

## Historical scientific research on disability at the Royal Society

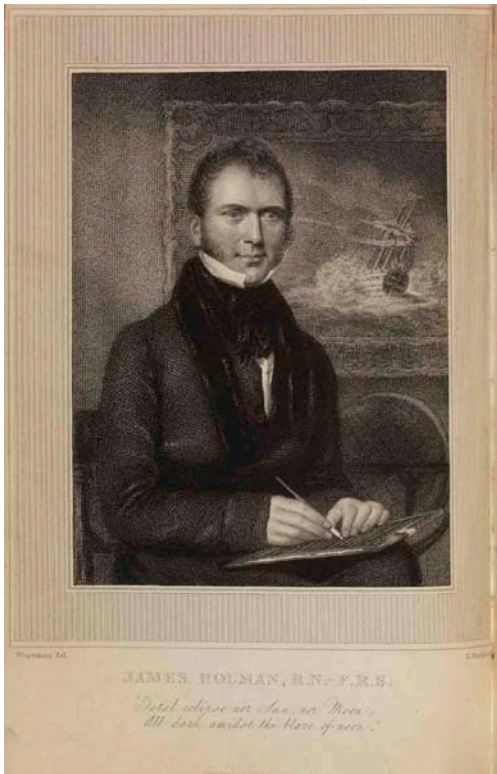
### “Travelling blind”, James Holman FRS (1785/6-1857)

Scientists are fascinated by observing the world and this is one of the fundamental tools of the scientific method. Unsurprisingly, many have travelled the globe and written about it in both scientific and popular accounts. Cook’s *Endeavour* voyage and Charles Darwin’s journey of discovery aboard HMS *Beagle* resulted in some of the most famous examples of this kind of genre writing. But one of the most remarkable travelling-author Fellows of the Royal Society was not sighted: James Holman (1785/6-1857) who became celebrated and known to his contemporaries as ‘the blind traveller’.



*James Holman by R Cooper after Madame Fabroni, 1825/The Royal Society*

Holman was an Oxford-educated Royal Navy lieutenant serving aboard ship until 1807 when ill-health meant that he was invalided out of his maritime profession. The nature of his condition is not known, but Holman had some apparent difficulties in physical mobility and became completely blind at around twenty-four years of age. He refused a quiet retirement in Windsor in favour of restless journeying: “the desire of locomotion has to him become a new sense – a compensating principle...”. Holman travelled to Europe initially but would eventually circumnavigate the world, writing popular books about his experiences and impressions.



*James Holman by Edward Francis Finden after Thomas Charles Wageman, c.1834/The Royal Society credit*

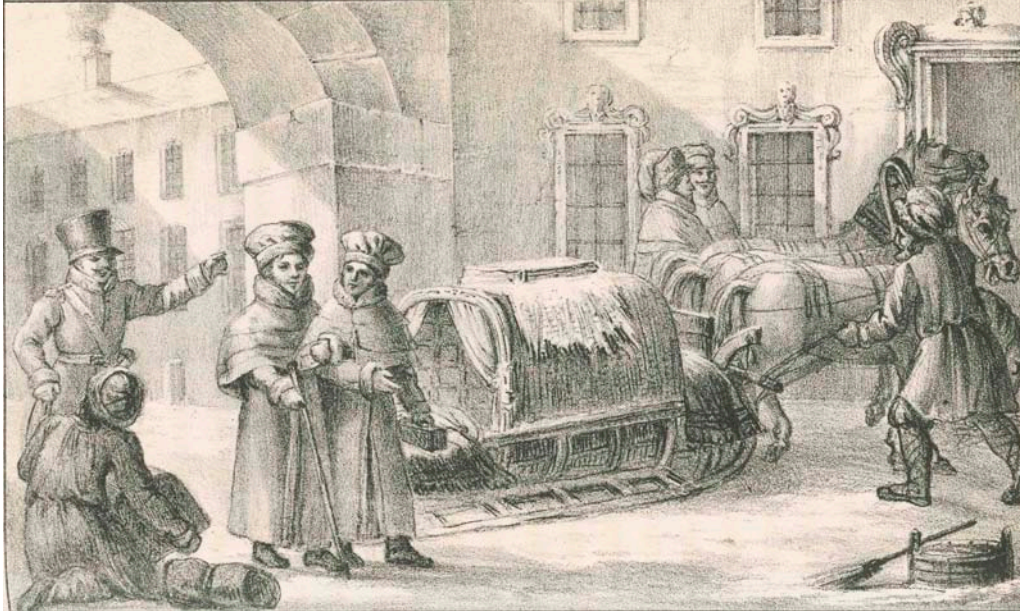
*Engraved by Edward Francis Finden (1791-1857) British printmaker after Thomas Charles Wageman (1787-1853) English artist*

