

# The Royal Meteorological Society as seen through its membership

**Malcolm Walker**

Education Officer, Royal Meteorological Society

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On Wednesday 3 April 1850, ten gentlemen assembled in the library of Hartwell House, near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. According to the minutes of the meeting, they gathered "to form a society the objects of which should be the advancement and extension of meteorological science by determining the laws of climate and of meteorological phenomena in general". They called the society the "British Meteorological Society" and appointed as its President Samuel Charles Whitbread, a grandson of the founder of the famous brewing firm. The society that they formed became "The Meteorological Society" in 1866, when it was incorporated by Royal Charter, and the "Royal Meteorological Society" in 1883, when Her Majesty Queen Victoria granted the privilege of adding 'Royal' to the title.

Besides Whitbread, those present at the meeting on 3 April 1850 were Dr John Lee, the owner of Hartwell House, the Reverend Samuel King of Latimer, near Chesham, the Reverend Joseph Bancroft Reade of Stone Vicarage, near Aylesbury, the Reverend Charles Lowndes of Hartwell Rectory, James Glaisher, Superintendent of the Magnetic and Meteorological Department of the Greenwich Royal Observatory, Edward Joseph Lowe of Highfield House, near Nottingham, Vincent Fasel of Stone, near Aylesbury, John Drew of Southampton and William Rutter of Haver-

stock Hill, north-west London. The following day, an additional five members were admitted, among them Mrs Lowndes and Mrs Lee. At the next meeting of the society, on 7 May 1850, the number of members increased by a further 75, among them General Sir Thomas Brisbane, Lady Noel Byron, Professor Temple Chevallier, Luke Howard, the Countess of Lovelace and Captain (later Admiral) W. H. Smyth. By the end of 1850, the number of members stood at 145.

For five months of 1850, three meteorological societies existed in the United Kingdom: the one formed at Hartwell House, one that had lain dormant since 1843, and one formed in 1848. The latter was known as the Meteorological Society of London. It was dissolved in September 1850 and its papers were handed over to the new society soon afterwards. Its Council recommended the 30-40 members to join the British Meteorological Society. Among the few who did were Samuel Collett Homersham, who was acting President of the society at the time of its dissolution. He was another of the 75 who joined on 7 May 1850, and he subsequently served as a Council member for several years. Mr Louis P. Casella, the society's Treasurer, joined the British Meteorological Society, too, but not until 15 January 1862. The dormant society was also known as the Meteorological Society of London and its

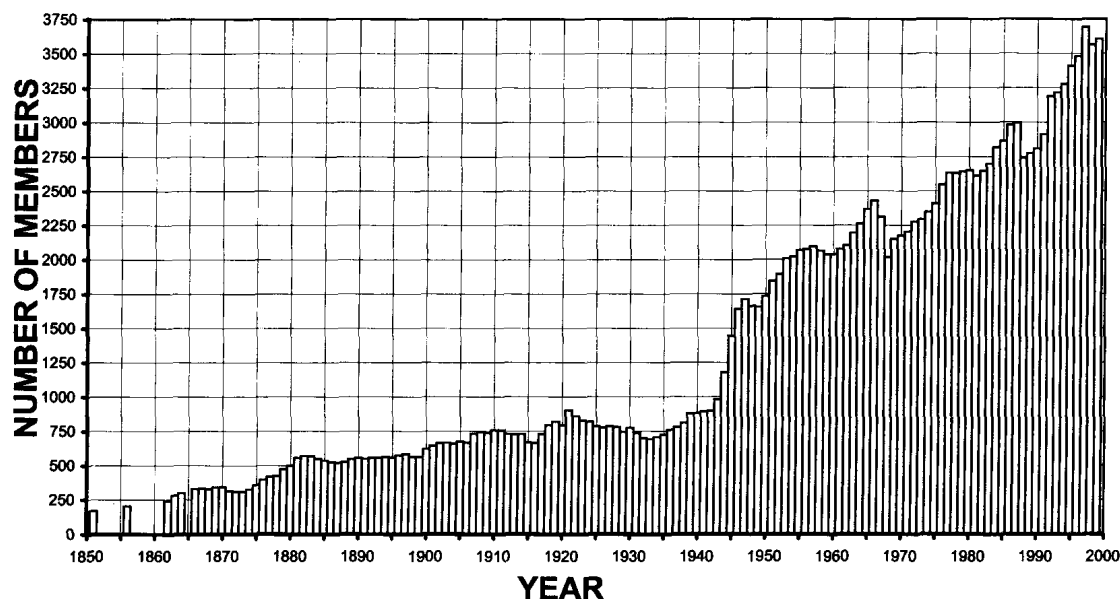


Fig. 1 Society membership, 1850–1999. In the period 1866–72, inclusive, the membership totals are for June of each year. For all other years, the totals are for 31 December. Source: annual reports of the Society's Council. Records of membership for 1852–55, 1857–61 and 1865 were not published in these reports.

papers were also handed over to the new society, in April 1851. In 1843, its membership numbered 133, of whom 59 were Associates and 10 were Honorary Members. How many of these considered themselves still members of a society that had remained inactive for seven years is not known, but Lord Robert Grosvenor, President since 1839, and Mr J. W. G. Gutch, Treasurer since 1841, were the persons who arranged for the society's papers to be passed to the new society. Grosvenor became a member of the British Meteorological Society on 7 May 1850, immediately becoming a Vice-President. Gutch never joined the new society\*.

