

Haydn at the Herschels

The real-life meeting of two iconic figures who have withstood the tides of history makes for a tantalizing prospect. But did it ever happen? Wolfgang Steinicke examines the facts of a visit to the Slough residence of William Herschel by none other than composer Joseph Haydn.

There is no doubt that in June 1792 the eminent Austrian musician and composer Joseph Haydn visited William Herschel's famous Observatory House in Slough, near Windsor Castle. His stay in England, which was one of several, lasted from 1 January 1791 until 2 July 1792. Haydn lived in London, where he presented his music at various events.

The engagement took place at the invitation of the German violinist, composer and conductor Johann



Above: German violinist and concert manager Johann Peter Salomon brokered Haydn's 1791 visit to England

Peter Salomon, acting there mainly as a concert promoter. However, the record of the Slough visit is inconsistent in contemporary documents. Two different dates are given; Haydn and Herschel variously met or did not; and there are claims that Haydn observed with the giant 40ft reflector, which is said to have led to his composing the oratorio *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*).

So where does the truth lie? When exactly did Haydn visit to Slough? Did he meet William Herschel in person? And was he really shown the 40ft, to trigger one of his great works?

The date of Haydn's visit

There are a number of sources that we can consider essential in determining the date of Haydn's visit to William Herschel's residence: his sister Caroline Herschel's 'Temporary Index'; several versions of the visitor books; and Haydn's diaries, known as the 'First London Notebook' and 'Second London Notebook'.

Caroline kept the 'Temporary Index' over many years to collect information about a wide range of events, objects and persons related to William's observations (see Steinicke 2021 for a detailed study of the siblings' astronomical activities). Actually, there are two versions of the Index; though the second is labelled 'copy', it includes additional data and corrections. The document is arranged in several tables; that of interest here is headed 'Visitors and Sundry's' (figure 1). It covers the period from 1775 to 1808, and mainly lists guests coming to Bath, Datchet, Clay Hall or Slough, who had the privilege to observe with a telescope. Caroline's table gives names, dates and occasionally objects.

The perceived status of each guest determined which instrument was available to them. Less-qualified visitors could only glimpse through the 7ft Newtonian with its 6.2in mirror; the easy-to-use telescope became famous through William's discovery of Uranus in 1781. But astronomers were occasionally allowed to observe with the 18.7in reflector of 20ft focal length, the standard tool to sweep the sky for nebulae and star clusters. To reach the eye-piece one had to climb up the wooden stand – a dangerous task at night (a few people could even make a short sweep). When in Autumn 1789 the 40ft reflector of 48in aperture with its convenient observing platform became operational at Slough, very important guests, such as nobles from nearby Windsor Castle, had the privilege of viewing spectacular objects like Saturn.

However, 'Visitors and Sundry's' does not have a record of a visit by Haydn. Given that Caroline was generally an accurate book-keeper, it is unlikely that she forgot to list such an important event. However, the lack does not mean that the Austrian musician did not visit Slough; it merely implies that no observation took place.

So we move to the Visitor Books (figure 2), which list guests, regardless of any observation. There are several versions. That in Caroline's handwriting covers the period 1783–92 (with dates from April 1786 concerning Slough). It is on display in the Herschel Museum, Bath. Given the clear form of the document (labelled '(a)' here), it probably is a transcript from original notes made at the time of the visit, which did not survive. When hearing the name and status of an unknown person at their greeting, Caroline occasionally wrote down the information incorrectly.

Two other Visitor Books are available, though not written by Caroline. All were sold at an auction by Christie's in 1958. The first (b) is archived at the Herschel Museum; the second (c) is in the possession of the National Maritime Museum (NMM), Greenwich. Both books are not mere copies of (a), because they cover larger periods: (b) contains entries between 1791 and 1828, (c) between 1783 and 1942. For the overlapping period (1791–92), (b) is a transcript of (a). All later entries are new and the handwriting is clearly by different persons. When Caroline had left Observatory House, William's wife Mary had taken over the guest registration. Some visitors have entered their own name, status and date (sometimes barely legible). (c) is a final transcript, based on the former documents and was written by a single person (probably much later).

