AHS London Lecture Thursday 15 March 2018

Katy Barrett, 'The lines, which are so very fine': John Harrison, William Hogarth and the trouble with drawing a line of Longitude.

In 1767, the Board of Longitude published the *Principles of Mr Harrison's Timekeeper*, sharing an account, both written and drawn, of his famous fourth longitude clock (H4). Writing the preface, the Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne, commented particularly on the printing process and choice of paper behind the publication, showing the careful attention that was put into a work intended to allow clockmakers to copy Harrison's designs directly. He asserted 'I can answer, that the lines on the copper-plates every-where correspond with the measure of the drawings within one, or at most two breadths of the lines, which are so very fine'. Yet those very lines were the crux of the disagreements that escalated between Harrison and the Board: he wanted to protect his work – his copyright – they wanted to be sure that his work could be understood by others.
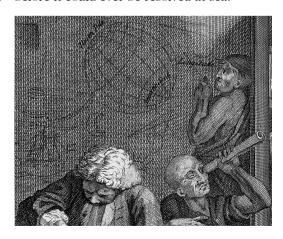
Rights in a printed line were causing concern to another London resident at around the same time. Jane Hogarth, widow of artist William, had applied to parliament in 1766 for rights in her husband's engravings to be extended beyond his death, giving her much-needed income. Her husband had put his name to the hard-fought 'Hogarth Act' three decades earlier, which had conferred rights in engraved images on their makers for the first time. His first prints to benefit from these rights need little introduction. The *Rake's Progress* is now synonymous with life in eighteenth-century London, showing all the cultural temptations with which the city might destroy a young man. In his last scene, the protagonist Tom Rakewell dies in Bethlehem Hospital – Bedlam – surrounded by fellow madmen, of whom one decorates the wall of their cell with a large diagram, one which attempts to solve the same longitude problem as Harrison.

Harrison and Hogarth thus shared an entwined history concerned with longitude, London society, and the complexity of printing and drawing a line on paper. Katy Barrett will consider this shared story, and how the longitude problem had to be solved by such artists, on paper, and in London, before it could ever be resolved at sea.

Detail from William Hogarth, Plate 8 of *A Rake's Progress* (original 1735, this engraving by T. Cook, 1796), Wellcome Library, London.

Dr Katy Barrett is Curator of Art Collections at the Science Museum, London. She was previously a Curator of Art at the National Maritime Museum, and has researched the cultural history of the longitude problem, particularly focusing on Hogarth and print culture.

TICKETS

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