From 145 at the end of 1850, membership, including Honorary Members, increased to 170 by the end of 1851, 200 in 1856 and 300 in 1864 (Fig. 1). Notable among those who became members were Admiral Robert Fitz-Roy, Meteorological Statist to the Board of Trade, who joined on 27 March 1855, Lieutenant-Colonel Henry James, Director-General

of the Ordnance Survey, who joined on 10 December 1850, George (later Sir George) Airy, Astronomer Royal, who joined on 19 March 1862, Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury of the US Navy, who became an Honorary Member on 23 March 1852, and Professor L. A. J. Quetelet of the Royal Observatory in Brussels, who became an Honorary Member on 27 May 1851. The instrument-makers Enrico (Henry) Negretti and Joseph Warren Zambra, who formed the partnership of Negretti & Zambra in 1850, both joined on 27 November 1855. George James Symons, Director of the British Rainfall Organization and a towering figure in the history of the Royal Meteorological Society, joined on 25 March 1856, when only 17 years of age†.

No increase in membership followed the award of a Royal Charter in 1866. Indeed, the number of members fell in the early 1870s, from 341 in 1869 to 308 by the end of 1873, though the main reason for the decrease was that the names of subscription defaulters were removed from the register around that time.

\* For information about the London Meteorological Societies, see Walker (1993). For information about the world's first meteorological society, Mannheim's Societas Meteorologica Palatina, see Kington (1974), Cappel (1980) and Cassidy (1985).

† For biographical details of Symons and information about his importance in the history of the Royal Meteorological Society, see Bilham (1938) and Burton (1993).

The principal consequence of incorporation was that members could now style themselves Fellows and use the letters FMS, instead of MBMS, as heretofore. The first lady Fellow of the Society, as distinct from the first lady member, was Eleanor Anne Ormerod, who was admitted on 20 February 1878 (see Wood 1999). The addition of 'Royal' to the title of the Society in 1883 also did not bring about an increase in membership. On the contrary, the steady increase of the 1870s and early 1880s, from 308 members in 1873 to 571 in 1882, was not maintained. The number fell back to 522 in 1887. The principal consequence of adding 'Royal' to the title was that Fellows could now use the designation FRMetSoc, but not FRMS, as these letters were (and still are) used by Fellows of the Royal Microscopical Society\*. Royal patronage has been enjoyed since 1904, when the Prince of Wales (later King George V) thus honoured the Society. He remained Patron until his death in 1936, whereupon King Edward VIII consented to become Patron. After King Edward's abdication, King George VI became Patron, and since her accession in 1952 the present Queen has graciously served in this way.

In 1900, the year of the Society's golden jubilee, the number of members topped 600 for the first time. By the end of that year, there were 620 members, 456 of them Ordinary Fellows or Foreign Members, 144 Life Members and 20 Honorary Members. Sadly, George James Symons, a mainstay of the Society for so many years, died only three weeks before the jubilee celebrations, and one of only two surviving founder members of the Society, Edward Joseph Lowe, died on the same day, 10 March 1900. The other surviving founder member, James Glaisher, who was responsible in no small measure for the survival and establishment of the Society in the 1850s and 1860s, passed away in 1903, age 93.

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\* FRMetSoc was the original designation. FRMetS is generally used nowadays. Another consequence of adding 'Royal' to the name of the Society was that 'Royal' was added to the title of the Society's *Quarterly Journal*. Volumes 1 to 9 inclusive were called the *Quarterly Journal of the Meteorological Society*.

The number of members reached 700 in 1907, 800 in 1919 and 900 in 1921, but it has to be noted that the substantial increase from 795 in 1920 to 904 in 1921 coincided with the amalgamation of the Royal Meteorological Society with the Scottish Meteorological Society at the beginning of 1921, when, at a stroke, 124 members of the Scottish Society became Fellows of the Royal Meteorological Society†. After 1921, when the annual subscription was raised from £2.00 to 3 guineas (£3.15), the number of members decreased markedly, falling to 690 in 1933. This occurred despite 75th anniversary celebrations in 1925, six 'Broadcast Talks on Weather Topics' on the radio in 1926, an effort to make the *Quarterly Journal* more popular, and the mounting of a major meteorological exhibition at the London Science Museum in January 1932‡. In an attempt to arrest the decline, caused partly by the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Council reduced the subscription to two guineas (£2.10) at the beginning of 1934 and this action appears to have proved helpful as membership increased steadily thereafter, reaching 800 in 1938, 900 in 1943 and 1000 in 1944. Admission of Student Associates began in 1932, but recruitment to this grade remained slow for many years and 16 years elapsed before their number topped 50. Most who joined the Society in the 1930s and 1940s did so as Ordinary Fellows or Foreign Members.

