

THE HERSCHEL KNIGHTHOODS: FACTS AND FICTION

ANDREW HANHAM and MICHAEL HOSKIN

William Herschel is revered as a pioneer of modern astronomy, and he is universally known as “Sir William” on the basis that he was accorded a British knighthood towards the end of his life. From then and up to the present day, publications have referred to him as “Sir William Herschel”. These include the many accounts of his life and work, which almost invariably mention that a knighthood was bestowed on him by the Prince Regent (later George IV) in 1816. Not surprisingly, a host of bibliographical guides, library catalogues and indexes of all descriptions and in all locations have followed suit and prefixed Herschel’s name with the knightly title of ‘Sir’.

Intriguingly, however, there is nothing in the formal record to indicate that Herschel was ever in fact the recipient of a knighthood, and so he was never officially “Sir William”. This article sets out to explore the highly unusual circumstances in which Herschel acquired the title upon his appointment by the Regent as a “knight of the Royal Guelphic Order”, and will show that it lacked any official or formal basis: with very few exceptions it has been widely though incorrectly assumed that Herschel derived the title of ‘Sir’ as a matter of form from his Guelphic knighthood. We also reveal the effects of this misunderstanding within his immediate family, and the problems this created for William Herschel’s son John when the latter was offered the same honour in 1831.

I

William Herschel’s first association with, and eventual settlement in Britain came about as a result of his family’s residence in the north German state or ‘electorate’ of Brunswick-Luneburg (usually known as Hanover after its capital city), which since 1714 had enjoyed a close royal relationship with Great Britain.¹ Due to the failure of the Stuart line the British throne had passed in that year to the house of Hanover, thus forming a royal ‘personal union’ that would last until 1837.² Throughout this time Britain’s kings continued simultaneously to rule their Hanoverian domains, though in constitutional terms the two states and their governments remained entirely separate and distinct. Strong social and cultural links between the two states were nevertheless exemplified by those such as William Herschel who chose to settle and find employment in Britain. Herschel’s first acquaintanceship with Britain had occurred while serving as a young bandsman in one of the regiments of the Hanoverian army.³ By about 1759 he had decided to settle permanently in Britain which he esteemed as the ideal country where he could exploit his gifts as a musician, aware of the “encouragement given to music in England”.⁴

As is well known, Herschel eventually moved to Bath in 1766 where he achieved fame, first as a musician and composer, and latterly and more widely as an amateur

astronomer. His discovery in 1781 of the planet we now know as Uranus brought him to the attention of the King, George III, who in 1782 appointed him as astronomer to the British court at Windsor with a pension of £200. Sometimes at the Castle, but more usually in his own home, Herschel would when asked demonstrate the heavens to the Royal Family and their guests.

In 1793 Herschel petitioned for, and obtained, a private Act of Parliament naturalizing him as a British subject.⁵ We can only speculate what may have prompted this move. His autobiographical notes⁶ end before this time, and his sister Caroline, the chronicler of the family and her brother's assistant in astronomy, destroyed her records for this period. In 1788 Herschel had married Mary Pitt, the widow of a wealthy merchant and neighbour (and the daughter of his landlady). After the birth of their son John in 1792, it may have seemed incongruous that whereas the infant had been born on British soil and was therefore in the eyes of the law a British subject, William was still technically a foreigner (albeit a subject of the British king in his capacity as elector of Hanover). Yet naturalization also cleared another significant obstacle. Herschel's reputation as an astronomer and telescope-builder had by this stage reached international proportions, and recognition in the form of a knighthood, or even a baronetcy⁷ — such as had been bestowed on Herschel's great friend and fellow scientist Sir Joseph Banks — must almost certainly have at some point arisen in Herschel's mind, and had perhaps been mooted as a possibility among the King's political advisers. But as long as Herschel remained a foreign subject, no such action could be contemplated.

As the conferment of honours was ultimately a matter for the King's own discretion, it was perhaps to Herschel's disadvantage that his relations with his royal patron had not run smoothly. In 1787, two years after having persuaded the King to fund a monster 40-ft reflector with a grant of £2000, mounting expense had forced Herschel to seek a further similar sum. An angry confrontation had then occurred between the frugal monarch and his profligate astronomer that had left Herschel shocked and resentful — and, one assumes, which had left any hopes he had entertained of a knighthood in tatters.⁸ The issue was soon resolved, and Herschel was given the money he needed, but his relations with the King never resumed their previous friendly informality.

In 1793, George III, in signifying his Royal Assent to Herschel's naturalization Act, would have known that the barrier that had stood in the way of Herschel's receiving a British knighthood was now removed. But the King evidently felt he had done enough for him. By this time it would have been plain to the King — and might well have been a matter of some considerable embarrassment to him — that the giant but cumbersome 40-ft reflector that he had so generously funded was unlikely to yield the discoveries widely expected of it, and had become a disappointing failure.

II

Official recognition of Herschel's work and achievements finally came to him in 1816, by which time he was in his late seventies and in poor health. In the intervening

years he had continued his astronomical researches, and he had frequently undertaken commissions from those both at home and abroad who wished to purchase telescopic instruments (though these were never as large as his 40-ft reflector which had become more of a sight-seeing attraction than an instrument of any real use).

The King had succumbed to permanent madness in 1811 and his royal duties were now performed by his eldest son George, the Prince Regent. Herschel continued on friendly terms with members of the British royal family, and as astronomer to the court at Windsor he was frequently obliged to play host to visiting foreign royalty, eager to meet him and watch him demonstrate his telescopes. During the peace celebrations of 1814 these visitors had included the tsar of Russia and his sister, and at the beginning of 1816 two brothers of the emperor of Austria.⁹ The favourable accounts that would have reached the Regent from such distinguished guests undoubtedly made a significant impression, and helped to underline Herschel's pre-eminence as one of Europe's great men of modern science.

