Obituary

Gerard L’Estrange Turner
22 January 1926 - 19 July 2012

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Gerard l'Estrange Turner, a well know scholar and connoisseur of the history of scientific instruments, died on 19 July 2012. Turner was born in Rugby on 22 January 1926. His father was an auctioneer and served as an officer in WW1. He was schooled at Churcher's College in Petersfield and studied at the University of London. Here, in 1949, he obtained a MSc in physics. He joined the research laboratory of GEC and he specialised in crystallography, a discipline in which he earned a MSc in 1959. In 1963, after a short experience at the Philco Corporation in Philadelphia, he joined the staff of the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford. This opportunity marked the beginning of a new career, which reflected his passion and lifelong interest for old scientific instruments. He remained at the Museum until 1987, when he retired as the senior assistant curator. He was then appointed visiting professor in history of scientific instruments at Imperial College in London. He was awarded doctorates by the University of London in 1982 and by Oxford University in 1989. In 1993 some of his most distinguished colleagues presented him with a Festschrift (Making Instruments Count) with several essays on historical scientific instruments. In it one can find a complete list of his publications up to this date. He married Helen Robinson in 1956. Helen, who was columnist of the Oxford Times, secretary of the Oxford Preservation Trust and also one of the founders and later chairwomen of the Oxford Civic Society, also was the most invaluable collaborator of her husband. She constantly helped and supported him in his investigations and researches. Her early and sudden death in 2004 was an irreparable loss for him and marked the beginning of his physical decline. In his final years he suffered very poor health.

It would be impossible here to list all Turner's writings. He wrote more than a dozen books, edited a few others and published over 120 papers without counting many books reviews. He was interested in every kind of historical scientific instrument, but microscopes, and Renaissance and Elizabethan mathematical instruments particularly attracted his interest and to them he dedicated several of his publications.

As for microscopy, microscopes and their makers, most of his articles were collected in the volume Essay on the history of microscopy. He also wrote a popular guide for microscope collectors and then he compiled the detailed catalogues of the microscope collections of the Museo Galileo in Florence and of the Royal Microscopical Society (The Great Age of the