Guides to the Royal Institution of Great Britain: 3
The Royal Institution and the Royal Family

by Frank A.J.L. James
The relationship between the Royal Family and any institution works on two levels, the official and the personal. At an official level members of the Royal Family may act as patrons or vice-patrons of an institution but they can also form personal relations with members or staff of that institution which makes the official relations function on a much closer plain. The archives of the Royal Institution reveal many instances where, over the past two hundred years, the relationship between the Royal Family and the Institution has encompassed both the formal and the more personal.

Ever since its founding year the Royal Institution has maintained close links with the Royal Family. On 29 June 1799, George Finch, Earl of Winchilsea (1752-1826), the President of what had until then had been called simply the “Institution” reported to a meeting of its committee of Managers ‘that he had had the Honour of mentioning this Institution to his Majesty [George III], and that his Majesty was graciously pleased to honour it with His Patronage and to allow it to be called the Royal Institution’. From then until now every reigning monarch on his or her accession has become the Patron of the Royal Institution. Further linking the Royal Family and the Royal Institution, the sons of George III, Victoria, Edward VII and George V were elected Honorary Members of the Royal Institution. For example the Prince of Wales, later Prince Regent, was elected an Honorary Member in 1802.

An example of how a new monarch was enrolled as Patron can be seen in 1830 when William IV, elected an Honorary Member in 1827 while Duke of Clarence, became Patron. A few days after his accession the General Meeting of Members of the Royal Institution on 5 July 1830 established a committee to draft a loyal address to the King petitioning him to become Patron. The draft was read to the next meeting the following month where it was approved. The Home Secretary, Robert Peel (1788-1850), responded a fortnight later saying that the King would serve as Patron and his letter was read to the November meeting of Members.

The Royal handle to the Institution’s name, and the patronage that went
with it, was undoubtedly useful in helping the fledgling Institution through its difficult early years. The support of the monarch was further reinforced by the conferral of a knighthood by the Prince Regent on Humphry Davy (1778-1829) in 1812 who retired from being Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Institution that year. With the accession of Victoria this involvement took on a more active aspect. Anticipating this stage just a few weeks before Victoria’s accession in 1837, the botanist and art collector Richard Chambers (1784-1858) sent the Fullerian Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Institution, Michael Faraday (1791-1867) an image of a hand drawn by the Princess Victoria. Faraday carefully mounted this opposite an engraved portrait of the Queen at the beginning of his personal album containing portraits of contemporary worthies.

The person who helped to forge close links between the Royal Family and the Royal Institution was the clergyman John Barlow (1798-1869). He joined the Royal Institution in 1832 and was elected a Manager in 1838. In 1841, following Faraday’s illness of 1839-1840, Barlow took over responsibility for the Friday Evening Discourses. These Discourses, which Faraday had run since their establishment in the mid 1820s, were and are, one of the most prestigious of the Royal Institution’s lecture series; most major scientists have delivered at least one lecture. Barlow not only took over the arrangements for the Discourses, but in 1842 he precipitated the resignation of Edward Seymour, 11th Duke of Somerset (1775-1855) as President who was replaced by Algernon Percy, Lord Prudhoe, later (1847) the 4th Duke of Northumberland (1792-1865). Barlow’s position within the
Royal Institution was reinforced in February 1843 when he was elected Secretary, a post he held until 1860.

Early in Barlow’s term of office the Managers passed a resolution requesting the President to ascertain whether Prince Albert would be willing to be elected an Honorary Member and Vice-Patron of the Royal Institution. The office of Vice-Patron was entirely new and one can only presume it was proposed to gain Albert’s interest in the Royal Institution given his well known concerns with scientific and technical matters. (For example, in February 1843 the weekly satirical magazine Punch in a mock Court Circular reported that Faraday had been commanded to dine with Albert.) Prudhoe made the request, on behalf of the Managers, through the Groom of the Stole to Albert, Brownlow Cecil, the Marquis of Exeter (1795-1867), who had recently been elected a member of the Committee of Visitors of the Royal Institution; Exeter indicated the Prince’s willingness. At a specially convened meeting of the Managers on 17 July 1843, Albert was formally nominated and was then elected by a General Meeting of Members immediately thereafter.