On 22 March 1816 it was announced from Hanover that the Prince Regent had appointed Herschel as a "knight of the Royal Guelphic Order".¹⁰ The Regent, acting in the name of his father George III, had recently established this order of knighthood as a Hanoverian rather than a British honour.¹¹ It was administered by the Hanoverian state, and no part in it was played by the British government.¹² At the Congress of Vienna of 1814, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Hanover had been raised to the status of a kingdom and the Order had been founded the following year as a necessary accompaniment to its elevated rank among the post-Napoleonic states of Germany. (In 1803 the then electorate had been overrun by French troops who remained in occupation until their expulsion in 1813.) There was thus a pressing need to establish a means of rewarding Hanoverian subjects who had rendered distinguished services during these difficult years, and in particular the officers of the King's German Legion, the expatriate Hanoverian regiments that had formed part of the British Army during the Napoleonic campaigns. The Guelphic Order, which took its name from 'Guelph', the old dynastic name of the house of Hanover, was also intended by the Regent as a reward to British subjects who had rendered important services to Hanover, or who had performed important personal services to himself, or who simply could not be provided for from Britain's own limited system of honours as it then was in the early nineteenth century.¹³

Since he was now a naturalized British subject, Herschel was a British appointee to the Guelphic Order, and thus from the Hanoverian perspective he was an *ausländer*, one of its foreign members. More accurately, he was appointed to the third class of the Order which carried the designation of 'knight'. The Guelphic Order, in common with many European orders of knighthood, was hierarchically structured allowing awards to be given for different levels of service. Guelphic knights were appointed to either the Order's military or civil divisions, and within each division were organized into three classes: a member of the first class was designated as a 'knight grand cross'; a member of the second class, as a 'knight commander'; and a member of the third class, as a 'knight'. Herschel was therefore at the lower end of

this pecking order. But since the first two classes were reserved exclusively for senior military and government personnel as laid down by the Order's statutes,¹⁴ there was no possibility that he, as a civilian and a scientist, might have been honoured with admission to a higher class. The Prince Regent had nevertheless accorded Herschel a unique distinction in selecting him to be the very first British 'knight' of his new Guelphic Order, an honour that also very appropriately paid tribute to Herschel's Hanoverian origin.

In her diary entry for 5 April 1816, Herschel's sister Caroline recorded laconically: "My brother received the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order."¹⁵ It is not clear whether this was the day on which Herschel received formal notification of the award, or on which he might, perhaps, have received the decoration through the post. He shortly afterwards received a summons to attend the Prince Regent at a levee on 14 May, which would have been either to be invested with his insignia by the Prince or to be congratulated by him on receiving the award. Before then, however, Herschel received a brief note (Figure 1) from Count Ernst von Münster introducing him to "two countrymen of ours", a visiting general and his brother who were eager to meet him.¹⁶

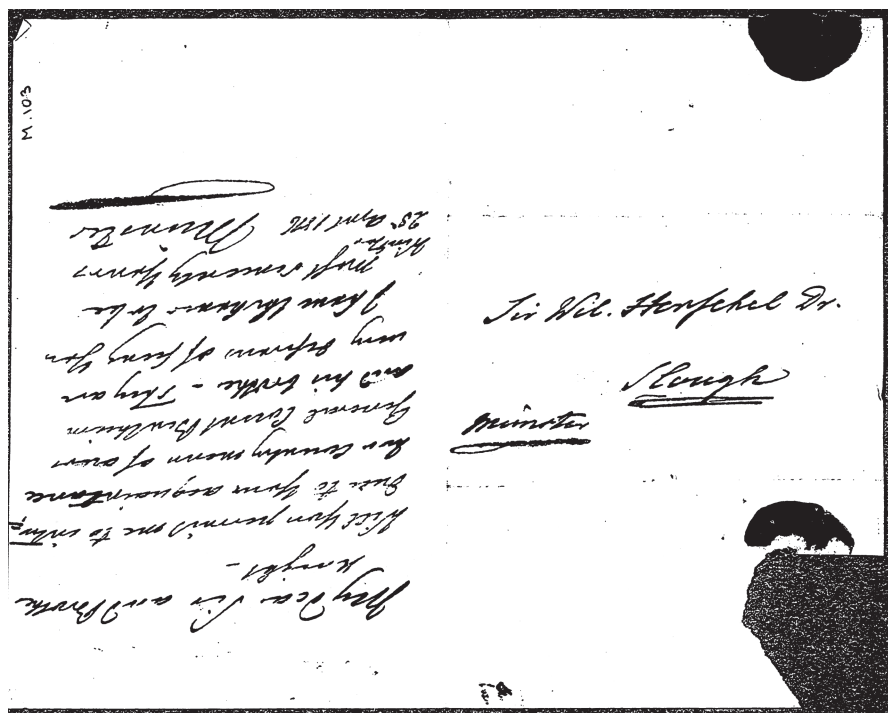


FIG. 1. The note from Count Münster to William Herschel written on 25 April 1816, only a month after Herschel's Guelphic award was gazetted in Hanover. He addresses Herschel as "Sir Wil. Herschel Dr.". RAS W.1/13.M.103, courtesy of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Münster was none other than Hanover's minister of state and minister resident in London, who, from his cramped offices at St James's Palace, had a considerable share in the administration of the Hanoverian kingdom. He had lately played a leading part in the establishment of the Guelphic Order in 1815 and had been appointed its 'chancellor'. In this role it was his particular duty to oversee the affairs of the Order and to advise the Regent on suitable appointments to it. He was a great friend and admirer of Herschel, and in a letter of 1813 spoke of "the pride I feel in calling you my countryman";¹⁷ the fact that Herschel was now a naturalized British subject did not seem to matter to Münster, who himself spent most of his time in Britain.

