The Measure of the World

A Technical History of the Royal Observatory

A comprehensive 25-chapter technical history of the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, from its founding in 1675 through the 19th century. The book integrates narrative history, mathematical exposition, and instrument analysis, treating precision as a practical achievement built from instruments, mathematics, and institutional habit.

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For those who built precision
by hand, by habit, and by refusal to guess.

Contents

Chapter 1
The Deadly Ignorance of Position

1.1 The Scilly Disaster: 22 October 1707

The fog rolled across the Atlantic with October's weight, thick as wool. HMS Association cut through black water, the flagship of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell, commanding the English fleet returning from Gibraltar after months of winter cruising against the French. The fleet had been at sea for weeks. The sailors' calculations, checked and rechecked against dead reckoning and the uncertain hints the stars provided on clear nights, put them safely west of the Scilly Isles—a good margin, or so they believed. The officers felt confident enough to press on toward home.

At eight o'clock in the evening, with no warning but the sound of breakers, the rocks rose up out of the darkness. Before anyone could shout orders, HMS Association struck the Western Rocks off Scilly with a noise like the world breaking. The flagship went down at once. Within minutes, Eagle, Romney, and Firebrand struck nearby reefs. The sea boiled white around the wrecks as the ships broke apart on stone, the men struggling in water too cold to permit survival for more than minutes. Between fourteen and twenty-two hundred men died that night—officers and ordinary sailors indistinguishable in the violence of water and rock.

By morning the cries had stopped. Bodies washed onto the black sand beaches. Among them was Shovell himself, so waterlogged that identification took hours, and was confirmed only when local women recognized his ring. The fleet that had fought the French returned home as wreckage scattered across an archipelago of rocks the commander had believed lay far behind.

The court of inquiry that followed was bitter and useless. The officers swore they had computed their position carefully. The navigators swore they had done the mathematics correctly. Nobody had committed an obvious, detectable error. And yet the fleet had been, by modern reckoning, more than 40 nm off course in a direction that put them precisely where the rocks lay waiting. That error—that invisible, undetectable, geometrically blameless error—had killed thousands.

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1.2 What Is Longitude?

The problem is elementary in principle, impossible in practice. The Earth is a sphere, and any position on its surface requires two coordinates: one north and south, one east and west. The first is latitude. The second is longitude.

1.2.1 Latitude: The Celestial Measure

Latitude is the angle from the equator toward the poles, measured in degrees. And here the geometry cooperates with the navigator. Stand anywhere on Earth and look toward the celestial pole—south if you are in the Southern Hemisphere, north if you are in the north. The altitude of that pole above the horizon, measured in degrees, is your latitude.

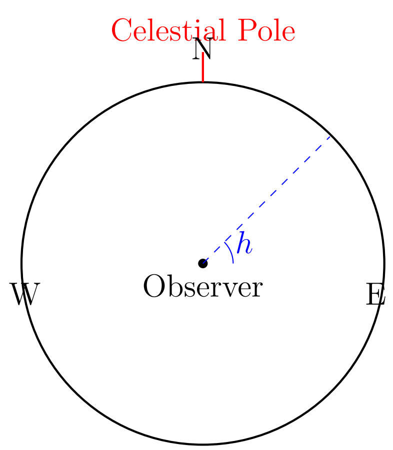

Figure 1.1: Celestial pole altitude equals observer's latitude. At the equator the pole is at the horizon ($h = 0°$); at the North Pole it is overhead ($h = 90°$).

In practice, the true celestial pole is not marked by any bright star. But *Polaris*, the north star, lies within one degree of it, a small enough error that a careful observation can yield latitude accurate to within a degree—the width of the full moon in the sky. Other methods exist. At noon, the Sun reaches its maximum altitude above the horizon. Measure that altitude, and know the Sun's declination (its angular distance north or south of the celestial equator) from the ephemeris, and latitude follows from simple geometry:

$$\phi = \delta + (90^\circ - h)$$

where ϕ is latitude, δ is solar declination, and h is observed altitude. A careful observer with a good instrument can achieve the same degree of precision with the Sun that they achieve with Polaris.