The Managers reassembled and ‘a Record of the proceedings was then signed by the Managers present, sealed with the Seal of the Institution and entrusted to the President to be forwarded to H.R.H. Prince Albert’. Prudhoe asked that the Register of Members should be sent to Albert for his signature. This book was returned the following day not only with Albert’s signature, but also with that of the Royal Institution’s Patron, the Queen, which Albert himself had obtained. That Barlow
was playing a crucial role behind the scenes is clear from a letter that Faraday wrote to him a few days after the election:
‘I wish you joy of the successful termination of the Election of His Royal Highness Prince Albert & think it will give you great pleasure’.

It was not until nearly six years later, in February 1849, that Albert paid his first visit to the Royal Institution, the first by a member of the Royal Family. The impetus came from the Palace. Albert’s physician and general adviser on scientific matters, James Clark (1788-1870), informed Faraday that the Prince ‘desired to see in the Royal Institution some of the experimental results of the discoveries in magnetism made in its Laboratory’. Faraday reported to the Managers that following further discussion a lecture similar to a Friday Evening Discourse had been suggested. It was agreed that Faraday should deliver such a lecture on Monday 26 February 1849 at 3pm. Further correspondence with Clark followed in which it was made clear that Faraday did not have to restrict himself to an hour on Albert's account but ‘If it is an hour and a half I know he will not think it too much’. Faraday delivered ‘On Magnetic and Diamagnetic Bodies’ before the Prince and 330 others. The geologist Gideon Mantell (1790-1852), who was in the audience, noted in his diary that ‘after the lecture [the Prince] chatted for some time with Prof. Faraday on the various subjects enunciated in the discourse’. The lecture had indeed gone well and this marked the start of a personal relationship between Faraday and the Prince which lasted until the latter’s death. Writing the same evening Clark told Faraday ‘how much he [the Prince] expressed himself to me pleased with the manner as well as the substance of your lecture. Indeed so much was he pleased with it, I expect he will come occasionally to the lectures at the Institution’.

Prince of Wales. Thomas Fairland after F. Winterhalter, lithograph, 1852, included in Faraday's collection of portraits. RI MS F1 H2
Indeed, during the next ten years, Albert chaired seven Friday Evening Discourses (including four by Faraday and one by John Tyndall (1820-1893), Professor of Natural Philosophy at the Royal Institution, 1853-1887). The Prince also chaired the first two lectures (by the Master of Trinity College Cambridge, William Whewell (1794-1866), and by Faraday respectively) in the series on education which the Royal Institution ran in 1854. Most famously, perhaps, Albert with his sons the Prince of Wales and Prince Alfred, then aged thirteen and ten respectively, attended the Christmas lecture delivered by Faraday on 27 December 1855 which was portrayed by Faraday’s co-religionist, the artist Alexander Blaikley (1816-1903). This was the first lecture in the series of six lectures ‘On the distinctive properties of the common metals’ and was on gold and platinum. The young Princes, though not their father, attended all the remaining lectures and wrote Faraday appropriate letters of thanks on 16 January, a week after the completion of the course. Faraday mounted these letters in his personal album of portraits, following Victoria’s portrait and sketch of a hand, and opposite the two 1852 portrait prints of the Princes. Such support by the Royal Family served to draw the attention of the wider public to the Royal Institution. One of Blaikley’s preparatory sketches for his painting featured as a full page plate reproduction in the very popular Illustrated London News. Further the Annual Report of the Visitors of the Royal Institution commented that the presence of the Princes ‘suggests a strong presumption that the rising hopes of the country are being educated in a manner worthy of their Royal Parents, and likely to make them examples and ornaments to the nation; while this and the general attendance afford a proof that the efforts of the Royal Institution to spread and inculcate the principles of practical and inductive science are met and appreciated by a high and extensive circle of supporters’.