A thorough study of the various sources shows that 15 musicians visited the Herschels over the years. Some came several times, but in two cases guests completely missed William, as he was on tour. With the exception of one person, all visited Slough. A thorough investigation of all visits and guests is currently being carried out by the author.

Visitors and Sundry's

Earthquake at Bath Sept: 8, 1775.

Dr. Watson saw thro' the 20 telescope Aug. 28, 1780.

Dr. Watson saw &c: in the moon Sep. 8, 1780.

At Greenwich observed some objects with different telescopes May 28,

Mr. Brydone saw some objects July 20, 1781. F.iii.

Professor Liffar from Göttingen saw the six satellites of Saturn &c:
Jan 12, 1792.

Mr. Bates obs. the 6 sat. of J. &c: &c: M. Sep. 13, 1792.

Figure 2 shows the relevant entries for the time of Haydn's visit. Under the date '1792, June 14', Caroline lists three persons (a): "Dr. Hayden, Mr. Solomon, Rev. Dr. Hussey his Cath. Majesty chaplain of Embassy". The first is, of course, Joseph Haydn, the second Johann Peter Salomon, and the third Thomas Hussey, an Irish diplomat and chaplain. The latter had already visited Slough in 1786. (b) only mentions the "Rev. Dr. Hussey Chaplain to his Cath. Majesty" for 12 June; Haydn and Salomon are missing. Finally, (c) offers two entries. That for 12 June (c1) is identical to (b) but there is another one for 14 June (c2); apart from Hussey, now "Dr Hayden" is mentioned (Caroline's spelling error was copied).

Curiously, both the preceding and following visitors are not documented by Caroline: on 10 June we have John Brinkley, Astronomer Royal for Ireland (listed in (b) and (c)) and on 17 June a 'Mr. Lardelly' (only listed in (b)). Although there is some ambiguity in these documents, Haydn seems to have visited Slough on 14 June.

But there is another source. Haydn himself has described the event in his 'First London Notebook', happening almost at the end of the England sojourn. However, the date differs by one day from Caroline's: he noted 15 June, a Friday. We read in a translation by Blanston (2016):

"On 15th June I went from Windsor to [Slough – here is a blank space], to Doctor Hershel [sic], where I saw the great telescope. It is 40 feet long and 5 feet in diameter. The machinery is very big, but so ingenious that a single man can put it in motion with the greatest ease. There are also 2 smaller [telescopes], of which



1 Caroline Herschel's table 'Visitors and Sundry's' is part of her 'Temporary Index'. The first entries are shown, and (separated) the two for 1792. (Science Photo Library)

ANNOUNCEMENT TO VISITORS
 Dr. Hayden
 Mr. Solomon
 Rev. Dr. Hussey his Cath. Majesty
 Chaplain of Embassy
 June 14

1792 June 12
 Rev. Dr. Hussey Chaplain to
 his Cath. Majesty

his Cath. Majesty
 Rev. Dr. Hussey Chaplain to his Cath. Majesty June 12

in 1828
 Dr. Hayden
 Rev. Dr. Hussey his Cath. Majesty Chaplain of Embassy
 June 14
 27

2 Three versions of the relevant visits in June 1792.

one is 22 feet long and magnifies 6000 times. The King had 2 made for himself, each of which measures 12 feet. He paid him 1000 guineas for them. In his younger days Dr. Herschel was in the Prussian service as an oboe player. During the seven-years' war he deserted with his brother [Jacob] and went to England, where he supported himself as a musician for many years: he became an organist at Bath, but gradually turned more to astronomy. After having provided himself with the necessary instruments, he left Bath, rented a room near Windsor, and studied day and night. His landlady [Mary] was a widow, fell in love with him, married him, and gave him a dowry of 100,000. Besides this he has a yearly pension for life of 500 from the King, and his wife, at the age of 45, presented him with a son [John] this year, 1792. Ten years ago, he had his sister [Caroline] come, and she is of the greatest assistance to him in his observations. Sometimes he sits for 5 or 6 hours under the open sky in the bitterest cold weather."

