

Astronomical observations

Our astronomical heritage can be found in place names, institutions, literature, drama, art and sculpture, and there are links to mythology and to some colourful City personalities. This is a leap year, when 29 February allows us to synchronise time and space. A little stargazing seems timely, and the Paternoster Square Noon Marker is a good place to start.

There are sundials all around the City illuminating astronomical links, although they do not necessarily tell the time. The Noon Marker on the wall of the London Stock Exchange in Paternoster Square is an example and only works if you already know it's noon. The Sun traces a strange



configuration, and the shadow cast by the 6m x 5m sundial will indicate the month, provided the observer is standing on the spot precisely at 12pm. The work of Frank King and the Lida Cardoza Kindersley Workshop, the sundial dates from 2003, but over the next four decades it is anticipated to lose alignment.

City characters have their names planted all across the solar system. Mary Wollstonecraft, who came from a City family and who lived in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral, has a 44km crater named after her on the planet Venus. The poet John Keats, baptised at St Botolph Bishopsgate, has a 107km diameter crater on Mercury. He once wrote, 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies. When a new planet swims into his ken.' On 11 November 2019, Mercury did just that, transiting across the face of the sun with a projection observable in London – including at Keats House, the City's star attraction in Hampstead. We will have to wait until 2032 for the next observable transit.

Mercury also accommodates a Christopher Wren crater (215km) and there is a modest sized one named for Charles Dickens. Robert Hooke, who has a good claim to being the

founding father of lunar geology, has craters on both the Moon and Mars.

William Shakespeare has a crater (350km) on Mercury, and in 1972 the Apollo 17 astronauts named a small depression for him on the Moon. Playhouse Yard has many Shakespeare links. Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, declares, 'I'll put a girdle round the Earth in 40 minutes', but even today the idea of Puck hurtling overhead at the required 60,000km per hour remains the stuff of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Playhouse Yard is also the site of the medieval Blackfriars monastery, whose founding father, St Dominic, is the patron saint of astronomers. The nearby College of Arms has been conjuring suns in splendour, star mullets and crescent moons for over five centuries.

The newly opened Temple of Mithras sheds an eerie light on an astral zodiac world of Londoners two millennia ago. Time and the calendar have long preoccupied the Christian church, too, even before 525AD when Pope John I tasked the monk Dionysius Exiguus (*aka* Dennis the Short) to calculate the dates for Easter, which called for close observations of the Moon. In the process, Dennis invented the *Anno Domini* system of dating.

Our City livery companies – in particular those making scientific instruments, clocks and glass – have, for centuries, been developing the specialist instruments needed by astronomers. Hans Holbein skilfully reproduced some of those used in Tudor times in his painting *The Ambassadors*, set in Bridewell Palace, once across from Playhouse Yard. In 2002, Professor

John North suggested that careful interpretation of the instruments purposefully positioned in the painting pointed to the date of Good Friday, 11 April 1533, at 4pm. (Incidentally, the Monument to the Great Fire, built in the 1670s, was designed to serve as an astronomical laboratory.)

Hulton Press on Shoe Lane, just off Fleet Street (where fact and fiction have often merged) saw the arrival of Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, on Friday 14 April 1950, courtesy of the children's comic *Eagle*. He was the creation of some highly imaginative clergymen, including Dr Chad Varah, Rector of St Stephen Walbrook, who is perhaps better known as the founder of the Samaritans helpline.



His life was celebrated in a packed St Paul's Cathedral, in 2008, when the Order of Service was vividly illustrated with cartoon images. The world's first real life astronaut, Yuri Gagarin, was a guest of Lord Mayor Sir Bernard Waley Cohen, at the Mansion House, just 100 days after his space flight, on 13 July 1961. The first Moon walk, eight years later, took over two hours to cover a distance no bigger than Paternoster Square.

Nowadays, the City has an impressive presence in satellite insurance. Premiums are truly astronomical, but exposure and risk can be parcelled up to include development, testing, launch, orbit, salvage value and TV coverage loss. The first policy for Intelsat 1, from Lloyd's, was in 1965. On 10 July 2019, a launch failure two minutes after lift-off from French Guiana caused the most expensive potential claim to date – £331.6m.

A slightly less costly claim may have resulted from the action of the sun reflecting off the Walkie Scorchie building (20 Fenchurch Street) on 2 September 2013, which warped the panels of a parked Jaguar car. Remedial work on the building means it no longer merits a safety warning to our customers. ■

The Noon Marker, Paternoster Square