This is the reason medieval and ancient navigators could determine latitude. The geometry of spherical astronomy cooperates. The celestial poles mark the axis of the Earth's rotation; the observer stands on a rotated coordinate system, and that system writes its angle onto the sky.

1.2.2 Longitude: The Hidden Coordinate

Longitude is the angle east or west from an arbitrary reference meridian—today the meridian passing through Greenwich, but in the seventeenth century, no single reference existed. The fundamental problem is this: longitude has no corresponding celestial marker. No star or planet sits directly over the Prime Meridian. The sky looks the same to an observer in London and an observer in Gibraltar, except for the time at which the stars rise and set.

And here is the essential insight that unlocks the whole problem: **the difference in longitude between two places equals the difference in the local time, converted to angle.**

If two observers on Earth are separated by one hour of local solar time, they stand on different meridians that are separated by 15 degrees of longitude. This is because the Earth rotates 360 degrees in 24 hours, or 15 degrees per hour. If you know the time at Greenwich, and you know your local time (which you can determine from the Sun's altitude), the difference between them, multiplied by 15 degrees per hour, gives your longitude.

$$\lambda_{\text{observer}} - \lambda_{\text{reference}} = \Delta t \times 15\,^\circ\,\mathrm{h}^{-1}$$

But here is where the symmetry breaks: determining local time is straightforward.

Determining the time at the reference meridian, while standing in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, is not.

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1.3 The Navigator's Problem

When no absolute time reference is available, the only tool the navigator possessed was *dead reckoning*—a calculation based on measured direction and estimated speed over elapsed time. It is a simple idea, and a relentlessly accumulating nightmare.

Each watch, the officer on deck estimates the ship's speed by dropping a wooden chip attached to a knotted rope into the water ahead and measuring how many knots pass through his hand in a given time (the *chip log*). He notes the direction from the magnetic compass. The heading and the estimated speed are recorded in the ship's log. When summed over hours and days, these estimates become the ship's position.

$$\text{longitude}_{\text{new}} = \text{longitude}_{\text{old}} + \int_0^t v(\tau)\cos(\theta(\tau))\,d\tau$$

$$\text{latitude}_{\text{new}} = \text{latitude}_{\text{old}} + \int_0^t v(\tau)\sin(\theta(\tau))\,d\tau$$

where v is estimated speed and θ is compass heading.

The mathematics is correct. The execution is catastrophic. The chip log is crude. Speed estimates may be off by 20 percent. The magnetic compass varies in its declination (the angle between magnetic north and true north) in ways that are not fully predictable. The current is invisible and unknown. A ship sailing through fog for days accumulates errors that grow in all directions at once, magnifying and interacting.

A difference of one degree of longitude at the latitude of the English Channel corresponds to about 40 nm—the distance between safe harbor and a reef. A crew can be in error by that much and not know it until the land appears in the wrong place, or the ship strikes rock.

Table 1.1: Cumulative error in dead reckoning: a transatlantic crossing.

Days at Sea	Estimated Error (nm)	Compass Direction
5	10–15	Random
10	25–40	Systematically westward
20	60–100	Westward
30	100–150	Westward
40 (typical Atlantic)	150–200+	Westward

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1.4 A Catalog of Disaster

The Scilly disaster did not appear from nowhere. It was the culmination of a long history of wrecks and losses, each attributable to the same invisible enemy: the impossibility of knowing where you were when the horizon had vanished.