After World War II, numbers continued to increase, reaching 1714 in 1947, when there were 1364 Ordinary Fellows and Foreign Members, 198 Life Members, 90 Associates, 49 Student Associates and 13 Honorary Members. The increase in membership during the War and just after resulted partly from a height-

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† For information about the Scottish Meteorological Society, see Wedderburn (1948, 1955).

‡ In 1926, a series of *Memoirs of the Royal Meteorological Society* was initiated, Council's idea being that the more technical papers would be published in the *Memoirs* and the *Quarterly Journal* would become "more attractive to the general body of Fellows", to quote from the Report of the Council for the year 1926 (*Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society*, 1927, 53, pp. 152–164).

ened interest in meteorology among those who served in the Royal Air Force, partly from the establishment of a Canadian Branch (formed in 1939) and partly from the efforts of Professor Gordon Manley (President 1945–46), who urged the Council to encourage meetings of a popular nature and to increase the number of meetings held outside London. He also helped to launch the Society's monthly magazine *Weather*, first published in May 1946. For no obvious reason, the number of members dropped a little in 1948 and 1949. Thereafter, however, another marked increase in membership occurred, with the number topping 2000 in 1953. In this respect, the year 1950 appears to have provided a boost. This was the year that the centenary of the Society was celebrated, field courses were introduced and popular lectures for sixth form students in the London area were first held.

After 1953, the number of members increased slowly, to 2099 in 1957, before decreasing a little over the next few years. Then, another significant increase occurred, with a total of 2430 reached in 1966. As the Council's annual reports in the early 1960s pointed out, the Society and its activities flourished, especially its field courses, and the circulation of *Weather* increased considerably. The reduction in membership which occurred in 1967 resulted from the dissolution of the Canadian Branch at the end of 1966 (the Canadian Meteorological Society replacing the Canadian Branch of the Royal Meteorological Society on 1 January 1967). Of the 430 Canadian members at the time of dissolution, however, some 200 continued to be members of the Royal Meteorological Society.

The decline in membership that occurred in 1968 was, in the words of the Council's annual report for 1972, "largely accounted for by a thorough review of the membership records, leading to a cancellation of those registrations for whom subscriptions were substantially in arrears". From 2313 in 1967, the number of members dropped to 2020 in 1968, and the figures for total membership of the Society that had been quoted in the annual reports for 1969, 1970 and 1971 were revised downwards. A 50% increase in the annual subscription, from £6.00 to £9.00, with effect from 1 Janu-

ary 1973, proved no deterrent and membership has risen in most years since. The sharp fall in membership which occurred in 1988 resulted from the dissolution of the Society's Australian Branch at the end of 1987\*. Of the Branch's 420 members, only about 100 remained members of the Royal Meteorological Society.

The increase in membership to more than 3600 today (3691 in 1997) reflects a flourishing society that appeals to many meteorologists, amateur and professional, around the world. The ten gentlemen who met at Hartwell House on 3 April 1850 would surely approve. The objects of the society that they formed included the "advancement and extension of meteorological science". The society has never lost sight of these objects. Today, it advances meteorology by means of its journals and other publications, discussion meetings, conferences, grants, prizes, the activities of its local centres and specialist groups, educational activities and professional accreditation. Among its members, there are, as there have been since the 1850s and were in the London Meteorological Societies beforehand, Honorary Members. These are persons who are distinguished by their work in meteorology or persons whom the Society desires to honour for services to the Society or whose association therewith is of benefit to the Society. Their number is limited to 20. The Honorary Members are at present: B. Bolin (Sweden), A. Eliassen (Norway), R. Frith (UK), R. Hide (UK), Sir John Houghton (UK), K. Ya Kondratyev (Russia), E. N. Lorenz (USA), Sir John Mason (UK), J. L. Monteith (UK), W. Munk (USA), R. J. Murgatroyd (UK), R. P. Pearce (UK), N. Phillips (USA), J. S. Sawyer (UK), R. S. Scorer (UK), J. Simpson (USA), J. Smagorinsky (USA), A. C. Wiin-Nielsen (Denmark) and D.-Z. Ye (China).

Today, to quote from a leaflet produced by the Society, membership is open to "anyone with a genuine interest in observing and under-

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\* The Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society replaced the Australian Branch of the Royal Meteorological Society (see the August 1998 issue of the *Bulletin of the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society*, 11, No. 4).

standing processes and occurrences in the atmosphere, or in their effects, or in related disciplines such as agriculture, biology, climatology, hydrology, medicine and oceanography". These were, basically, the people that the founding fathers sought to recruit, though there is nowadays more emphasis on applied meteorology than in the 1850s. Were these founding fathers still alive today, they would probably be pleasantly surprised that the society they formed had survived for 150 years and shows every sign of surviving for at least another 150. They would undoubtedly be grateful to all who have ensured its survival. These include not only the distinguished meteorologists and other scientists who have held high office or served on the Society's Council and committees but also those who have edited and produced journals, the staff who have carried out a host of administrative duties behind the scenes, and the many hundreds of enthusiasts who have supported the Society over the years.

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Correspondence to: Mr J. M. Walker, Royal Meteorological Society, 104 Oxford Road, Reading, Berkshire RG1 7LL.