

## Greenwich and the Moon

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When a luminous floating Moon moors itself beside the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park this weekend it may seem as though our planet's natural satellite has fallen to Earth. The [Museum of the Moon](#) by artist Luke Jerram is a spectacular seven metre wide lunar globe that uses detailed NASA photography to reproduce the Moon's surface features at a scale of 1:500,000. This glorious fusion of science and art, with a dash of magic mixed in, has been enchanting audiences around the UK but perhaps here in Greenwich the *Museum of the Moon* has found its natural home, as this visitation is only the latest in a long line of lunar manifestations in the Royal Borough – so many in fact that Greenwich has a strong claim to being London's most lunar district.

As a settlement on the tidal Thames, the twice daily rising and falling of the river at the behest of the Moon has always been a familiar part of Greenwich life. This tidal influence is embodied on the ceiling of the Old Royal Naval College's [Painted Hall](#) in the form of the lunar goddess Selene, her brow crowned with a silver crescent. Also commemorated on the ceiling is the eclipse of April 22 1715, accurately predicted by Greenwich resident and first Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed, based on his painstaking observations of the Moon's motions.

The ORNC, then known as Greenwich Hospital, features prominently in [The Thames and Greenwich Hospital by Moonlight](#) painted by Henry Pether in the mid-nineteenth century and now on display in the Queen's House art gallery. As an artist Pether was famous for both moonlit scenes and views of the Thames so this ethereal canvas combines his two abiding interests.

On the right hand side of Pether's painting is another structure with a lunar connection: the 1855 [obelisk in memory of Lieutenant Joseph René Bellot](#). Bellot was a French naval officer who won the admiration and gratitude of the British for his efforts to discover the fate of missing arctic explorer Sir John Franklin and his crew (soon to be the subject of a [blockbuster exhibition](#) at the National Maritime Museum). But Greenwich is not the only place where this mariner is remembered: in 1935 a 17 kilometre wide crater on the Moon, on the edge of the Sea of Fecundity, was named Bellot - giving him the rare honour of a monument on two different worlds.

Several other lunar features have Greenwich links. There are craters named after Astronomers Royal Flamsteed, Halley, Bliss, Maskelyne, Airy, Dyson and Spencer Jones, while Maunder Crater honours the nineteenth century husband and wife team of Walter and Annie Maunder whose pioneering work on solar variability is still relevant to studies of climate change today. Rather than a crater the third Astronomer Royal, James Bradley, who proved that the Earth moves around the Sun, has a lunar mountain named in his honour.

Arguably the Royal Observatory itself owes its very existence to the Moon: it was founded in 1675 by King Charles II to measure and predict the complex motions of the Moon across the sky so that they could be used to improve marine navigation (although for several months, while the Observatory itself was being constructed at the top of the

hill, Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed conducted his lunar observations from the Queen's House). This lunar legacy is reflected today in two of the Observatory's iconic buildings: the elegant [Altazimuth Pavilion](#), built in the late nineteenth century for observing the Moon, and, on the side of the neighbouring Astronomy Centre, the allegorical terracotta bas relief of Astronomia holding a crescent Moon in her outstretched hand.

The Moon also features heavily in the Royal Observatory's world-class collections of maps, globes and scientific instruments. Among these is the wonderful [Selenographia](#) – an astonishingly detailed and accurate globe of the Moon by the eighteenth century artist John Russell. Russell was most famous for his pastel portraits of Georgian celebrities but he had a lifelong obsession with all things lunar and, in an age when science and art were not quite as separate as they are today, he was well acquainted with Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne and President of the Royal Society Sir Joseph Banks. One of Russell's delicate [pastels of the Moon](#) – a portrait as much as a scientific recording – is also in the Greenwich collection.

Russell's lunar globes and portraits only show one side of the Moon, since our satellite always keeps one face permanently turned towards the Earth. Humanity had to wait until 1959 to see the mysterious Far Side, when the Soviet Luna 3 probe made a circuit of the Moon and beamed back the first grainy pictures. Amazingly, just ten years later Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin left the first human footprints in the soft lunar dust. Among the hundreds of thousands of people who contributed to this historic achievement was Welsh engineer and amateur astronomer Hugh Percy Wilkins, whose [300-Inch map of the Moon](#), painstakingly compiled from lunar observations made in South London, was used by NASA to help select the landing sites for the Apollo missions. Reputedly, engineers designing the spacesuits worn by the Apollo astronauts also studied the construction of [Henry VIII's suit of foot combat armour](#) made by the craftsmen of the famous Greenwich Armoury.

It's just two years until the fiftieth anniversary of Armstrong's 'one small step' and Royal Museums Greenwich is planning to celebrate in 2019 with a programme of exhibitions and events. Also on the horizon are plans for [Aluna](#), a unique tidally powered lunar clock proposed for the Greenwich riverside. Greenwich's links with the Moon are set to continue for many years to come.

Of course, the Moon's influence extends beyond science and art into stories and folklore, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the terrifying legend of the werewolf – a human being transformed into a ravaging beast by the occult power of the Moon. It's worth noting that the 2010 remake of classic horror movie [The Wolf Man](#), starring Benicio Del Toro and Emily Blunt, was partly filmed here in Greenwich. Might the digitally-rendered features of Luke Jerram's *Museum of the Moon* be capable of triggering a bout of twenty-first century lycanthropy? Who knows? But it's something to ponder as you make your way home through the darkening groves of Greenwich Park.

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