1. **1591, the São Thomé.** Portuguese galleon en route to India struck and sank near Sumatra. The crew believed themselves to be 600 nautical miles to the east. The ship carried 944 people; fewer than 200 survived. The survivors were enslaved by local peoples.
2. **1615, the Eendracht.** Dutch East Indiaman, separated from her convoy, made unexpected landfall on the coast of Western Australia in the Indian Ocean's eastern reaches. The ship was lost, but the accidental discovery added a continent to European geography.
3. **1656, the Tryall.** English East Indiaman struck rocks off Western Australia, also having misjudged her longitude severely. Forty men survived on a desolate island; only a handful were ever rescued.
4. **1691.** A squadron of English ships, attempting to make port at Plymouth in fog, struck rocks near the English coast. Five ships lost; the incident provoked outrage.
5. **1707, the Scilly Disaster.** HMS Association, Eagle, Romney, and Firebrand, with Admiral Shovell commanding the fleet. Twenty-two hundred dead. The court of inquiry concluded that no one was obviously at fault.

Each loss was, by the standards of the time, inexplicable and blameless. The officers had followed procedures. The calculations had been correct. The instruments had been as good as the age could provide. And yet the ships had gone down anyway, leaving the maritime powers of Europe staring at a problem that appeared to be unsolvable with the tools at hand.

The loss of the ASSOCIATION was the final argument in a long case that had been building for a century. The economic cost was staggering: lost ships meant lost cargoes, lost naval power, lost lives among crews who were already the most disposable resource in the empire. The strategic cost was worse. Any nation that could solve the longitude problem would own the oceans.

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1.5 The Political Response

Pressure had been building for decades. In 1714, the Parliament of Great Britain passed the Longitude Act, offering a prize of £20,000—a sum equivalent to the cost of a large warship, or the annual salary of thousands of working people—to anyone who could devise a method of determining longitude at sea to within 30 nm.

The immediacy of the act, and its size, reflected the desperation of the moment. The Scilly disaster, little more than half a decade past, was fresh enough that the grief and anger were still raw. The maritime losses of the previous century had accumulated into a political consensus: something had to be done.

Two competing visions emerged immediately. The astronomers believed the answer lay in the heavens—that careful observation of the Moon's motion against the stars, or the periods of Jupiter's moons, could provide a time signal that would propagate across the ocean in the form of ephemerides and tables. The clockmakers believed the answer lay in the machine—that a sufficiently accurate clock could be carried aboard a ship and would keep London time, even in the midst of salt spray and the ship's violent motion.

The Royal Observatory at Greenwich, founded in 1675—forty years earlier—had been established in part to prepare the ground for astronomical solutions. The observations that would enable lunar distance tables were only just beginning to accumulate. And the battle between the two schools—the astronomers and the mechanical philosophers—would consume the next century.

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1.6 Forward to the Solutions

The rest of this narrative concerns how these two visions competed, how experiments were conducted and often failed, how precision was driven upward by relentless pressure, and how the problem was not solved by one method but, in the end, by both. The astronomers would contribute methods of genuine utility, refined over decades into the lunar distance technique. The clockmakers would produce instruments of extraordinary accuracy, eventually creating the marine chronometer that made longitude determination as routine as any other celestial navigation.

But the story begins not with solutions, but with the ground prepared. **??** describes the instruments and measurements available to the navigators and astronomers of the late seventeenth century—the precision ceilings they faced, the theoretical knowledge they possessed, the techniques they had refined. It is the foundation on which everything that follows rests.

Chapter 2
The State of the Art in 1675

2.1 The Instrument Maker's Workshop: London, Circa 1670

In a narrow shop on Cornhill or in Fetter Lane, a brass worker bent over a quadrant in the making. The metal curved in a perfect quarter-circle, its outer edge marked with a scale of degrees. The craftsman's tools were ancient: a ruler, a divider, a fine burin for engraving. His task was to divide the ninety degrees into smaller units—not all the way to minutes, mind you, but to enough subdivisions that a careful observer could read between the lines. The human eye, guided by steady hands and a lifetime of practice, was the measure of all instruments.