Who is right about the date? It seems most likely to be Haydn, who presents a detailed schedule of his final time in England, used for some excursions in the vicinity of London. He was definitely at Ascot the day before he left for Slough, as we read in the 'Second London Notebook' (Blanston 2016): "On 14th June I went to Windsor and from there 8 miles to Ascot Heath to see the races."

Though not explicitly mentioned in Haydn's one-paragraph report, there is no doubt that he was accompanied by his friend Salomon when visiting Slough on 15 June. But the present author has doubts about the third person, Thomas Hussey. When several

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engagements to visit the musician-astronomer, and gaze at his monster telescopes" (Clerke 1895).

Did they meet?

According to Heinrich Eduard Jacob (Jacob 1950), Haydn, when travelling to Slough, was armed with a letter of recommendation from a good friend of William, the well-known London music critic Charles Burney. Equipped with this paper, Haydn expected a pleasant meeting with the famous astronomer. His report is telling about the issue. It does not indicate any extraordinary experience and sounds more like a brief outline of Herschel's life. Only at the beginning, we read something about his impression of the site, when briefly mentioning the 40-foot, 20-foot, and (probably) the 7-foot reflector. However, the text says nothing about a personal meeting with the seven-years-younger Herschel; Caroline is only casually mentioned at the end.

All of this is not surprising, given that the astronomer was absent from Slough in June! We know this from William's 'Diary 1791-1817', presenting a more or less detailed description of his frequent journeys, made in later years when he was married. From 29 May to 15 July 1792, he was travelling through Wales, Scotland, and Devon, accompanied by his friend Jean-Baptiste Komarzewski, a Polish lieutenant-general and mineralogist. In the luggage was the 7-ft 'skeleton reflector', occasionally used for observations during the tour. On 14 June we see them in Bersham (near Wrexham) and on 17 June in Caernarfon. Lady Herschel (Mary) had to stay at home with three-month-old John. Thus, only she and Caroline could greet the illustrious guests.

It was an unfortunate circumstance that the Austrian Joseph Haydn and the German-born William Herschel, a talented musician and composer, early on, but then for almost 20 years addicted to astronomy, had no opportunity to talk with each other. Facing Haydn's almost complete ignorance of the English language, both would have used German, though Herschel generally avoided it (even in letters to German colleagues). Caroline undoubtedly spoke to Haydn and Salomon in her mother tongue.

*June 15. 1792.
17th 5' Sid. time. I began to sweep with the two
nebula in the head of Ursa and forgot as
far as to the group of stars in the knee
19th 5' of Perseus. I was very careful in laying over
the sweeps deep enough and the weather was very
clear. but I saw nothing new*

guests showed up on the same day, they usually came in a group and thus had some connection with each other. However, this is not true for the trio in question. There was no personal or professional relationship between Hussey and the two musicians. Thus, it is possible that the Chaplain of the Spanish Embassy was a single visitor at Slough and Caroline simply forgot to make a separate note for Haydn and Salomon for 15 June: an uncommon but likely mistake. The question remains whether Hussey was present on 14 June (after (a)) or on the 12th (b). The latter date could be another mistake, otherwise we would have two visits. (c) simply collects the entries in (a) and (b). It should be noted that Hussey had already visited Slough in 1786 and Solomon was there again in July 1806, on 15 August 1810 and 28 August 1812. Another Haydn visit is not noted and is unlikely.

