

William Derham Biography

William Derham

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Biography

A scholar with many interests, from botany and **meteorology** to astronomy and physics, William Derham made the most accurate measurements of the speed of **sound** up to his time. English physicist Sir Isaac Newton accepted these measurements and used them in his landmark publication *Principia*. Derham was born in Stoughton, England, in 1657. Little is known about his family other than his father's name, Thomas Derham, and that the family was poor. Derham attended Oxford University, Trinity College, where he received his B.A. and M.A. degrees. Ordained a priest in the Anglican Church in 1682, he served as the Vicar of Wargrave in Berkshire and the Vicar of Upminster in Essex. Derham also fulfilled the role of village physician.

With a wide range of interests, Derham wrote on philosophy, theology, and the sciences. His first publication was a treatise on clocks, titled *The Artificial Clockmaker* (1696). His extensive writings included papers on wildlife, the behavior of mercury barometers, telescopes, and astronomy. His best known works were *Physico-Theology* (1713) and *Astro-Theology* (1714). In *Physico-Theology*, Derham discussed atmosphere, **light**, **gravity**, and biology. While studying the **speed of sound**, Derham instructed friends to fire shotguns on a set time with synchronized pocket watches from distant locations (often the towers of churches). Derham then observed the interval between the flash and the arrival of sound, using telescopes and a half-second pendulum. Derham also invented an instrument for finding the meridian.

Derham was married to Anne Scott, daughter of George Scott, who, like Derham, was a fellow of the Royal Society. Derham had several children, including an eldest son, William, who became president of St. John's College, Oxford. Derham died in 1735.