This was the state of the art in 1675, when John Flamsteed would establish the Observatory at Greenwich. No telescope yet aimed at the sky for precise measurement. No mechanical vernier scale. No screw micrometer. The best instruments the world could produce were the work of patient craftsmen—men like Henry Sutton or Walter Hayes—who combined ancient geometry with Renaissance precision and an almost monastic devotion to accuracy.

The ships were still lost. The navigation was still blind. And yet the instruments existed that could, in theory, provide the answer. The barrier was not knowledge but precision: the ceiling imposed by the hand with a burin and the eye with a naked pupil.

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2.2 Instruments for Finding Latitude

If the problem of longitude was hard, latitude's solution was almost elegant. The celestial pole marks the Earth's rotation axis, and its altitude above the horizon equals the observer's latitude. A navigator needed only to measure one angle.

2.2.1 The Astrolabe

The astrolabe was ancient technology, perfected in the Islamic Golden Age and transmitted to Europe through Al-Andalus in the medieval period. It was a disk of brass, beautifully engraved, projecting the celestial sphere onto a flat plate using stereographic projection. The projection was ingenious: it preserved angles, so that the celestial equator, the ecliptic, and the star positions could all be drawn accurately on the flat surface. An observer could hold the astrolabe at arm's length, sight along the alidade (a rotating ruler), and read the altitude of a star from a scale around the rim.

The principle was sound. The execution was limited. The engraved scales could not be divided more finely than the eye could read them—roughly to a degree, perhaps better in the hands of a master. More fundamentally, the astrolabe was delicate. The moving parts could jam. The projection introduced distortion near the poles. And the whole device, held aloft by the observer's hand, introduced motion and vibration that added its own error.

For all these reasons, by 1675, the astrolabe was becoming obsolete for serious observation. It remained a navigator's tool, valuable enough for rough determination of latitude, but its precision—perhaps a degree in untrained hands, half a degree in practiced ones—was insufficient for the astronomical work Flamsteed would undertake.

2.2.2 The Cross-Staff and Backstaff

Where the astrolabe measured angles with an engraved scale, simpler instruments used geometry. The cross-staff, or JACOB'S STAFF, was nothing more than a wooden rod with a movable crosspiece at right angles. The observer would hold it at arm's length, position the crosspiece so that one end aligned with the horizon and the other with the Sun or a star, and then read the angle from the divisions marked along the rod.

The geometry was pure similar triangles. If the rod was held at a fixed distance from the eye, and the crosspiece was moved until its ends aligned with the two celestial objects, the angle between them could be read directly.

The problem was obvious: to measure the Sun's altitude, the observer had to stare into the Sun. John Davis's 1594 improvement, the *backstaff*, solved this by working backward. The observer faced away from the Sun, using a shadow to fix the Sun's position while sighting a star or the horizon ahead. The geometry was more complex, requiring both a fore-staff and an aft-staff, but the result was a practicable method that protected the observer's eyes and, more importantly, improved accuracy.

By the 1670s, the backstaff was standard equipment aboard English ships. A skilled observer could achieve an accuracy of perhaps half a degree. It was simple, robust, and required no tools for repair at sea. For navigation, it was adequate.

2.2.3 The Quadrant and the Vernier Scale

For astronomical observation, the quadrant was the workhorse. It was a quarter-circle of wood or brass, its arc divided into ninety degrees and subdivided into smaller increments. The observer would sight along one arm, align the other with a star or the Sun's limb, and read the angle from the graduated scale.

The precision of the quadrant depended entirely on the fineness of the divisions. A quadrant divided to the nearest degree gave precision of $\pm 0.5°$. If the divisions could be made ten times finer—to one-tenth of a degree, or six arc-minutes—the precision might improve tenfold.

But the hand could only cut so fine. A division smaller than half a millimeter was nearly invisible to the naked eye. A craftsman working with a burin could produce divisions accurate to perhaps one-tenth of a millimeter, sufficient for about one arc-minute—the angular width of a grain of wheat held at arm's length.