It is interesting that Joseph Haydn is neither mentioned in Caroline's autobiographies (Hoskin 2003) nor in the important books about the Herschels written by Mary Cornwallis (Herschel 1876) and Constance Anne Lubbock (Lubbock 1933), both members of the large Herschel family. Checking other biographers, only Agnes M. Clerke mentions the visit in 1792, writing "Joseph Haydn snatched a day from the turmoil of his London

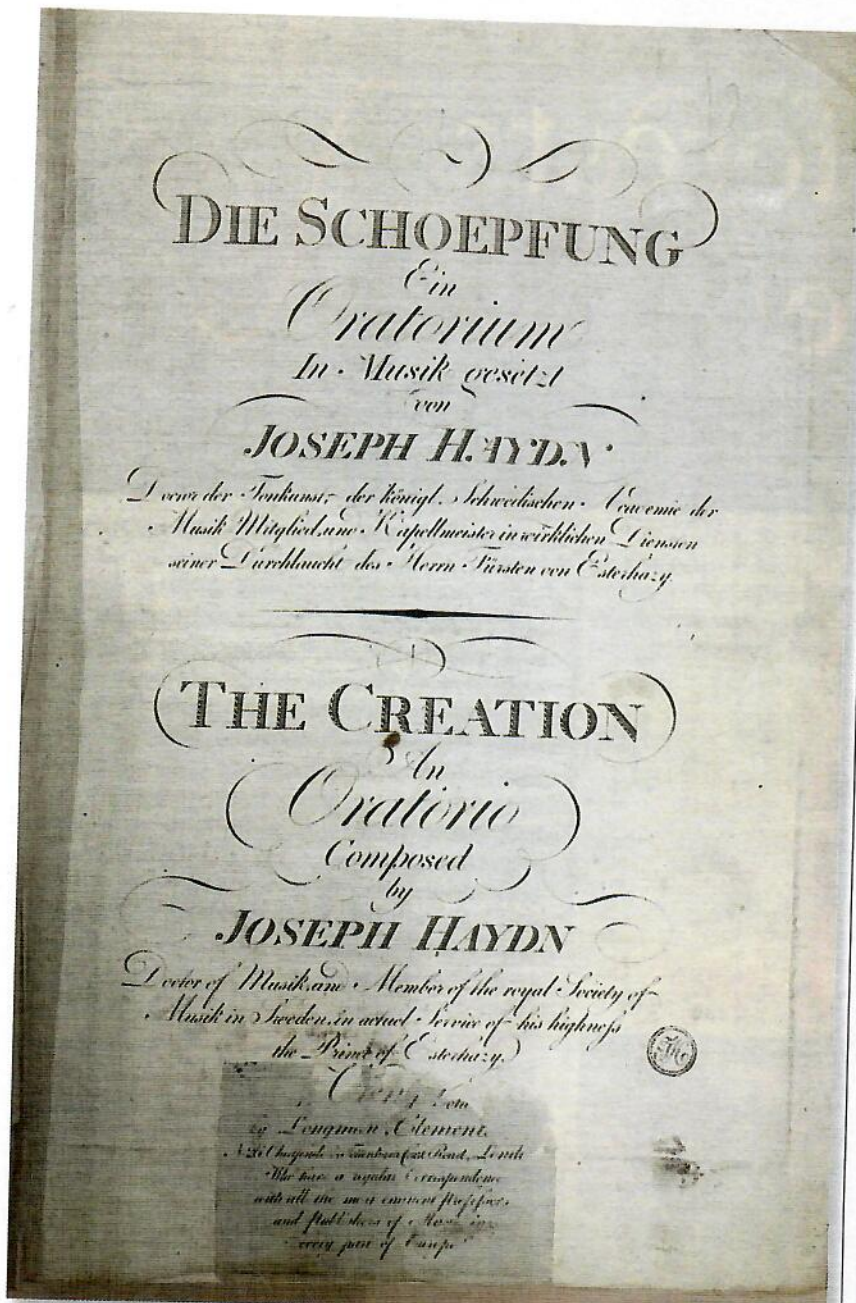
3 The entry for 15 June 1792 in Caroline's fourth Journal.

