The Royal Society

The Royal Society is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world’s most distinguished scientists drawn from all areas of science, engineering, and medicine. The Society’s fundamental purpose, reflected in its founding Charters of the 1660s, is to recognise, promote, and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity.

The Society’s strategic priorities are:
- Promoting science and its benefits
- Recognising excellence in science
- Supporting outstanding science
- Providing scientific advice for policy
- Fostering international and global cooperation
- Education and public engagement

History of the Royal Society

The Society was officially founded on 28 November 1660, when a group of 12 scientists met at Gresham College, agreeing to form “a Colledge for the Promoting of Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning”. This group included Sir Christopher Wren, Robert Boyle, John Wilkins, Sir Robert Moray, and William, Viscount Brouncker, the first Society president. The Society met weekly to witness experiments and discuss scientific topics. Moray told the King, Charles II, of this venture and secured his approval and encouragement.

The name ‘The Royal Society’ first appears in print in 1661, and in the second Royal Charter of 1663 as ‘The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge’.

In 1662 the Society was permitted by Royal Charter to publish and the first two books it produced were Sylva by John Evelyn and Micrographia by Robert Hooke.

The first issue of Philosophical Transactions was edited in 1665; making it now the oldest scientific journal in continuous publication.

In 1857 the Society moved to Burlington House in Piccadilly, with its staff of two. Over the next century the work and staff of the Society increased rapidly and soon outgrew the site. The Society moved to its present location on Carlton House Terrace in 1967. It now houses a staff of over 140, all working to further the Royal Society’s role as an independent scientific academy.

For further information
The Royal Society
6 – 9 Carlton House Terrace
London, SW1Y 5AG
T +44 20 7451 2683
E events@royalsociety.org
W royalsociety.org

Front cover
Interior designs for Charles Sanford by Ernest George and Peto, 1890.

Above
Self-guided tour

1. The Marble hall is the entrance of the former home of American, Charles Henry Sanford, of somewhat ambiguous wealth. He had the house opulently decorated in the style of an Italian Palazzo. Note the Royal Society motto emblazoned on the marble above the doorway to Reception.

2. The President’s staircase is decorated with carved timber ceilings with mother-of-pearl inlay, marble carvings and alabaster surrounds.

3. Wolfson Library room 1 was once used for lavish parties at the turn of the 20th Century – note the painted ceiling and gold leaf detail. There is also a section of the preserved timber floor to view.

4. Wolfson Library room 2 was once a grand reception room. Now it houses a collection of the Society’s books in custom-made book cases.

5. The Council room shows evidence of the building’s previous use as the German Embassy – note the original Third Reich doorknobs.

6. The Conference room houses a head table of which was said to belong to Robert Hooke.

7. The main staircase has arched supporting walls and German Travertine marble facings all of which remain from Speer’s renovation of the German Embassy though the block-like National Socialist balustrade was replaced with lighter banisters. The large painting above the staircase is of Burlington House, the former residence of the Royal Society.

8. The Lower mezzanine accommodates the stained glass window carrying the crest of the Society, brought from Burlington House to commemorate the Tercentenary.

9. The Reception display case contains the Royal Society mace, a gift from King Charles II in 1663, seen in the Bank’s portrait on the first floor.

10. The City of London rooms hold the beautiful preserved 19th century timber flooring.

11. The Welcome Trust lecture hall was the most ambitious of the modern renovations, requiring the removal of a staircase and a central spine wall.

12. The Nash staircase is one of few traces of Nash’s original interior design features to be found in the building today.

Floorplan