**Aberdeen’s Local Astronomical History**

*John S. Reid*

*Astronomy has touched the lives of many people who wouldn’t have called themselves ‘astronomers’ on their CV, if they ever had to write a CV. Astronomy is a subject with a long history of amateurs making valuable contributions. In fact until the 20th century there were very few professional astronomers. In centuries past one became a professional astronomer by patronage, academic appointment or self-finance and there were few opportunities for any of these. Many ‘professionals’ used more than one of these routes and did other things too – think of Tycho Brahe (patronage and self-finance), Galileo Galilei (academic and professional mathematician), Johannes Kepler (patronage and astrologer), William Herschel (musician, instrument maker and patronage) Johannes Hevelius (brewer, administrator, self-finance), and so on. In a way it’s hard to separate the professionals and the amateurs so I haven’t done so in what follows.*

*Scottish astronomers are not that thick on the ground – perhaps the weather has something to do with it – but Aberdeen and its surroundings can claim a good few who have contributed to astronomy in one way or another. Their association with this area are by birth and upbringing, residence or education and commonly all of these. I have written about quite a few of them so this page is mainly the time-honoured time-line, very brief comments and links to where I have fuller details. I’ve also included some relevant places.*

**Duncan Liddell** 1561 – 1613. Native of Aberdeen who made his name as a teacher of astronomy in Helmstädt; donor to Marischal College of an impressive library of early astronomical texts that have assisted NE astronomical scholarship for 400 years. [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Liddell).

**James Gregory** 1638 – 1675. Native of Drumoak (about 20 km outside Aberdeen); graduate of Marischal College, Aberdeen; inventor of the reflecting telescope. The University possesses two 18th century Gregorian telescopes. See [Stars from the NE](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/nph120/astro/starsne.pdf) and [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitourMarischal.shtml#Gregory).

**James Ferguson** 1710 – 1776. Native of Rothiemay in NE Scotland; another educator famous in his day for popularising astronomy and an admired horologist, designer of outstanding astronomical clocks. The University possesses [one of these](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/article/select.pdf) made by Copland and John King. See [Stars from the NE](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/nph120/astro/starsne.pdf) and [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Ferguson).

**Patrick Copland** 1748 – 1822. Marischal College Professor, founder of the [Castlehill Observatory](http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/1982JHA....13...84R), notable outreach teacher including astronomy. I have written a lot about [Patrick Copland](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/articles.shtml#Copland)! His residence was at [Fountainhall House](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Fountainhall). See also [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitourMarischal.shtml#Copland).

**Andrew Mackay** 1760 – 1809. First and only keeper of the Castlehill Observatory. His expertise was in navigation, including celestial navigation. [Stars from the NE](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/nph120/astro/starsne.pdf).

**John Ramage** 1788 – 1835. Pioneer astronomical telescope maker and lecturer on astronomy. [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Ramage).

**Robert Davidson** 1804-1894. Local manufacturer with many interests whose large telescope was a skyline feature in the 1820s and 30s. See [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Davidson).

**John Lamont** 1805-1879. Born in Aberdeenshire he spent much of his life as director of the Bogenhausen Observatory in Bavaria and was Professor of Astronomy at the University of Munich for 27 years. [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Lamont).

J**ames Clerk Maxwell** 1831 – 1879. Maxwell wouldn’t have written ‘astronomer’ on his CV but his major work on elucidating the rings of Saturn was done mainly while he was Professor at Marischal College. See [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitourMarischal.shtml#Maxwell) and also an account of his [Aberdeen plaque](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Maxplaque).

**David Gill** 1843-1914. One of Scotland’s greatest astronomers. Born and educated mainly in Aberdeen; Director of the Dunecht Observatory of Lord Lindsay; Her Majesty’s Astronomer at the Cape of Good Hope; master of precision astrometry; developer of the photographic stellar catalogue; exceptional surveyor. See [Stars from the NE](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/nph120/astro/starsne.pdf) and [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitourKings.shtml#Gill).

**James Ludovic Lindsay** 1847- 1913. Born in France and educated at Eton and Cambridge as Lord Lindsay he doesn’t sound like a local astronomer but he set up the world class [Dunecht Observatory](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0083665692900274), carried out first-class astronomy and inherited the huge Dunecht Estate when he became 26th Earl of Crawford.

**John Carroll** 1899-1974. Professor of Natural Philosopher and solar spectroscopist with a special interest in the solar corona. See [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitourMarischal.shtml#Carroll).

**The Castlehill Observatory** 1781 – 1796. Founded by Professor Patrick Copland on the strength of a public subscription. Arguably the first public (or semi-public) observatory in Scotland with ‘modern’ instruments. See [The Scientific Tourist](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/scitour.shtml#Castlehill).

**The Cromwell Tower Observatory** 1826 – present. Founded by King’s College, Aberdeen; used as both an [astronomical and meteorological observatory](http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/nph120/astro/cto/histcrom.htm). The University possess some of the historical instruments from this observatory.

*Please e-mail me with any suggestions for additions.*

*JSR*