

DEE, JOHN (1527 - 1608), mathematician and astronomer

Name: John Dee

Date of birth: 1527

Date of death: 1608

Parent: Rowland Dee

Gender: Male

Occupation: mathematician and astronomer

Area of activity: Science and Mathematics; Space and Aviation

Authors: John James Jones, Llewelyn Gwyn Chambers

Born 13 July 1527, in London; son of Rowland Dee, a gentleman server to Henry VIII. He was a grandson of Bedo Ddu of Nant-y-groes, Pilleth, Radnorshire and he retained his connection with the locality. The Dees hailed from Radnorshire (see [J. D. Rhys](#), *Cambrobrytannicae Cymraecaeve Linguae Institutiones*, 60); Dee himself constructed a pedigree purporting to show his descent from [Rhodri Mawr](#), prince of Wales. Though there seems to be no evidence in support of the statement in *Archæologia Cambrensis*, 1858, 472, that he was a native of Bugeildy (corrupted to 'Beguildy'), near Knighton, Radnorshire, his biographical writings show that he numbered many Welshmen among his special friends, including some of the Herberts, [John David Rhys](#), and [Morris Kyffin](#). There is, besides, at least one letter of his extant which definitely connects his family with Radnorshire; this is in Peniarth MS. 252, and it is in Dee's autograph, addressed to his 'Cosen Nicholas ap Meredith at Prestene,' and containing allusions to 'cosens' William, Thomas, and [John Lewis](#) - the last-named being the [John Lewis](#) of Llynwene, Llanfihangel Nant Melan, Radnorshire, whose collection of papers forms the manuscript in question ([F. G. Payne](#) in *N.L.W. Jnl*, i, 42-3) and who is mentioned several times in Dee's diary. He also called [Thomas Jones](#), 'Twm Shôn Catti' with whom he was acquainted, 'cousin'.

Dee graduated from S. John's College, Cambridge, 1544/5, and was nominated one of the original Fellows of Trinity College on its foundation in 1546. He visited the Low Countries in 1547, and was a student at Louvain from 1546 to 1550, when he left for Paris and lectured on mathematics with distinction and success at the College of Reims. He declined an offer of a permanent lectureship there, as he did a similar offer at Oxford in 1554.

After a narrow escape in the Marian persecution he was received into favour by queen Elizabeth [see [Parry, Blanche](#)] and settled at Mortlake. