

SCIENCE NEWS A CENTURY AGO

Laying the Keel of the *Great Britain*

ON July 19, 1839, the keel of the *Great Britain* was laid in a dock at Bristol. This marked the beginning of the construction of by far the largest iron ship of the time. Like the *Great Western*, she was built for the Great Western Steamship Co., for work on the Atlantic. Her construction was due to the collaboration of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Thomas Richard Guppy, William Patterson and Captain Christopher Claxton, R.N. At first it was intended to build the ship of wood, but the unusual size led to the adoption of iron. The largest iron vessels afloat were only of about 700 tons, but when completed the *Great Britain* had a displacement of 3,618 tons. She was 289 ft. long between perpendiculars, 50½ ft. wide and 32½ ft. deep. Her flat keel was made of wrought iron plates ¾ in. thick and 20 in. wide, welded into lengths of 50-60 ft. Her stern and stem frame were both wrought iron forgings. The ship had five watertight bulkheads. Before the ship was commenced, Claxton and Patterson made a careful study of iron for ship-building. They found that iron afforded greater strength, buoyancy and capacity, and that iron beams 2½ in. thick would have the strength of wooden beams 2 ft. thick. The *Great Britain* was not only the largest iron ship, but the largest wrought iron structure for any purpose.

Re-discovery of the Aurora Islands

THE *Athenæum*, in its accounts of the papers read to the Royal Geographical Society on June 24, 1839, included references to the voyages of the *Medina* and *Mary* belonging to Mr. Burrows of New York, who on a recent expedition had re-discovered the Aurora Islands, which lie half way between the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. In its issue of July 20, 1839, the journal said: "A letter from our United States Correspondent gives us some particulars of this expedition which are romantic enough to deserve to be recorded. It appears that some four years since a neighbour and friend of Mr. Burrows, a Capt. Johnson, after consulting with and communicating to him his views and intentions, sailed from New York to the Antarctic Seas. Letters were received from Johnson when in a high latitude, and still sailing south, since which no information has been received either from or of him. These circumstances weighed upon the mind of Burrows, who thinking there was a possibility of rescuing his friend, resolved to follow the example of Capt. Back, and to proceed in search of him. Two small vessels were accordingly fitted out for the expedition. The success in the principal object has been small, although the hazards run were great and the labour most oppressive." When beyond the Falklands icebergs were met with. "Subsequently Mr. Burrows, when exploring in his boat, was wrecked on an iceberg, but he was rescued by another boat driven by accident to the spot, where for three days he and his crew had been without food. For six months he persevered, but without discovering any positive evidence of the fate of his friend. He found, indeed, clear traces of eight different wrecks, a house constructed from the wrecked vessels and fitted up as a winter residence; several graves were near it, and one body not interred. What a history 'in little' is there in this last fact."

A Uranian Society

IN July 1839, a preliminary meeting was held in the Meteorological Society's rooms, Bartlett's Buildings, Holborn, for the purpose of founding a society for the advancement of astronomical science. The society was to be called "The Uranian Society". According to the *Mechanic and Chemist*, Mr. W. H. White, F.R.S., the senior secretary of the Astronomical Society, presided at the meeting. Various resolutions were passed relating to membership, subscriptions, committee and officers, and it was agreed "that the anniversary of this society be held on the 22nd of March, that being the birthday of the immortal Laplace".

Sepulchral Urn

THE *Gentleman's Magazine* for July 1839 contains the following information: "A curious discovery has recently been made on the ridge of hill which divides the Vale of Ovoca from the Vale of Redcross near Kilbride, County of Wicklow. The ridge of the hill affords many remains of remote antiquity, some are blocks of stone 15 ft. in length, laid parallel to each other, resembling burying places made for men of gigantic stature. A farmer was raising stones in a wild and solitary part of the mountains to fill up gaps; about two feet below the surface he turned up a flag, under which was a stone coffin, containing an urn in an inverted position, under which were two small bones laid parallel to each other. The coffin, consisting of six flags, was eighteen inches long, the sides were seven inches high, and ten broad, put together with neatness, the corners rectangular and the sides perpendicular; the inside perfectly clean and free from dust or mould. The urn was four inches deep, swelling in the middle, and contracting at both ends."

UNIVERSITY EVENTS

ABERDEEN.—At the graduation ceremony held on July 6, the honorary degree of LL.D. was conferred on Prof. C. L. Burt, professor of psychology in the University of London, and on Prof. A. Low, professor of anatomy in the University of Aberdeen from 1925 until 1938.

The degree of D.Sc. was conferred on Dr. J. Farquharson, for a thesis entitled "Magnetism and Polymerisation"; L. C. Snook, for a thesis entitled "The Effect of Diet on Ketonemia and Pregnancy Disease in Breeding Ewes"; and on H. Waring, for a thesis entitled "The Relation of the Pituitary Gland to the Chromatic Function of Fishes" (*in absentia*).

ST. ANDREWS.—The degree of M.A. *ad eundem gradum* has been conferred on Dr. E. Finlay Frounlich, Napier lecturer in astronomy. The degree of D.Sc. has been awarded to Dr. J. D. Robertson for a thesis entitled "The Nature and Movements of Interstitial Fluids and Aqueous Humour"

Dr. F. L. Arnot, whose work on ionization in gases has been approved for the degree of Sc.D. by the University of Cambridge, has resigned his post as lecturer in natural philosophy in the United College, having been appointed to a lectureship in his old University of Sydney, New South Wales.