Was there an observation at Slough?

It was essentially William's job to observe with select guests, so none of his telescopes were used when he was absent. Caroline wasn't allowed to use any instrument for a 'star party' and in any event, she wasn't able to manage the difficult task of setting up either of the bigger telescopes. She reported to Haydn and Salomon on the astronomical work and showed them the 40-foot and other instruments set up in the garden, in daylight, of course.

Even if William had been at home, there was no chance for the guests to observe on that night due to a simple reason: in mid-June the sky doesn't get sufficiently dark until very late. There would be little point in operating a larger telescope, especially the 40ft, only briefly. This season was generally avoided for regular telescopic work (like sweeping), and this was all the more true for interested visitors. The lack of an observation is the obvious reason that there is no entry in Caroline's 'Temporary Index'. Haydn also does not mention any use of a telescope.

Most likely, the two musicians left Observatory House no later than sunset to return to London. This is supported by another fact: Caroline's observing book (Journal 4) has an entry for 15 June 1792 (figure 3); She



used the short but very clear night for sweeping with the 9.6in Newtonian, built for her by William. Generally, there were no strangers during the observations, made on the (unsafe) flat roof of the cottage near the main house. Due to the late darkness, Caroline started about 11:30pm; the first target was the pair of nebulae M81/M82 in Ursa Major. The session lasted about two hours; nothing new was found.

Die Schöpfung

Finally, it is claimed in the literature that, when looking through Herschel's 40ft reflector, Haydn was inspired to compose *The Creation* (which he did not write until 1797). His music has been described by Robbins Landon (1976) as having a "feeling of great space, of cosmic loneliness (perhaps, really, Haydn's view of eternity through Herschel's giant telescope)". According to another author, he is said to have stammered "so high, so far" when gazing at celestial objects (Jacob 1950); see also Joyce (2003), Rosenfeld (2016) and Petzold (2019). Actually, the 40ft was used only on two nights in 1792 (in February and September, both without guests). The American author Deborah Crawford (Crawford 1968) copied Clerke's sentence, quoted above, then added the following conversation between Haydn and Herschel about the giant instrument

Poster of Joseph Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*

(Powerhouse collection. Barry Willoughby Bequest, 2017. Photographer Damian McDonald.)

(here in italics): "I could conduct a small orchestra inside it! he marvelled. William rose to the occasion. *But Maestro*, he said, laughing, *think of the echoes!*"

A recent version is due to Robert Holmes (Holmes 2008): "Joseph Haydn claimed that his visit to Slough in 1798 [sic] had helped him compose his oratorio *The Creation*". This made-up statement was later copied by Michael Rowan Robinson (Rowan Robinson 2013): "Joseph Haydn visited Slough in 1791 [sic] and later claimed that this helped him compose his great choral work *The Creation*". Note that this author 'corrected' the wrong year from 1798 to 1791. Given the above presented facts, this is all nonsense.

Not to criticize, this is a purely fictional treatment of Haydn's encounter with Herschel, written by Fred Chappell (Chappell 1979). In his short story *Moments of Light*, Haydn is accompanied by Charles Burney. An inspiring observation with the 40ft is described. The text is a mixture of historical and astronomical knowledge and artistic freedom – a fascinating piece of poetry.

The two musicians Joseph Haydn and Johann Peter Salomon visited Slough on 15 June 1792, but did not meet William Herschel, who was on tour in Wales at the time. In daylight, Caroline showed them the telescopes, erected in the garden of Observatory House at Slough, especially the 40ft reflector. There was no use of this or any other instrument and thus no direct influence on Haydn's composition *Die Schöpfung* of 1797. Dissenting claims, made in the literature, are all pure fiction. Finally, it is possible that the third person, Thomas Hussey, was separately at Slough a day earlier due to an error made by Caroline.

Tantalizing as it seems, then, the chance of these two giants in their fields having met seems remote. That is not to say, thought, that they weren't an inspiration to one another from afar. ●

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