GLEANINGS FROM THE LIBRARY—II

THE BOARD OF LONGITUDE AND THE ROYAL SOCIETY

Interest in the Board of Longitude of the eighteenth century and its intimate connexion with the Royal Society has been revived by Earl Baldwin's presentation to the Society of a collection of manuscripts, printed documents and original letters relating to the joint deliberations of the Society and the Board.

An Act of Parliament, which was passed in 1714 offering various rewards for a method of finding the longitude at sea and constituting the Board of Longitude, named the President of the Royal Society as one of the Commissioners. Other Fellows by virtue of some or other public office served on the Board from time to time; the Astronomer-Royal, for instance, was one of the Commissioners. Many applications for grants were considered by the Board, which was unable to recommend any reward until John Harrison eventually perfected his chronometer to the satisfaction of the Commissioners. The Royal Society was officially consulted with regard to Harrison's instrument and it was upon a recommendation of the Council that he was awarded sums amounting in all to £15,000 during the period 1737-73.

The papers now received from Earl Baldwin relate to the work of the Board from 1760 onwards and consist principally of letters and papers supporting claims for rewards, rough draft minutes of meetings, and many notes of suggestions and recommendations mostly in the handwriting of Sir Joseph Banks. There is, however, among the documents a printed broadside, dated 1714, which was issued to urge the passing into law of a bill offering rewards for a method of finding the longitude at sea. It is signed by William Whiston and Humphrey Ditton, and among other things it recalls the work done in this connexion by Newton and Halley and says:

'We take leave to recommend the Learned Savilian Professor of

1 There is a printed copy of this Act of Parliament in the Library of the Society
Geometry at Oxford, Dr Halley, as the fittest person in the World for the Tryal, and Practice, and Improvement of this Method.'

A perusal of the papers gives one the idea that they originally formed part of the private papers of Sir Joseph Banks. He, in his capacity as President of the Royal Society, took the chair at all meetings of the Board, and it is apparent that he devoted much time and thought to the work of this department. The subjects considered were improvements in clocks, watches, telescopes, the making of flint glass for achromatic lenses, and lunar tables. In addition the Board was responsible for various publications, notably the 'Nautical Almanac.'

The work of the Board as outlined in the aforesaid Act of Parliament having come to an end soon after the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was dissolved. The Board was, however, reconstituted in 1818, by a new Act of Parliament, but it was abolished in 1828 and the duties were subsequently performed by a Committee appointed to advise the Admiralty upon all scientific subjects.

ORIGINAL DRAWINGS OF JOHN SMEATON

It seems appropriate to call attention from time to time to items in the Archives of the Society of topical interest. One such collection which has been consulted on many occasions recently is the six volumes of original drawings by Smeaton.

Although the Society was aware that it possessed these drawings, the fact was not generally known to engineers and others outside its membership. They are not mentioned in the Dictionary of National Biography. Interest has recently been aroused in this collection by the fact that Watt is said to have acquired his engineering knowledge from the construction of the 'Fire Engine' at New River Head which was demolished many years ago, and of which no drawings were known until an inquiry in the library some months ago led to their discovery in one of the volumes of Smeaton's drawings.

The six volumes were collected and arranged by John Farey and are bound up in the following order:

I. Wind Mills and Water Mills for grinding corn,
II. Mills for various purposes and Machines for raising water,
III. Fire Engines for raising water,
IV. Warehouses, Bridges, etc.,
V. Rivers and Locks,
VI. Canals and Dykes.

They contain a complete collection of all the drawings made by Smeaton in the course of his professional career. Smeaton was a man of laborious habits and made all his drawings with his own hands. His earliest designs, which were executed under his own supervision, show signs of having been used as working drawings. After he became more established and employed a draughtsman, he still continued to draw the lines of all his drawings to the proper scale in pencil lines on cartridge paper—these he called sketches. Fair copies of the sketches were then made on drawing paper by the draughtsman, William Jessop or his successor Henry Eastburn; and Smeaton’s daughters frequently helped in the shadowing and finishing in Indian ink.

After Smeaton’s death all his papers were purchased by Sir Joseph Banks.

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