It is very likely that Münster had been instrumental in suggesting Herschel's name for the honour. In the brief note he penned to Herschel soon after the announcement in Hanover of the latest Guelphic awards, Münster addressed him cordially as "My dear Sir and Brother Knight", alluding to the fact that they now enjoyed a fraternal bond as members of the new Order. But when it came to writing Herschel's name on the outside cover, Münster wrote "Sir Wil. Herschel Dr.". Münster was doing no more than pen a brief note asking for a favour, and may not have given the matter much thought. But he was setting a precedent that has been followed ever since.¹⁸

There are two distinct reasons why Münster might have chosen to address Herschel by the title of 'Sir' in April 1816. The first concerns the fact that the Guelphic Order itself was as yet an entirely new distinction and that some of its ground rules had yet to be worked out. A particular problem concerned the status of British 'honorary' appointees to the Order. In 1813 the government had been forced to put a stop to the practice whereby British subjects receiving foreign honours frequently and incorrectly adopted the title of 'Sir', without having received the accolade of knighthood.¹⁹ Münster would have been especially mindful that the Guelphic Order stood in a somewhat anomalous category, since despite being instituted as a Hanoverian award, Hanover was ruled by the British sovereign, and in this context it was difficult to regard the Order strictly as foreign. Indeed, it would have been considered positively disrespectful to regard as 'foreign' a decoration bestowed by, and received from the hands of the Prince Regent. The fact that members of the Order's third class were designated as 'knights', which in Britain implied an association with the title 'Sir', might easily have led Münster to assume that British Guelphic recipients of that class would be accorded the knightly title as a matter of course.²⁰ It soon afterwards became the established norm for British appointees to the Order not to be knighted except in cases where it was an expressly desired royal wish.²¹ But at the time of Herschel's appointment in the spring of 1816, there may well have been a certain lack of clarity over Herschel's status and whether as a British third class 'knight' he should remain as "Dr Herschel" or become "Sir William". In adopting the latter, Münster took an option which, while it may have seemed correct at the time, later appeared incorrect in the light of subsequent practice.

The other possibility is that Münster may have improvised this gesture purely for Herschel's benefit alone, intending that he, as the first British 'knight' of the Order, should be accorded the title of 'Sir', and to have this extra honour as a special favour.

Whether he did so with the Regent's complicity cannot be known. But whatever Münster's motive, Herschel would only have been properly entitled to consider himself as a British knight if he had actually been knighted by the Regent.

On 14 May 1816, Herschel (Figure 2) duly attended the Prince Regent's levee at his London residence, Carlton House. Some 1,500 people were present, including members of the royal family, aristocracy, cabinet ministers, foreign ambassadors, and others, who had assembled to offer the Prince their congratulations on the recent marriage of his daughter, Princess Charlotte to Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg.²² At some point in these proceedings Herschel was presumably presented to the Prince, though *The Times* report of the levee is brief and lists only the principal guests. Had there been any intention to confer a knighthood on Herschel in the proper fashion, this would have been the likeliest moment for it. But though during the presentations the Regent bestowed knighthoods on six individuals whose names were afterwards published in the government's official journal, *The London Gazette*, they did not include Herschel.²³

Two days later, Herschel attended an even larger gathering of well over two thousand nobility and gentry hosted by the King's consort Queen Charlotte at Buckingham House.²⁴ By contrast, this event was fully reported in the press, and among the presentations it is noted that Herschel was received by the Queen who congratulated him "on being created a knight of the Guelphic Order". Not only is it mentioned that he was introduced by Count Münster, but it also cites him as "Sir Wm. Herschel", suggesting that this was the style by which he was announced and introduced to the Queen. This could hardly have been an invention of the newspapers, but must have been taken directly from written details provided by the lord chamberlain's office within the royal household to the newspapers' court correspondents. The clear implication, therefore, is that as far as the royal court was concerned — and indeed in the eyes of the general public who read this and similar reports in the press — the famous Dr Herschel was now "Sir William Herschel".

In the remaining six years of Herschel's life, however, there is no mention or even the slightest hint in any formal record that his admission to the Guelphic Order as a third class 'knight' was ever followed up with the bestowal of a British knighthood. One should not, of course, be blind to the possibility that Herschel may have been knighted between the announcement of his award and his appearances at court in May 1816, and that through some administrative oversight the occasion was never officially reported in *The London Gazette*, where the bestowals of all British honours were routinely recorded.²⁵ It is certainly possible, for instance, to find very occasional examples of knighthoods that somehow escaped inclusion in the *Gazette*.²⁶ There are also a few isolated examples of recipients of the Guelphic Order besides Herschel who though styled as 'Sir', were never 'gazetted' as having been knighted.

In Herschel's case, however, the possibility that he was the recipient of a knighthood that went unreported in the formal record of court events recedes in the light of decisive evidence from another quarter. For all his fame and success, Herschel

