

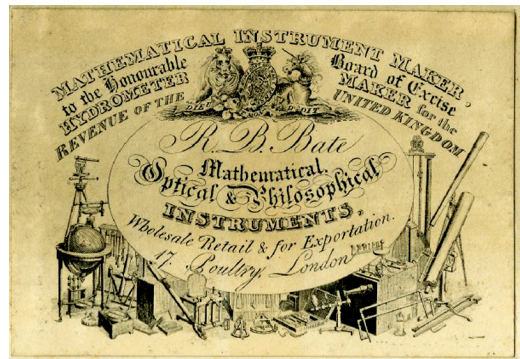
AHS London Lecture Thursday 19 July 2018

Rebekah Higgitt, **Staking a Claim to ‘Practical Science’: the Clockmakers Versus the Spectacle Makers in the Long 18th Century**

In the early years of the 19th century, the Clockmakers’ Company entered dispute with its fellow craft guild, the Spectacle Makers’ Company. This was over the question of which of the two could claim jurisdiction over the business practices of the instrument maker Robert Brettell Bate. It was an occasion for the leadership of each to look over their history and put forward a case that a mathematical, optical and philosophical instrument maker or vendor such as Bate should be a Freeman of their Company. The Clockmakers’ pointed out that mathematical instrument making had long been considered an allied craft and, therefore, under their control. The Spectacle Makers’ retorted that, in fact, “the trade of Optical and Mathematical Instruments has been united by Custom to that of the Spectaclemakers”. Each could point to eminent members, from Elias Allen and George Graham on the Clockmakers’ side to Edward Nairne and Peter Dollond on the Spectacle Makers’.

While the power and activity of the City’s guilds had broadly declined by the later 18th century, as institutions they sought to adapt to changing circumstances. The dispute over Bate reflected the Companies’ desire to reassert or test their regulatory powers but was particularly charged because of the case’s links to the increasingly authoritative and

high-status world of the physical sciences. It was also coloured by the fact that the Spectacle Makers had, shortly before, laid claim to a role in the progress of the city’s, indeed the nation’s, success in the sciences, in a way that the Clockmakers’ Company deemed illegitimate. This talk will explore this episode and the longer histories of the corporate or collective identities of each company, in relation to the growing world of natural philosophy and scientific practice within London. While each continued to oversee its core trade, it is clear that emphasising links to elite science could serve important purposes. serve important purposes.



Tradecard of R. B. Bate. BM Heal, 105.7
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Dr Rebekah Higgitt is a senior lecturer at the University of Kent and was previously Curator of the History of Science at Royal Museums Greenwich. Her work has focused on the history of science in 17th-19th-century Britain, including explorations of scientific biography, the material culture of science and its display in museums, and the roles of scientific institutions. In 2010-15 she was a Co-Investigator on an AHRC-funded project on the history of the Board of Longitude and she is currently leading a Leverhulme Trust research project, Metropolitan Science: Places, Objects and Cultures of Practice and Knowledge in London, 1600-1800, in partnership with the Science Museum. She is author of *Recreating Newton* (2007) and, with Richard Dunn, *Finding Longitude* (2014).

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