Later biographical accounts of Lieutenant Holman have tended to concentrate on the novelty of his situation as a solo adventurer and on the more arduous aspects of his journeying. In one episode he was arrested and removed from Moscow, to make a 5,000 miles overland journey by post and sled to Krakow. It was typical that many simply did not believe that Holman could pursue such a livelihood and the accusation of spying followed. Holman's independence led him close to being foolhardy – he was determined to ascend Vesuvius alone, before being persuaded to take a friend to the volcano's summit. His portrait at the Royal Society, by the artist George Chinnery (1774-1852) was painted in 1830 during a pause to his restlessness, probably at Canton (Guangzhou) where Chinnery worked.



*James Holman by George Chinnery, 1830/The Royal Society*

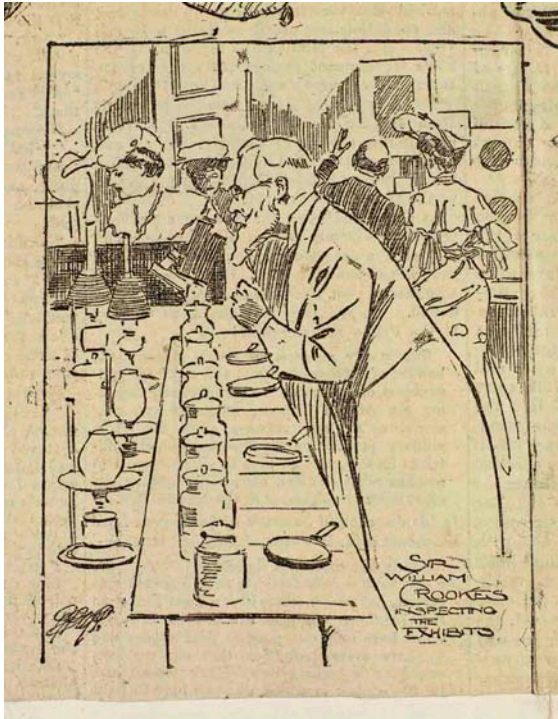
His travel accounts were popular for their contemporary novelty but are now most interesting for their sensory detail. Where Chinnery could not see, he could write about things that other travellers might have missed: how the silky coat of a beast of burden might feel to his fingers, for example, or the tactile working methods of blind compositors checking the typesetting of books in Russian schools with a rapidity that surprised even Holman himself.



*Holman's Travels through Russia (1825) shows journeys by sled/The Royal Society*

## Invention of sun-glasses, Royal Society President William Crookes (1832-1919)

Royal Society President William Crookes (1832-1919) was part of a team trying to understand the causes of glassworkers' cataracts from 1908. In addition to finding out which parts of the spectrum in infra red and ultra violet were most damaging to eyesight, Crookes suggested that spectacles fitted with glass to filter out these rays might be an effective means of prevention, so instigating the thinking behind modern sunglasses and therefore a significant industry. A form of blindness, unthinkingly represented by darkened glasses, was actually responsible for the widespread take-up of sunglasses by all of us.



*Sir William Crookes attending a Royal Society conversazione/The Royal Society*