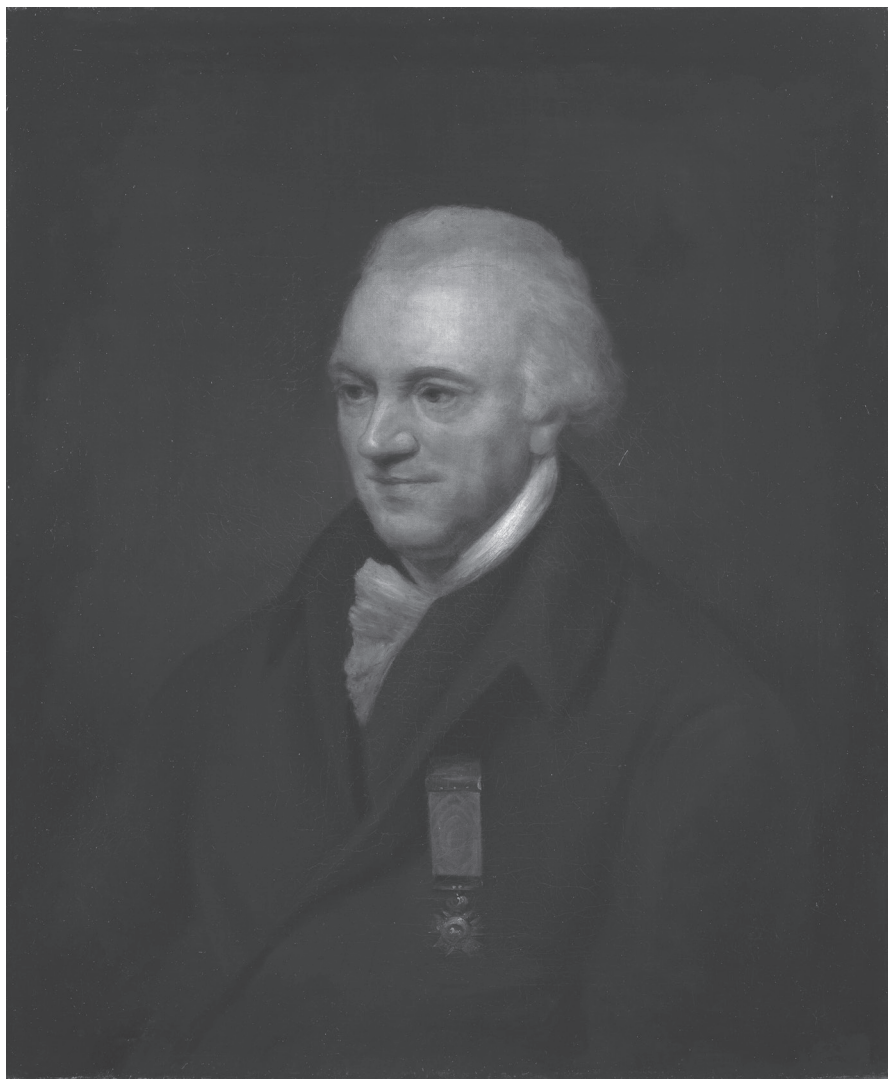


FIG. 2. The portrait of William Herschel painted in the summer of 1819 by William Artaud. It shows Herschel aged 81, wearing his Guelphic insignia. The original is in family possession, while this copy, which Caroline ordered for herself, is in the Royal Astronomical Society. Courtesy of the Royal Astronomical Society.

was ever-eager for honours and compliments, and these he detailed meticulously and in full in a chronologically arranged list that he compiled towards the end of his life.²⁷ The completeness of this list is underlined, for example, by the inclusion of all his memberships of scientific societies, both in Britain and on the continent. It also includes, against the year 1793, his naturalization by Act of Parliament. And against the date '4th April 1816' he duly records: "Appointed by His Royal Highness the Prince Regent to be a Knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order". It is quite inconceivable that he would have received a summons to be knighted by the Prince Regent, which would have been the greatest honour of his life, without mentioning it in this list. It is inconceivable, too, that his sister Caroline — always so meticulous in recording practically every aspect of her brother's life — would have made no mention of such an honour in her diary.

For the rest of his life Herschel styled himself as "Sir William", and his wife as "Lady Herschel" or as "Dame Mary Herschel".²⁸ At the head of each of his published papers his name was grandly displayed as "Sir William Herschel, Knt Guelph., LL.D., F.R.S.". Senior government officials, such as those who in 1820 approved and oversaw the drafting of a royal warrant to renew Herschel's pension from the crown,²⁹ were probably oblivious to the fact that he was not properly a knight of the realm (and were not prepared to plough through hundreds of pages of *The London Gazette* to check). There were a few others, such as Sir George Nayler, the herald at the College of Arms responsible for the Guelphic Order's heraldic arrangements, who were likely to have taken a more punctilious view, regarding Herschel's title in retrospect as a gentle *faux pas* by Count Münster which should not have happened, and had not been allowed to happen again.³⁰ At all events, by addressing him as "Sir William", Münster had in effect given Herschel reason to believe that he had the proper authority to consider himself a knight, and no-one thereafter had the heart to tell the venerable old man, the most famous astronomer in Europe, that in reality he was simply "Dr William Herschel, K.H." and that his wife was still "Mrs Herschel".

III

We do not know when William's son John realized the correct position, but it was probably before he composed the English version of his father's epitaph. The long Latin recitation of Herschel's achievements on the memorial above his burial place in Upton Church, near Slough, does not proclaim him as "eques" (knight), but more specifically as "eques Guelphicus" (knight of the Guelphic Order). John Herschel is unlikely to have overlooked a brief obituary notice to his father in *The Times* which spoke of "Dr Herschel".³¹ But he could hardly break the news to his mother that she was not in fact, nor ever had been, "Lady Herschel"; and to have told his aunt Caroline, now back in Hanover, that her revered brother was no more than "Dr Herschel" would have been an unforgivable cruelty. And so he wisely kept his own counsel. In 1828 he may well have encountered a newly published work entitled *Calendar of knights*, by the herald and genealogist Francis Townshend.³² As the author explained in his

preface, the huge recent outpouring of reference works on the British peerage and baronetage had almost entirely neglected the holders of knighthoods. Townshend's volume was therefore something of a novelty in providing an exhaustive listing of every knight created since the accession of George III in 1760. From its pages John Herschel would have gleaned further confirmation regarding the truth of his father's status. Not only was William Herschel omitted from Townshend's lengthy list of knights bachelor,³³ but by way of additional humiliation his name was also omitted from the list of third class knights of the Guelphic Order, suggesting that Townshend must have mistakenly assumed that Herschel had been a Hanoverian rather than British appointee to the Order.