The vernier scale, invented in 1631, offered a mechanical solution. It used two scales offset slightly from each other. The main scale was divided into larger units; a secondary scale, the vernier, had its divisions slightly compressed. By finding which mark on the vernier aligned with a mark on the main scale, an observer could read to a fraction of the main division. A good vernier could extend the readable precision of a quadrant to five or ten arc-seconds.

By 1675, vernier scales were known, but not yet universal. Tycho Brahe had built instruments that could read to perhaps a minute of arc. The best work was limited by the sharpness of the engraved lines and the resolving power of the human eye.

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2.3 The Astronomer's Toolkit: What Existed

By the time the Observatory was founded, the celestial map was crude. Tycho Brahe, working in the late sixteenth century at his private observatory Uraniborg on the island of Hven, had created a star catalog of roughly one thousand bright stars, determining their positions with unprecedented care. His great mural quadrant, mounted on the wall of his instrument room, could read to about one arc-minute—extraordinary precision for naked-eye work.

But Tycho's catalog, compiled from observations spanning decades and published posthumously, was already thirty years in the past when Flamsteed arrived at Greenwich. More fundamentally, it was incomplete. The Southern Hemisphere was nearly blank. The positions of the brighter stars were known to perhaps one to two arc-minutes, which was often sufficient for navigation but inadequate for testing gravitational theories or predicting planetary motions with precision.

2.3.1 The Telescope's Arrival

The telescope, invented in 1608, changed the rules. Suddenly, the eye could see fainter stars, could measure the positions of Jupiter's moons with greater certainty, could resolve the disk of Saturn. But the telescope introduced its own errors. The lens introduced chromatic aberration. The narrow field of view made finding a star difficult. The motion of the observer's hand or the vibration of the instrument could introduce errors larger than the improvements the magnification provided.

Most critically, the telescope could measure angles no better than a well-made quadrant when the measuring device was used properly. The tube itself had no graduations; the observer still had to use an external measuring instrument or a reticle to determine the angular position.

2.3.2 Clock Technology and the Pendulum

For timekeeping, the best instruments before 1656 were foliot escapements—verge-and-foliot mechanisms that regulated the motion of a falling weight. They were crude by later standards, with errors of fifteen minutes or more per day. In 1656, Christiaan Huygens invented the pendulum clock, and accuracy improved by orders of magnitude.

The pendulum's period of oscillation depends only on its length and gravitational acceleration, not on its amplitude (for small angles). This made it nearly isochronous—each swing took the same time. Coupled with an escapement mechanism, a well-made pendulum clock could keep time to within ten or twenty seconds per day.

This was revolutionary for land-based astronomy. Flamsteed would use pendulum clocks to time his observations, to verify the motions of the stars, to test gravitational theories. The precision they offered transformed observational astronomy.

But there was a catch: they failed at sea. The motion of the ship, the vibration of the hull, the tilt of the deck—all of these disrupted the pendulum's regular swing. A pendulum clock aboard ship would lose minutes per hour, sometimes more. This is why the longitude problem could not be solved by simply putting an accurate clock in a ship and comparing it with time at a reference meridian.

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2.4 The Gap Between Need and Capability

By 1675, the demands of navigation and astronomy had begun to outpace the capabilities of instruments. This gap would define the next hundred years.

2.4.1 Latitude Determination

For navigation, the determination of latitude was reliable. A backstaff could measure the altitude of the Sun or a star to within half a degree or better. This translated to a position error of perhaps 30 nm at the equator, narrowing toward the poles. This was often adequate for warning of danger.

For astronomy, the requirements were stricter. Tycho's star catalog had positioned stars to within a minute or two of arc. Flamsteed's mission at Greenwich was to improve on this—to catalog the brighter stars to a precision of perhaps thirty arc-seconds, and to verify Tycho's positions for accuracy.

To achieve this precision, an instrument needed to read reliably to a few arc-seconds. This required either a vernier scale of exceptional finesse, or a micrometer screw that could be turned to track a star as it moved.

