

Science at Burlington House celebrated on 31 Oct 2025



The signing of the new lease on Burlington House was a momentous occasion on all sides of the Courtyard and one that deserved a suitable celebration. For the first time a joint working group comprising Fellows from the Geologists, Astronomers, Antiquarians and Linnaeans assembled in early 2025 to take on the task of organising a joint event to mark the occasion. It was soon decided that the event needed to be held in Burlington House itself, and the upper library of the Chemists was selected. The event raised a number of interesting problems, including the different methods of advertising events to members, our shared problems with room hire and external catering costs, and the different mechanisms for how each society can work across the Courtyard.

On the night we were delighted to be joined for dinner and drinks by seventy-two Fellows from across the Courtyard societies to celebrate our secured shared future together in the building. It was fantastic to see a wide range of Fellows from the different societies present, from those newly elected to current Council members and Past Presidents, all mingling, discussing news and their ideas for the future and making new bonds of friendship across the Courtyard.

The evening was also an opportunity to reflect on the joint history of the societies. Burlington House was purchased by the government in 1854 with the intention of being for the use of the learned societies whose accommodation at Somerset House was becoming somewhat cramped. By 1873 the Antiquarians, Geologists and Astronomers had moved into Burlington House alongside the Linnaeans and the Chemists, beginning the now over 150-year history of the Courtyard hosting the key lectures, debates and exhibitions that have pushed forward the frontiers of science and knowledge – something that will now continue for many centuries more thanks to the new lease.

The speeches on the night gave a flavour of what had taken over two decades of hard work to accomplish. David Southwood - President of the RAS Dining Club - described when the first storm clouds appeared on the horizon for the courtyard societies, and Mike Edmunds - RAS Past President 2022-2024 – praised the work of the great number of people who over the last twenty years kept up the fight in the face of near certain doom, recognising in particular Mike Cruise the late Treasurer of the Astronomers and Andrew Macdonald of the Antiquarians, whose persistence over many years helped steer the societies towards a positive resolution. Elizabeth Hallam-Smith of the Antiquarians paid tribute to the late Patrick, Lord McCormack a tremendous advocate for all the Courtyard Societies who went like a human steamroller against the ministers of the various departments that needed to agree the new lease.

As a result of the combined efforts there was finally the dawning of hope when in summer 2023 a meeting with Gove, then head of the government department overseeing Burlington House, indicated that a solution was possible – only for Johnson to sack him a day later. Thankfully the momentum continued and with the agreement of all the Courtyard Presidents and Executive Secretaries it was agreed that there would be a concerted effort to get the agreement over the line - but at the last minute the election was called, would it all be for nothing? Fortunately, the draft agreement was honoured by the new Government and the good news was announced to Fellows shortly after.

Andrew Dobrzański – Council member of the Geologists – explained how when he first came to Burlington House as a Sixth Form student he was impressed by how the country chose to house its learned scientific societies whose members do so much to support the public benefit, a legacy which continues to inspire students who visit the building, and thanked all who unrelentingly raised the issue with parliament and the civil service and got the fantastic resolution over the finish line. He recalled an argument in Hansard when in 1854 the Earl of Ellenbrough complained about the amount of money spent on Burlington House and other projects which could have funded a navy to command the Sea of Azov, take Helsinki, or flatten the defences of St Petersburg; in reply the Duke of Newcastle reminded the Lords that he had no hesitation in saying that the information which the Museum of Practical Geology had diffused had greatly increased the wealth of the country. Somehow the arguments never change, but with the resolution of the secure lease the societies at Burlington House can continue their work greatly enriching our country and its people with their work.

All attendees agreed what a splendid night it had been and how wonderful it was to bring so many Fellows of the different societies together. The societies now have excellent co-operation from which all Fellows and the public can benefit - the sharing of expertise across the courtyard is key to developing a new joint vision for the building, along with the enjoyment of meeting new people from different disciplines and carrying on the fun for many years to come. There is now a feeling of warm friendship across the Courtyard, much anticipation of the next joint social event, and a good cheer that will carry us all the way to the next lease negotiation in 2023.