Albert also invited Faraday to come to Windsor to converse with him, but it is not clear if Faraday accepted the invitation. If such a visit occurred, the range of topics covered would have been wide. After Albert had chaired Faraday’s lecture on ‘Mental Education’ on 6 May 1854, they talked in the
Royal Institution Library for half an hour. Presumably among other things, they talked about whether paddles or propellers were the best form of propulsion for the new Royal Yacht. Albert, of course, made sure that Faraday was involved in the Great Exhibition of 1851 where he served on one of the juries. On his part Faraday in correspondence suggested various pieces of new science that the Prince might be interest in such as the pendulum invented by Léon Foucault (1819-1868) to demonstrate the rotation of the earth and the discovery by Robert Bunsen (1811-1899) and Gustav Kirchhoff (1824-1887) of spectro-chemical analysis.

It seems to have been at Albert’s suggestion that the Queen offered Faraday a Grace and Favour Residence on the river at Hampton Court in 1858. For many years prior to this, Faraday had spent a good part of the year away from the Royal Institution renting houses in outlying areas such as Hampstead, Norwood, Hammersmith, Surbiton etc and commuting to the Royal Institution. It is, of course, impossible to know how much Albert
was aware of this aspect of Faraday's life, but the offer of a permanent country residence clearly solved Faraday's increasing desire to be away from the bustle of London. He was offered the house by the Keeper of the Queen's purse, Charles Phipps (1801-1866) who made reference to Faraday's lectures to the Prince of Wales. Faraday, however, responded to one of Albert's secretaries, Ernst Becker, whom Faraday believed knew about the offer. After a slight hesitation, during which Faraday was assured that he would not need to pay for the necessary repairs, he accepted. He spent an increasing amount of time at Hampton Court in the 1860s and died there in 1867.

The sudden death of Prince Albert on 14 December 1861 came as much as a shock to the Royal Institution as it did to the rest of the country. Faraday left instructions with the housekeeper for the lower windows to be closed as a mark or respect 'upon this sad death of our Prince'. Writing to Becker at the beginning of 1862 Faraday wrote of the Prince 'We remember him more as a man than a Prince. He exalted his rank far more than it exalted
him’. Such personal sentiments were very characteristic of Faraday. On 13 January 1862 special meetings of the Managers and Members were called so that the Royal Institution could address their condolences to the Queen.

Following Albert’s death there was a widespread desire to do what he would have wished. This applied not only to the Royal Family, but to other parts of society including the Royal Institution. Faraday considered the possibility of inviting the Prince of Wales to be Vice-Patron in July and had sounded out Becker as to its feasibility. Unfortunately Becker’s reply has not been found. Since the matter was not raised again until December, I am inclined to conclude that there was a feeling that a full period of mourning should be observed before anything could be proposed officially. Even when it was raised at a meeting of Managers on 1 December 1862 the discussion was not minuted and one has to infer what happened from the minutes of the following, special, meeting and from correspondence. What is clear, however, is that Faraday was deputed to make soundings.

Faraday in many ways was the ideal person to make such an approach; he was known to the Prince, knew many of the staff of the Royal Household and lived in a Grace and Favour house. Thus on 4 December he wrote again to Becker repeating the proposal he had made in July. Becker tried to see Faraday who was then at Brighton and when they did finally meet on 19 December, Faraday noted that ‘He encouraged me’. Faraday then tried to pass the task of making the formal approach to the President, the Duke of Northumberland, who declined on the grounds that he would be at Alnwick for some weeks and suggested that Faraday did it himself. This Faraday did on 5 January; the Comptroller of the Prince’s household, William Knollys (1797-1883) replied on behalf of the Prince accepting the proposal, adding, as a personal touch to the formality, that it would give the Prince pleasure to ‘meet you again where he has listened to you before and derived so much instruction from your lectures’. These letters were read to the Managers of the Royal Institution on 12 January 1863 when the Prince of Wales was formally nominated to be an Honorary Member and
Vice-Patron. The election occurred at a special meeting of members on 19 January 1863. Knollys wrote a few days later to Northumberland acknowledging the Prince’s election. While the formalities of election were proceeding, the Queen ordered that a copy of The Principal Speeches and Addresses ... of the Prince Consort be sent to Faraday, a personal touch for which he was almost uncharacteristically inarticulately grateful: ‘I do not know how to thank Her Majesty enough or well’.

