

Susie Thom (Natural Sciences) – London, 2012

Over the Christmas vacation and early half of Lent term, I travelled to London on several occasions in order to make use of the archives at the Royal Society, which occupies a position in central London at the intersection of Pall Mall and Waterloo Place. As a third year student in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, I am writing a dissertation that requires primary source research. I am writing about a period of dispute and debate in the Royal Society in the late eighteenth century – a series of events termed the ‘Mathematician’s Mutiny’, I will be arguing that the significance of these events was far greater than has formerly been suggested in the secondary literature. It is my thesis that these ‘Dissensions’, as they were branded at the time, were not the disciplinary struggle between the physical sciences and the life sciences that they have been made out to be by the historian J.L.Heilbron, but were actually the result of developing ideas about elite society in science and individual competition.

My purpose in visiting the Royal Society was to look through the diaries and archived correspondence of Sir Charles Blagden, a physician involved in the disputes who acted as a mediator between the two rival factions. The diaries proved particularly useful for the work I am doing, not only because Blagden was absolutely meticulous in recording the events of the period, but also because they are not a resource that have been drawn on at all in other scholarship of the period. The six volumes of correspondence, both letters to and copies of letters sent by Blagden, also impacted on my work, but in a slightly different manner – the absence of retained correspondence for the period of the Dissensions points to a desire to suppress the ‘paper trail’ associated with the events, and so supports my thesis of the perceived significance of the events at the time.

In addition to these necessitated periods of study in London, I have also been conducting extensive archive research in Cambridge University Library, where copies of many of the polemical pamphlets and satirical sketches that were produced in response to the problems in the Royal Society are kept. These form a central part of my argument, as they are demonstrative of the non-disciplinary, more classist basis of the disputes on which I am writing.