2.4.2 Longitude by Lunar Distance

For longitude by lunar distance, the precision requirements were extreme. The method depended on measuring the angular distance between the Moon and a known star with high precision, then looking up the time from a table. The tables came from theory and calculation, based on precise knowledge of the Moon's orbital position and the star positions.

If a star's position was uncertain to one arc-minute, this introduced an uncertainty of roughly one minute of time in the calculated longitude—equivalent to a fifteen-minute error in the final answer. At the latitude of Greenwich, this was a position error of several miles. For a ship at sea, this was marginal.

To make lunar distance reliable, the star positions needed to be known to better than thirty arc-seconds. This meant instruments that could read to better than thirty arc-seconds, and even then, observer error would introduce additional uncertainty.

The existing catalogs fell far short. Tycho's stars were good to a minute or two; some positions, especially of faint stars, were uncertain by several minutes. The gap between what the Moon's motion method needed and what the existing data could provide was a major obstacle.

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2.5 Precision and the Measuring Hand

All of this precision depended on the same bottleneck: the engraved scale and the human eye. A division finer than half a millimeter could not be seen. A line thinner than the eye's resolving power blurred into ambiguity.

This is why Flamsteed's great achievement would not be a new instrument, but a new method: the mural circle and the micrometer. By fixing an instrument in the meridian plane and using a telescope with a reticle to track a star, he could eliminate many sources of error. By using a micrometer screw to measure the small distances the eyepiece image moved as a star passed through the field, he could measure angles to precision hitherto unachieved.

But that lay ahead. In 1675, the best instruments the world could produce were the work of patient craftsmen, their precision limited by hand and eye, their capability sufficient for navigation but not yet adequate for the precision science that was emerging.

Table 2.1: Precision of navigational and astronomical instruments, circa 1675.

Instrument	**Precision**	**Notes**
Astrolabe	$\pm 30'$	Best case; scale limited
Cross-staff	$\pm 20'$	Trained hands
Backstaff	$\pm 15'$	Standard at sea
Quadrant	$\pm 5'$	Tycho-level
Quadrant+vernier	$\pm 30''$	Rare & difficult
Pendulum clock	±10s	Land only
Foliot clock	±15m	Pre-pendulum

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2.6 Forward to Methods and Instruments

The precision ceiling of 1675—perhaps a minute of arc with the best available instruments—was a reflection of the fundamental limits of hand-made scales and naked-eye observation. Within a few years, Flamsteed would push against this limit, designing new instruments and developing new methods. The quadrant with a micrometer eyepiece would emerge as the first truly modern astronomical instrument, capable of precision approaching ten arc-seconds.

But even that would not be enough. The next chapter describes the founding of the Observatory itself and the instruments Flamsteed began with. It is a story of ambition constrained by budget, of royal patronage competing with the persistent realities of craftsmanship and cost. **??** takes us to Greenwich, where the real work began.

Chapter 3
Chapter Title

Chapter 4
Chapter Title

Chapter 5
Chapter Title

Chapter 6
Chapter Title

Chapter 7
Chapter Title

Chapter 8
Chapter Title

Chapter 9
Chapter Title

Chapter 10
Chapter Title

Chapter 11
Chapter Title

Chapter 12
Chapter Title

Chapter 13
Chapter Title

Chapter 14
Chapter Title

Chapter 15
Chapter Title

Chapter 16
Chapter Title

Chapter 17
Chapter Title

Chapter 18
Chapter Title

Chapter 19
Chapter Title

Chapter 20
Chapter Title

Chapter 21
Chapter Title

Chapter 22
Chapter Title

Chapter 23
Chapter Title

Chapter 24
Chapter Title

Chapter 25
Chapter Title

Appendices

Appendix A
Appendix Title

Appendix B
Appendix Title

Appendix C
Appendix Title

Appendix D
Appendix Title

Appendix E
Appendix Title

Appendix F
Appendix Title