That the Royal Institution was trying to retain the same personal link with the Royal Family that it had forged through Albert is clear from the first visit of the Prince of Wales as Vice-Patron. At midday on 21 May 1863, the Prince of Wales, together with the Princess of Wales and Princess Alice, came to the Royal Institution to hear Tyndall talk on spectrum analysis and to sign the Register of Members. Faraday commented that ‘It will be a meeting like that first one we had with the Prince Consort’. This seems to have been a case of Faraday’s memory (which he regarded as poor) letting him down since Tyndall’s lecture was clearly a private one for the Prince, not a Discourse for Members of the Royal Institution. Nevertheless, Faraday couching it in terms of Albert’s visit in 1849 was clearly trying to retain the link with the past.

During his first decade as Vice-Patron, the Prince of Wales proved almost as assiduous as his father in chairing Friday Evening Discourses. He chaired six during the 1860s, including the special Discourse on Tuesday 23 June 1863 delivered by the explorer John Speke (1827-1864) on the source of the Nile -
that great challenge of Victorian exploration. The Assistant Chemist at the Royal College of Chemistry, Herbert McLeod (1841-1923), who was in the audience of 897, described the lecture in no uncertain terms as ‘awful’. Following the death of Faraday, in 1867, the Prince of Wales played a leading role in securing a memorial for him. The drive for subscriptions was commenced at a public meeting held on 21 June 1869 at the Royal Institution where the Prince took the chair. In his speech the Prince referred to Faraday as ‘one whom I had the pleasure of knowing personally, and whose interesting lectures I have so frequently attended in this very room’ and contributed his five guineas (the maximum permitted) towards a statue. The resulting full length marble statue of Faraday by John Foley (1818-1874) has stood in the Grand Entrance to the Royal Institution since 1876.

The Prince did not chair any Discourses nor seems to have played much role in the Institution during the 1870s. This may, in part, have been due to the controversial position in society which Tyndall occupied during these years. However, in 1877 James Dewar (1842-1923) was appointed Fullerian Professor of Chemistry, a post he held until his death. He slowly but surely took over the running of the Royal Institution from Tyndall and the 1880s marked a return of Royal interest. In 1882 the Prince of Wales chaired the Discourse by Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) on the motion of animals and in 1887 that by Frederick Abel (1827-1902) on the Imperial Institute at the end of which the Prince spoke to thank Abel for the lecture. Perhaps a more significant marker of the return of the Prince of Wales’s interest in the Royal Institution is that in 1884 and 1885 he attended private lectures delivered by Dewar on his work on the liquefaction of gases. Dewar gave another lecture on the same subject before the Prince, his son the Duke of York (who took the opportunity to sign the Members Register), and an invited audience on 22 February 1893.

In the 1890s the Prince played a role in the celebrations marking the centenaries of the birth of Faraday and of the founding of the Royal
Institution as well as in the opening of the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory. The centenary of Faraday’s birth was marked at a meeting held at the Royal Institution on 17 June 1891 presided over by the Prince of Wales. During his address he referred to the meeting in 1869 to secure a memorial for Faraday and added that he was ‘proud to think that in the days of my boyhood my brother and myself used to attend his chemical lectures here about Christmas time’. He then introduced the Professor of Natural Philosophy, John William Strutt, 3rd Lord Rayleigh (1842-1919), who delivered a lecture on Faraday’s work. In 1896, due to the purchase of the adjoining 20 Albemarle Street and an endowment by the industrial chemist Ludwig Mond (1839-1909), the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory was founded with Rayleigh and Dewar as its first Directors. The Prince of Wales opened the new laboratory on 22 December 1896. This ceremony received a whole page illustration consisting of five images in the Illustrated London News and a long account in the Times. In his speech, for once, the Prince did not refer to the lectures by Faraday that he had attended and his talk was followed by a lecture by Dewar on the liquefaction of gases. At the centenary celebrations of the Royal Institution, however, the Prince, in his speech at the banquet held at the Merchant Taylors’ Hall on 5 June 1899, returned to his childhood memories again: ‘Though it is nearly half a century ago, I have not forgotten that, as a boy, my brother, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg, and myself were sent by our father to London, just after Christmas, to attend those famous lectures, which were then given by the great Professor Michael Faraday’. It seems that the influence of Faraday over the Royal Institution was as pervasive as that of Albert’s over the Royal Family.

