The purpose of this paper is to examine how and why a museum in London that was opened only in the 1930s came to acquire a substantial collection of scientific instruments made in central Europe during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Was there a deliberate attempt to build up a representative collection of earlier instruments, or was it simply an incidental by-product of the acquisition of certain large complete collections?1

A considerable range of Central European instruments, dating from the period 1500–1800, are included in the collections of the National Maritime Museum and Royal Observatory, Greenwich (see Appendix). The most numerous category is sundials, with 41 examples, but there are also substantial numbers of globes, both celestial and terrestrial, 25 altogether, and small numbers of other instruments: an armillary sphere, three astrolabes, three mariners’ compasses, eleven compendia, five pairs of dividers, four hourglasses, a level, a nocturnal, a sextant, one ‘trigometre’ and two telescopes. The earliest dated item is the armillary sphere of 1543, but if instruments whose dates have been estimated are included, there are 28 from the 16th century, 37 from the 17th century and 34 from the 18th century. In order to understand how this substantial collection came to Greenwich, a brief summary of the origins of the National Maritime Museum is needed.

1 In putting together this overview, I must acknowledge my debt to research carried out by several Sackler Fellows of the National Maritime Museum and Royal Observatory, Greenwich, whose work has been published in a series of illustrated catalogues. These are: ELLY DEKKER, Globes at Greenwich, Oxford, 1999; Hester Higton, Sundials at Greenwich, Oxford, 2002; and KOENRAAD VAN CLEEMPOEL, Astrolabes at Greenwich, Oxford, 2006.
The impetus behind the creation of the National Maritime Museum came from the Society for Nautical Research (SNR), founded in 1910. From the start, some of its members campaigned for the creation of a national museum of naval and nautical history. Its activities ceased during World War I, but revived afterwards largely through the work of Geoffrey Callender (1875–1946), who became its Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. He was then a teacher at the Royal Naval College, Osborne, but in 1922 became Professor of History at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich. At that time the Royal Hospital School at Greenwich was in the process of moving out of the buildings just across the road from the College. These consisted of the Queen’s House in the centre, linked by a colonnade to later east and west wings. It was clear that a good use would have to be found for the Queen’s House, which was an architecturally important building, the earliest Renaissance building in England in the classical style. Callender had the idea of using the Queen’s House as a naval museum. The Society for Nautical Research included influential naval officers who in 1927 were able to help secure Admiralty agreement in principle to the idea of a national maritime museum at Greenwich and also to the transfer of the collections then housed in the Royal Naval College, including the Greenwich Hospital Collection of paintings and Nelson relics. In the process it was agreed that the other former school buildings at Greenwich, as well as the Queen’s House, should be given to the proposed new museum.

In the same year, 1927, a major maritime collection came on the market, the Macpherson Collection, and the Society for Nautical Research issued an appeal to secure it for the proposed museum. After a slow start an anonymous donor came forward with the full sum. It later emerged that this was James Caird (1864–1954), then owner of the Scottish Shire Line, a leading shipping company (Fig. 1). His successful business dealings had made him a millionaire at a time when such a sum had far greater purchasing power than it does now. More importantly, Caird’s enthusiasm for Britain’s maritime achievements made him willing to

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3 The Queen’s House was originally designed by Inigo Jones for Anne of Denmark, Queen of James I, who was King of England 1603–1625. He was also King James VI of Scotland, so uniting the two kingdoms for the first time.