

THE DERBY PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY:



Erasmus Darwin, by Joseph Wright,
or James Rawlinson after Joseph Wright, 1792-3.

Upon moving to Derby in 1783, one of Erasmus Darwin's (1731-1802) first acts was to set up the Derby Philosophical Society. Inspired by Enlightenment progressivism, their pursuit of natural philosophy and Darwin's leadership, the Derby philosophers became one of the leading scientific societies of the time and significant drivers of change.

A FORCE BEHIND LOCAL AND NATIONAL ENLIGHTENMENT

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Friendships and Connections

In the 1780s, the celebrated painter Joseph Wright (1734-1797) and Erasmus Darwin lived five hundred yards apart in Derby, whilst Darwin had treated Wright as a patient from the 1760s when in Lichfield. The two had various mutual friends such as the Derby clockmaker, mechanic, geologist and Lunar Society member John Whitehurst (1713-1788).

Wright painted Darwin twice in 1770 and 1792, and the second portrait, which was engraved and printed, became the most widely circulated likeness to appear.

When Darwin formed a local intellectual discussion group called the Derby Philosophical Society, it involved some of Wright's other friends and acquaintances including Rev'd Thomas Gisborne (1758-1846), William Strutt (1756-1830), Brooke Boothby (1744-1824), John Whitehurst and Francis Noel Clark Mundy (1739-1815), although Wright himself was probably never a member.

A Melting Pot of Ideas

The Derby Philosophical Society served as a regional association bringing together professionals, especially medical men, gentry, industrialists and manufacturers.

It formed a large scientific library and provided a forum for philosophical discussion, especially concerning the latest developments in chemistry, electricity and geology, which were well represented in the library.

Scientific associations, such as those in Manchester and Derby, were important nodes in national and international Enlightenment networks for the exchange of ideas and practices and were part of a broad progressive culture equally attractive to Anglicans, Tories and different religious affiliations.

Wright's paintings *'Philosopher Giving that Lecture on an Orrery'* (exhibited 1766) and *'Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump'* (exhibited 1768), as well as the frequency of itinerant lecturers coming to Derby demonstrate clearly the centrality of science in the Enlightenment and the aesthetic potential of such subjects.



Detail from Peter Perez Burdett's Survey of Derbyshire, 1767. Engraved by Thomas Kitchin of London, 1791 (2nd edition), showing the town of Derby.

At the Forefront of Improvement and Reform

Some of Darwin's ambitious plans for the society, such as the publication of transactions, were never achieved and it sought little publicity. Nevertheless, inspired by Enlightenment progressivism, their pursuit of natural philosophy and the leadership of Darwin, the Derby philosophers were at the forefront of local improvement and national political campaigns.

They involved themselves in issues such as the measures to enclose common lands, the campaign against the Test and Corporation Acts, and the Derby Society for Political Information. They also employed a series of other institutions and associations to foster a public platform for science in Derby and Derbyshire such as the Derbyshire General Infirmary (1809).

Gentlemen and Progress

According to Darwin, the Derby Philosophical Society would operate like a gentlemanly Freemasonic Lodge. The one shilling entrance fee and annual subscription of one guinea placed it beyond the reach of the labouring classes. There were no female members, although Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806), later became an honorary member and women did attend the informal domestic meetings.

At his house in Full Street in 1784 Darwin read an inspirational address which celebrated the value of Enlightenment ideas and argued that social and scientific progress was inevitable.

He claimed that philosophical societies would be at the vanguard of the progress of knowledge, leading the battle against torpor, ignorance and anarchy, just as the philosophers of antiquity had sought to transform their world. Through the 'daring hand of experimental philosophy' they could transcend their feeble human frame and help to 'enrich the terraqueous globe', contributing to the useful arts, necessities and 'embellishments of life' from magnetism to cookery, which did 'honour to human nature'.

The 'liberal and agreeable associations' that promoted it, like the freemasons, were a 'band of Wampum', or 'chain of concord', and they too could collect together the 'scattered facts' of philosophy and converge them 'into one luminous point...to exhibit the distinct and beautiful images of science'. He hoped that they would be able to gather together the publications of other societies and 'ingenious philosophers' in an 'increasing, and valuable library', perhaps enriching one day 'by our own publications...the common heap of knowledge' which would 'never cease to accumulate so long as the human footstep is seen upon the earth'.

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Further Reading

Paul A. Elliott, *The Derby Philosophers: Science and Culture in British Urban Society* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequalled Achievement* (Giles de la Mare Publishers, 1999).

Enlightenment! <http://enlightenmentderbyshire.wordpress.com/>