The following day, 6 June, the Prince of Wales chaired Lord Rayleigh’s commemorative lecture on the history of the Royal Institution. This was the Prince’s last visit to the Royal Institution, for in January 1901 he acceded to the throne as Edward VII and became Patron. Following what had become the standard pattern, the new Prince of Wales (formerly the Duke of York) was elected Vice-Patron. Once again Faraday’s legacy was in
evidence since a copy of his 1863 letter to the then Prince of Wales was sent to the President, Henry Percy, 7th Duke of Northumberland (1846-1918), no doubt to serve as a template for his letter to the new Prince of Wales. On 6 June 1902 the Prince of Wales chaired his first Discourse on ‘The Nile Reservoir and Dams’ which was delivered by the engineer Benjamin Baker (1840-1907) ‘being before a brilliant audience’ according to the Visitors’ Report. Seven years later, on 19 February 1909, the Prince of Wales chaired his second Discourse. This was delivered by the Chairman of the Royal Commission on Coal Mines, Henry Cunynghame (1848-1935), on ‘Recent Advances in means of saving life in coal mines’ and was also attended by the Princess of Wales and Queen Alexandra. That same day Dewar and the Professor of Natural Philosophy, J J. Thomson (1856-1940), demonstrated some of their experiments to the Royal Party. This same Royal Party, with the addition of the Empress of Russia (mother of the Czar and sister of Queen Alexandra), was back again the following month, on 15 March 1909, to attend a private lecture by Dewar on his low temperature research.

The problems that affected the world during the first half of the twentieth century as well as those more specific to the Royal Institution, such as the affairs surrounding the dismissals of the Superintendent of the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory, Alexander Scott (1853-1947), in 1911, and of its Director, Edward Andrade (1887-1971), in 1952, both of which ended in litigation, may have contributed to the reduction of the number of Royal Visits. However, the very important patronal links with the Royal Family remained firmly in place. The Royal Family was absent from both of the big inter-war celebrations organised by the Royal Institution to mark the centenary of Faraday’s discoveries of benzene (1925) and electro-magnetic induction (1931) the latter being a very large scale affair.

George V acceded the throne in 1910 and became Patron, but it was not until 1919 that the new Prince of Wales was elected Vice-Patron. He never signed the Register of Members, nor seems to have visited the Royal
Institution. When he acceded the throne in 1936 he was elected Patron, but following his abdication the Palace informed all organisations that his patronal roles would be assumed by George VI unless notified to the contrary. George VI, as Albert, Duke of York, had earlier been elected an Honorary Member in July 1930 and had signed the Register of Members on the 24th of that month, though the circumstances in which he did so are not known.

In the post 1945 years the Royal Family played a more active role in the Royal Institution than earlier in the century. Princess Elizabeth was elected an Honorary Member in 1949. The following year, on 17 February 1950, she attended, but did not chair, a Discourse delivered by Andrade, then newly appointed as Fullerian Professor of Chemistry, on the ‘The Nature of Light’ and signed the Register of Members. Following her accession to throne in 1952, the Queen became Patron of the Royal Institution. Although not a member until October 1960, the Duke of Edinburgh attended a Discourse delivered by William Hawthorne on ‘Aero-Thermodynamics’ on 6 March 1958. Following the Discourse, the Director, Lawrence Bragg (1890-1971), entertained the Duke in the Director’s flat.

