

ELIZABETH COBBOLD an astronomer too?

February 2020

The Trust received a most interesting email earlier this month. Here it is; do please read it.

Having just read Adele Mallen's biography of Elizabeth Cobbold may I add 'astronomer' to the list of Elizabeth's scientific disciplines?

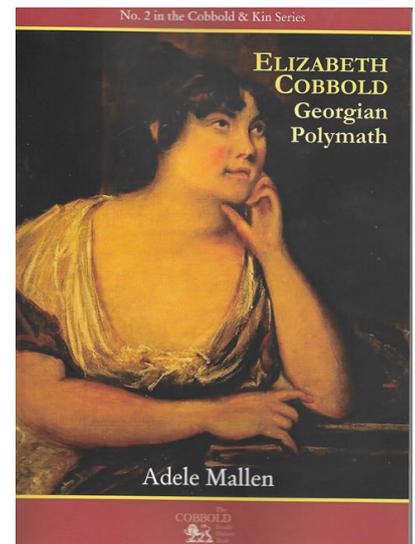
My claim is based on a single observing report, that of a shooting star (or meteor) and one of her poems.

Elizabeth observed a meteor at around twenty to nine in the evening of 27 July 1806 while she was walking by the river Orwell with two of her daughters-in-law. Elizabeth wrote a letter to the *'Monthly Magazine or British Register'* about it dated 12 August and this was duly published on pages 143-4 of volume 22 (September 1806, see scans below).

I think we can learn several things from studying the contents of her letter:-

1. Elizabeth was sufficiently knowledgeable about the night sky to know a point of light in the gathering gloom of that evening was, in fact, the planet Jupiter. She was also aware when this planet becomes visible in the sky related to the time of sunset.
2. She realised she was seeing a meteor.
3. She was well enough versed in the observing of meteors to know what relevant facts to take note of.
4. She noted the details of the meteor's physical appearance.
5. She noted that this meteor's movement as being 'extremely slow' suggesting some previous experience in this field of observation.
6. She has prior knowledge of the contents of this magazine, suggesting that she, or someone she knew, was a subscriber to it. This suggests an interest in the *Registers* content of 'miscellaneous communications from correspondents on all subjects of literature and science'.
7. She sought out John Bransby, a land surveyor, mathematics teacher and astronomer also of Ipswich, to discuss what she had seen. Also, by some means, she found out that the meteor had also been observed by somebody else in the town, namely a Mr. Stebbing.
8. She claimed a high degree of accuracy in her timing of the duration of the meteor's flight as she was, apparently, 'accustomed to the use of a stop watch'.
9. She re-enacted the event to check her estimate of the duration against three different stop watches.

In 1811 & 12 a bright comet [technically referred to as C/1811 F1] was visible in the night sky. It's brightness peaked in October 1811, when the astronomer William Herschel noted it had a tail 25° long. One of Elizabeth's poems was dedicated to 'The Comet' and is dated September 6 1811 as it was becoming noticeable to the naked eye. I'd suggest that it was this precise night sky object that Elizabeth dedicated her poem to.



I find the references to the stop watches most interesting because, as far as I am aware, none of her other interests (entomology, botany, mineralogy or conchology) or, indeed the family business of brewing are done 'against the clock'.

Bill Barton, FRAS

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The text of Elizabeth's letter is preserved in the Trust's archive. Bill Barton's view arrived at a very opportune moment; having an instinctive dislike of exaggeration in advertising and promotion we had been apprehensive about our use of the word *Polymath* in the title to Adelle's book. This revelation dispels those misgivings absolutely.

Adele's book is available on this website [BUY BOOK](#)