In 1831, however, an unusual turn of events threatened to expose the truth about William Herschel's knighthood and upset the quiet ambience of the Herschel family circle. John Herschel's efforts to uphold the fiction of his father's knighthood for the benefit of his ailing mother and his aunt were suddenly put in danger of exposure, the prevention of which forced him to take extraordinary measures.

Lord Brougham, who as lord chancellor was a senior member of the reforming Whig administration that had replaced the unpopular Tory ministry the previous year, was well known as a friend to science and was keen to promote the status of science in Britain by honouring a number of its leading figures. Outside the sphere of government and military service it was exceedingly rare at this time for Britons to be rewarded with official honours, and both King William IV and the prime minister Lord Grey agreed that such recognition was well overdue. In order to fulfil Lord Brougham's initiative it was eventually decided that the only suitable honour that could be offered was the third class of the Guelphic Order, the very decoration (Figure 3) that had in 1816 been conferred on William Herschel. Since then the Order had been extensively used to reward government servants in both Hanover and Britain. And in Hanover — though never in Britain — it had been used occasionally to reward scientific, literary and intellectual achievement. In a new departure, however, early in October 1831, it was announced that seven eminent British scientists were each to receive the Guelphic Order, third class, of whom one was to be John Herschel who was being honoured for his work in astronomy.³⁴

Herschel had at first attempted to decline the Guelphic decoration. News of the offer was relayed to him in a letter dated 14 September 1831 from his friend William Somerville, the surgeon (and husband of the mathematician Mary Somerville), whom Brougham had asked to sound Herschel whether he would be willing to accept.³⁵ Herschel demurred, however, stating his preference to distance himself from the recent acrimony over the lack of honorific recognition for scientific achievement that had been stirred up in the periodical press, particularly by another of Brougham's intended recipients of the Guelphic Order, the mathematician Charles Babbage.³⁶ But there were also reasons of a very acute, personal nature that he could not possibly divulge. His acceptance of the Guelphic decoration — the same honour that his father "Sir William" had received — would leave him still plain "Mr Herschel, K.H.". Herschel would have been aware that it had long been the practice that awards



FIG. 3. The insignia of a civil knight (third class) of the Guelphic Order, still in the possession of the Herschel family. Since insignia were to be returned to the crown on the death of the holder, this particular Guelphic decoration is likely to have belonged to John rather than William, for by the time John died in 1871 the kingdom of Hanover had been absorbed into the Prussian kingdom and the Order had ceased to exist. Photograph by Cassie Herschel-Shorland, courtesy of John Herschel-Shorland.

of the third class or ‘knight’ of the Guelphic Order were *not* normally accompanied by a substantive knighthood. Yet his mother believed that her appellation of “Lady Herschel” was an entitlement directly related to her late husband’s Hanoverian decoration, and by the same token she would expect her son to become “Sir John”, as would John’s aunt Caroline.

Oblivious to this particular difficulty, Somerville pressed the matter, and told Herschel that he had little choice, since it was the wish, not only of Lord Brougham, the lord chancellor, but of the King himself.³⁷ Herschel acquiesced, declaring that he was “satisfied and encouraged by the proposed honour”, and would seek a suitable opportunity to thank Brougham in person.³⁸

In fact Herschel lost no time in doing so, as he had other business to transact with the lord chancellor. He had taken it upon himself to intercede with Brougham concerning a fellow Guelphic nominee, John Ivory, a celebrated mathematician, now

in ill-health and in straitened circumstances,³⁹ and much more in need of material financial support from the government than an honour. Very soon after the awards were publicly announced, Herschel visited Brougham with a view to obtaining the promise of a pension for Ivory, who was disposed to decline the award, believing it “unsuitable to my present circumstances”.⁴⁰

Brougham had already received one refusal, from Charles Babbage,⁴¹ and was understandably anxious to avoid the embarrassment of others, especially as all the Guelphic nominees were known to be sympathetic towards the Whig government. As part of their reforming image the Whig ministers were keen to promote themselves as natural patrons of scientific progress, which over the past few decades had been largely ignored by their Tory rivals when in power. Amid the political furore currently raging over parliamentary reform they could ill-afford to lose public face over one of their key principles.

Herschel found Brougham willing to promise a pension for Ivory. But it seems that Herschel may also have taken the occasion to raise the personal problem facing himself in relation to his father, and requested that his own Guelphic honour be accompanied by a substantive knighthood. Herschel might well have been able to soften Brougham by drawing attention to his own earlier reluctance to accept the award. Shortly afterwards, on 12 October, having already been appointed a “knight of the Guelphic Order”, Herschel attended a levee at St James’s Palace at which the King bestowed on him the accolade of knighthood (Figure 4).⁴²

Now properly knighted as “Sir John”, he could face his mother without the severe family repercussions that would otherwise have ensued. In writing to his aunt Caroline just three days later, Herschel was diplomatic, and carefully avoided mentioning the British knighthood he had just received, treating it as if his new title derived automatically from the Guelphic ‘knighthood’ (which, of course, it did not): “the King hath been graciously pleased to confer on your most obedient nephew the Guelphic order of knighthood as borne by my Father — henceforth address to me under the Epithet of Sir John and don’t forget to stick after my name the mysterious anagram K.G.H. which does not mean King of Hanover but Knight Guelph. Hanov.”⁴³

Lord Brougham’s problems concerning his scientific awards in 1831 were far from over, however. The confusion he caused to another of the Guelphic appointees, the Scottish mathematician and astronomer David Brewster, is significant for the additional light it casts on William Herschel’s situation. Shortly after receiving the insignia of his award, Brewster was “perplexed” when his old friend Charles Babbage told him of his own decision to decline it, saying that the Guelphic knighthood did not confer any title.⁴⁴ In his reply on 16 October, Brewster expressed difficulty in reconciling what Babbage had told him about the title with the fact that his insignia had been addressed to him under the lord chancellor’s authority as “Sir David”.⁴⁵ To make matters worse, as he pointed out to Babbage, the package’s journey through the Scottish postal system “announced to the public here that I had received a title, and this on the high authority of the Chancellor”.⁴⁶ He stressed, too, that the Scottish newspapers in reporting the award had also assumed that it carried with it the dignity

[2108]

From the Freeman and Inhabitants of the Town and Port of Dover, in the County of Kent, in Common-hall assembled.