From the 1970s onwards there was a marked increased in the connections between the Royal Family and the Royal Institution. In February 1973 the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh visited the Royal Institution to open the Faraday Museum. This was the first time that the
reigning monarch had visited the Royal Institution. The Duke signed the Register of Members as did the Queen for the second time. In the course of her visit, which lasted two hours, the Queen declared the Faraday Museum open and unveiled a glass plaque marking the event by sending a signal through Faraday’s electro-magnetic induction ring. In 1977 an Evening Party was held at the Royal Institution to mark the Silver Jubilee of the Queen. The Evening, which included displays and lectures relating to work of the Royal Institution during the previous twenty five years, raised £100 for the Queen’s Silver Jubilee Trust. In 1979 the role of Vice-Patron was reinstituted after an interval of forty three years when the present Prince of Wales was elected to that position. He has, however, yet to sign the Register of Members.

The Royal connection was reinforced in 1975 when the Duke of Kent was elected an honorary member. The following year he was elected President - the first time that a member of the Royal Family has held that post - and signed the Register of Members on 3 May 1976, the day he took office. The Duke has been active in the Royal Institution, for instance in chairing many Discourses. Furthermore, during the 1976-7 series of Christmas lectures, the first of his Presidency, he brought his son, the

George Porter, Christmas lecture, “Natural History of the Sunbeam”, before Prince Andrew, the Duke of Kent and the Earl of St Andrews, 23 December 1976. RI
Earl of St Andrews, to hear, on 23 December 1976, the Director, George Porter, talk on the ‘Natural History of the Sunbeam’. The Duke also brought with him Prince Andrew and he stayed on for tea in the Director’s Flat along with some of the other children who had attended the lecture. For the next three annual series both Prince Andrew and Prince Edward attended one or two lectures each, hearing respectively Carl Sagan (1934-1996), Christopher Zeeman and Eric M. Rogers.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the involvement of the Royal Family with the Royal Institution has been stronger than ever. The Duke of Kent as an active President, has spoken on many occasions, most notably at the bicentenary banquet held in the Royal Institution on 6 October 1999. On that occasion the Director, Professor (now Baroness) Susan Greenfield, presented the Duke, as a mark of gratitude of the Royal Institution for his Presidency, with a copy of the 1801 caricature by James Gillray (1757-1815) showing the earliest image of the Royal Institution.

During that quarter century the Queen visited the Royal Institution twice. On 8 March 1988 she attended a recital by Melvyn Tan given in the Main Lecture Theatre as part of the 175th anniversary celebrations of the Royal Philharmonic Society. The second visit, accompanied by the Duke of Edinburgh, on 7 December 1999, was as Patron to mark the bicentenary of the founding of the Royal Institution. After being presented to members of Council, members of the Heart of Science Campaign Committee and staff, she was welcomed to the Royal Institution by the Duke of Kent. She
then heard three brief talks on the past, present and future of the Royal Institution. As in 1973 she again used Faraday’s electro-magnetic induction ring to send the signal to unveil the Bicentenary Bronze Plaque (designed by Franek Boczarski and modelled by him and by John Bonington) located in the Main Entrance. After presenting Colin Pulham with the Royal Institution’s first ‘Science to Society’ prize, she was shown, in the Main Library, examples of the research work carried out in the Davy Faraday Research Laboratory. Some Members of the Royal Institution were then presented to her, following which she inspected the plaque in situ, signed the Occasion Book and was presented with a bouquet before departing an hour after she had arrived.
With this visit the relationship that was established between the Royal Institution and the Royal Family more than two hundred years ago continues to thrive. Perhaps the essence of the relationship is best captured in the report of the Visitors for 1869: ‘The Institution has always been, and still is, essentially self-supporting, but some portion of its success must undoubtedly be attributed to the distinction conferred upon it by its Royal Patrons.’

**Guides to the Royal Institution**

1: History (Frank A.J.L. James)

2: The Site and the Buildings (H.J.V. Tyrrell)

For a short account of the Queen’s 1999 visit to the Royal Institution and an artist’s depiction of it see Michael and Vivien Noakes, The Daily Life of the Queen: An Artist’s Diary, London, 2000, p.225.

The Royal Institution web page, which contains full details of future events, research and much else, is at www.ri.ac.uk
Front page: Alexander Blaikley, Michael Faraday delivering the Christmas lecture, 27 December 1855, before the Prince of Wales, Prince Albert and Prince Alfred. Hand-coloured lithograph. RI

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