepared by Librarian, Royal Society

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Further Reading: For further information on the Royal Society, now based in Carlton House Terrace, London SW1, visit <https://royalsociety.org/>