From the Inhabitants of Leeds, in the County of York.

From the Inhabitants of the Town and Parish of Lochwinnoch, Renfrewshire, in public meeting assembled.

From the Incorporation of Barbers of the City of Glasgow.

From the Dean and Faculty of Procurators in Glasgow.

Whitehall, October 14, 1831.

THE following Addresses and Petitions—praying for Parliamentary Reform—expressing their feeling on the rejection of the Reform Bill—declaring their confidence in the King's Ministers—and praying His Majesty to exercise his prerogative of creating Peers—having been transmitted to the Right Honourable Viscount Melbourne, one of His Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State, were by him presented to His Majesty, who was pleased to receive the same very graciously:

From the Inhabitants of the Parish of St. Luke, Chelsea.

From the Inhabitants of Wingham, in the County of Kent.

From the Inhabitants of Tonbridge, in the County of Kent.

From the Magistrates, Town Council, and Inhabitants of the Burgh of Auchtermuchty, in the County of Fife.

From the Fellows, Burgesses, Merchants, Ship-owners, and Inhabitants of the Town of Peterhead, assembled in public general meeting.

From the Overseers of the Poor of the Old Artillery-ground, in the Liberty of the Tower of London, on behalf of themselves and other the Inhabitant Householdholders thereof, at a public meeting assembled.

From an Association at Kidderminster, signed by W. H. Regan, Chairman.

From an Association at Dudley, signed by Samuel Cook, Chairman, and Joseph Pitchfork, Secretary.

From an Association at Worcester, signed by the Committee, Joseph Meek, and others.

St. James's-Palace, October 12, 1831.

This day the Count St. Martin D'Aglé, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary from the King of Sardinia, had an audience of His Majesty to take leave *pro tempore*:

To which he was introduced by Lord Viscount Palmerston, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and conducted by Sir Robert Chester, Knt. Master of the Ceremonies.

St. James's-Palace, October 12, 1831.

The King was this day pleased to confer the honour of Knighthood upon Charles Bell, Esq.

F. R. S. Knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order.

St. James's-Palace, October 12, 1831.

The King was this day pleased to confer the honour of Knighthood upon George Head, Esq. Deputy Knight-Marshal of His Majesty's Household.

St. James's-Palace, October 12, 1831.

The King was this day pleased to confer the honour of Knighthood upon John Frederick William Herschel, of Slough, in the county of Buckingham, Esq. Master of Arts, and Knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order.

Commission signed by the Lord Lieutenant of the County of Suffolk.

John Lord Rendlesham to be Deputy Lieutenant.
Dated 30th September 1831.

Exchequer Bill Loan-Office, South Sea-House, London, October 4, 1831.

WHEREAS an Act has passed in the present session of Parliament, intitled "An Act to amend several Acts passed for authorising the issue of Exchequer Bills, and the advance of money, for carrying on public works and fisheries, and employment of the poor, and to authorise a further issue of Exchequer Bills for the purposes of the said Acts;"

Notice is hereby given, that applications, in writing, for loans under the said Acts, specifying the amount required, the purposes for which the same is applied for, and the security proposed, are to be addressed to William Holden, Esq. Secretary to the Commissioners constituted by the said Acts, at their Office as above.

NOTICE is hereby given, that application is intended to be made to Parliament in the next session, for an Act to alter, amend, and enlarge the powers and provisions of three several Acts; the first, passed in the thirty-third year of the reign of His late Majesty King George the Third, intitled "An Act for paving, lighting, cleansing, and otherwise improving the town of Ipswich, in the county of Suffolk, and for removing and preventing encroachments, obstructions, and annoyances therein;" the second, passed in the thirty-seventh year of the reign of His said Majesty King George the Third, intitled "An Act for amending and rendering more effectual an Act, passed in the thirty-third year of the reign of His present Majesty, for paving, lighting, cleansing, and otherwise improving the town of Ipswich, in the county of Suffolk, and for removing and preventing encroachments, obstructions, and annoyances therein;" and the third, passed in the fifty-fifth year of the reign of His said Majesty King George the Third, intitled "An Act for amending and enlarging the powers of two Acts

FIG. 4. The announcement from *The London Gazette*, 14 October 1831, 2108, of the (British) knight bachelorhood conferred by the King of the United Kingdom on John Herschel, as a result of which he became entitled to style himself "Sir John".

of ‘Sir’. He then referred to the case of William Herschel:

I believe Sir W. Herschel did not receive the ordinary knighthood, and yet he took the title. He always added Knt. Guelph which I think he would not have done if he had the common title also. I cannot understand either why the Guelphic Knighthood was given on the present occasion if the common knighthood is to be a necessary accompaniment of it.

The following day Brewster wrote directly to Brougham, asking him to clarify the situation.⁴⁷ Brougham had evidently made the same assumption as Count Münster had when William Herschel was appointed to the Guelphic Order in 1816. In Brougham’s case, however, the error was less forgivable as he should have known, as Babbage clearly did, that in accordance with what had become established practice the third class of the Order had long since been used as a non-knighthood award. Brougham took the only possible route out of this embarrassing muddle and arranged for Brewster to be properly knighted by the King, and for him to be exempted from the usual fees of £170 or so, which Brewster had been anxious above all to avoid.⁴⁸

IV

The bestowal of a substantive knighthood on John Herschel in 1831 has escaped the attention of students of his life and work, who have assumed that he had become entitled to the style of ‘Sir’ when he was admitted to the Guelphic Order. But it was, in fact, on “John Frederick William Herschel ... Esq. Master of Arts, and Knight of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order” that the King conferred “the honour of Knighthood” on 12 October 1831 (Figure 4).⁴⁹

Seven years later, on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s coronation, he was to become a baronet, and it is noteworthy that in his entry in the 1839 edition of *Burke’s peerage and baronetage*, the authoritative catalogue of the entire British titled élite, his father was cited as “Sir William Herschel”.⁵⁰ Although, in time, he might have chosen to correct this inaccuracy in later editions of Burke’s, particularly after the eventual death of his long-lived aunt Caroline in 1848, he did not do so. Having in the early stages of his own rise to prominence done so much to sustain the fiction of his father’s knighthood, in his busy later life it evidently proved far easier to allow that myth simply to perpetuate itself than to try to explain matters as they really had been.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Peter O’Donoghue, York Herald, and Robert Yorke, Archivist, at the College of Arms, and to officers of the Imperial Society of Knights Bachelor; and we thank James Bryan, Simon Mitton and Wolfgang Steinicke for visiting Herschel archives at our request. John Herschel-Shorland and his daughter Cassie were ever-helpful as always.

REFERENCES

1. Hanover belonged to the vast system of German states that comprised the Holy Roman Empire, and was an 'electorate' on account of the fact that its ruling prince, or 'elector', participated with eight other leading princes in the election of the holy roman emperor.
2. Queen Victoria succeeded to the British throne in 1837, but not in Hanover where the Salic Law, which governed the succession, prohibited a female from becoming ruler. The personal union therefore ended, and the two countries ceased to be linked by a single monarch. For several useful essays on the Anglo-Hanoverian connection, see B. Simms and T. Riotte, *The Hanoverian dimension in British history, 1714–1837* (Cambridge, 2007).
3. In 1756 Herschel's regiment was summoned to reinforce Britain against possible French invasion, but returned home in January 1757, only to be defeated at the Battle of Hastenbeck six months later. At his father's insistence the boy William deserted and fled to England, where he chose to remain even after the defeat of the French in 1759. Michael Hoskin, *The Herschels of Hanover* (Cambridge, 2007), 20–2.
4. Hoskin, *Herschels* (ref. 3), 22.
5. Statute 33 Geo. III (Private), c. 38.
6. Royal Astronomical Society Herschel archive (hereafter: RAS) W.7/8.
7. Banks had been created a baronet in 1781. The holder of a baronetcy was entitled to the prefix style of 'Sir', but unlike an ordinary knighthood, the title could be inherited by an elder son.
8. On this episode, see Michael Hoskin, "Herschel's 40ft reflector: Funding and functions", *Journal for the history of astronomy*, xxxiv (2003), 1–32.
9. Hoskin, *Herschels* (ref. 3), 68; *The Times*, 16 Jan. 1816, 2.
10. College of Arms, London, Ms 'Guelphic Order', f. 153, printed extract from Heinrich Schaedtler, *Kurze Beschreibung des Königlich Hannoverschen Guelphen-Ordens, nebst beigefügten Abbildungen, Ordens-Statuten und Ritter-Listen* (Hanover, 1816).
11. The Order is discussed in Andrew Hanham, "Regency knights: The Royal Guelphic Order, 1815–1837", *The Coat of Arms*, 3rd ser., iv (2008), 101–24.
12. During the reign of William IV (1830–37), however, the Order *did* become extensively used by the British government.
13. The Order was also variously known as the "Royal Hanoverian Order", as the "Order of the Guelphs", or, somewhat tautologically as the "Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order".
14. Johann Hieronymus Schroeter, known to historians of astronomy for the leading role he played in 1800 in organising a cooperative search for a planet between Mars and Jupiter, and an amateur observer with close links to Herschel, was appointed to the second class of the Order in July 1816 on account of his status as a provincial governor.
15. Mrs John Herschel, *Memoir and correspondence of Caroline Herschel*, 2nd edn (London, 1879), 125.
16. RAS W.1/13.M.103, Münster to Herschel, 25 Apr. 1816.
17. RAS W.1/13.M.102, Münster to Herschel, 23 Sept. 1813.
18. We do not know how Herschel was styled in the letter addressed to him announcing the award. The Sotheby's auction sale of Herschel papers in 1958 included in lot 473 the "diplomas" for his various honours and "the letter to him announcing his nomination as a Civil Knight of the Hanoverian Guelphic Order".
19. N. Carlisle, *A concise account of the several foreign orders of knighthood* (London, 1839), p. xxiii. A knighthood could only be bestowed by the king in person through the brief ceremony of knighting or 'dubbing' in which the knight-designate, kneeling before the monarch, was tapped by him on each shoulder with the flat edge of a sword.
20. This contrasted, however, with British practice in the Order of the Bath which, like the Guelphic Order, was a three-class order, though its third class members were designated not as 'knights' but as 'companions', and were not entitled to knighthood.
21. By the later 1820s, however, as many more British appointees joined the Order, it became customary for recipients of the first and second classes additionally to be knighted by the king (as ordinary

‘knights bachelor’), enabling them to use the title of ‘Sir’ (if they were not knights already); recipients of the third class were not knighted, however, unless the king specifically chose otherwise.

22. Caroline Herschel’s *Memoir* (ref. 15), 125; *The Times*, 15 May 1816.
23. *The London Gazette*, 21 May 1816.
24. *The Times*, 17 May 1816; *La belle assemblée, or Bell’s Court and fashionable magazine*, May 1816, 227. After he became King in 1820, the Prince Regent transformed Buckingham House, then a residence, into what is now Buckingham Palace.
25. There was certainly an opportunity as the Prince Regent had paid a brief visit to Windsor Castle during 9–10 April 1816 and could easily have summoned Herschel from nearby Slough to be dubbed a knight.
26. For example Anthony Carlisle, Surgeon Extraordinary to the King, was presented as “Mr. Carlisle” at a levee on 24 July 1821 (*The Times*, 26 July 1821) but was “Sir A. Carlisle” at a Drawing Room that shortly followed (*The Times*, 27 July 1821).
27. RAS W.7/9.
28. As he did, for example, in his will, dated 17 December 1818: The National Archives, PROB 11/1662/213.
29. RAS W.7/10.
30. Royal Society, Herschel Papers, HS 13.146, Nayler to John Herschel, 10 April 1818.
31. *The Times*, 6 Sept. 1822.
32. Francis Townshend, *Calendar of knights, containing lists of knights bachelors, British knights of foreign orders, also knights of the Garter; Thistle, Bath, St. Patrick and the Guelphic and Ionian orders, from 1760 to the present time* (London, 1828).
33. As a member of the College of Arms, Townshend had full access to the official lists of knights maintained at the College; see Townshend, *Calendar of knights*, pp. v–vii.
34. Besides Herschel, they were David Brewster (mathematician, physicist and astronomer), James Ivory (mathematician), John Leslie (mathematician and physicist), Charles Babbage (mathematician), Charles Konig (mineralogist and botanist), and Charles Bell (anatomist).
35. Royal Society, HS 16.392, Somerville to Herschel, 14 Sept. 1831.
36. Royal Society, HS 16.393, Herschel to Somerville, 16 Sept. 1831.
37. Royal Society, HS 16.395, Somerville to Herschel, 29 Sept. 1831.
38. Royal Society, HS 16.396, Herschel to Somerville, 30 Sept. 1831.
39. See Alex D. D. Craik, “James Ivory, F.R.S., mathematician: ‘The most unlucky person that ever existed’”, *Notes and records of the Royal Society of London*, liv (2000), 223–47.
40. Royal Society, HS 10.256, Ivory to Herschel, 14 Oct. 1831; University College London, Special Collections, Brougham Papers, HB 8614, Ivory to Brougham, 22 Oct. 1831. Cited by Craik, “James Ivory” (ref. 39), 238, 239. In 1842, in his obituary tribute to Ivory, the Marquess of Northampton, as President of the Royal Society, said of him: “In 1831, the Hanoverian Guelphic Order of Knighthood was conferred on him by King William IV, and it was intimated that he might also receive the British Knighthood, but this he declined, as the title would have been inconsistent with his circumstances.” *London, Edinburgh, and Dublin Philosophical Magazine*, 3rd ser., xxii (1843), Proceedings of Learned Societies: The Royal Society, Address of the President, Anniversary Meeting, 30 Nov. 1842, obituary of Mr. James Ivory, 142–8.
41. Babbage had viewed as an insult the offer of the lowest class of what he damned as a foreign Order, and had written to Brougham refusing the award on 23 Sept. (British Library, Additional Manuscripts 37186, f. 97: Babbage to Brougham (draft), 23 Sept. 1831). However, it reached Brougham too late to prevent publication of his name, which was gazetted in Hanover with the others in the *Hannoversche Nachrichten*.
42. *The London Gazette*, 14 Oct. 1831, 2108.
43. University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center, John Herschel collection, folder 25.5, John to Caroline Herschel, 15 Oct. 1831. Herschel’s own diary record of the occasion makes the same

- connection: "Went to the levee to be knighted K.G.H." Harry Ransom Center, John Herschel collection, folder 17.1, John Herschel's diary for 12 Oct. 1831.
44. British Library, Additional MSS 31786 (Babbage Papers), f. 114: Brewster to Babbage, 11 Oct. 1831; Brougham Papers, HB: 26612, Brewster to Brougham, 17 Oct. 1831.
 45. Brewster told Babbage that Brougham had also addressed his fellow Scot, John Leslie, as "Sir John". This would suggest that Brougham had in fact addressed all six of the new Guelphic knights by the style of "Sir" in his letters notifying them of their awards. Herschel, for his part, would have recognised at once that he could not legitimately assume the title without having been knighted by the King, or would otherwise find himself in the same awkward predicament as his father. Brougham may therefore have unwittingly given Herschel an effective pretext to expect a substantive knighthood.
 46. Additional MSS 31786, ff. 124–5: Brewster to Babbage, 16 Oct. 1831.
 47. Brougham Papers, HB: 26612, Brewster to Brougham, 17 Oct. 1831.
 48. Additional MSS 31786, f. 150: Brewster to Babbage, 17 Nov. 1831. See also, Margaret Gordon, *The home life of Sir David Brewster, by his daughter Mrs Gordon*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1870), 153. Brewster was accordingly knighted by the King on 8 Mar. 1832. It is possible that for similar reasons John Leslie was knighted on 26 June 1832. Charles Konig was not knighted, possibly because as a native of the German duchy of Brunswick he had not been naturalized as a British subject.
 49. *The London Gazette*, 14 October 1831, 2108. The title of 'Esq.' was a courtesy used until very recently in Britain when referring to adult males. "J. F. W. Herschel Esq." was the formal equivalent of "Mr Herschel". Charles Bell, John Leslie and the antiquarian Nicholas Harris Nicolas (who was nominated in the place of Babbage) were similarly styled 'Esq.' in *The London Gazette* when they received their knighthoods.
 50. J. Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic dictionary of the peerage and baronetage of the British Empire* (London, 1839), 528.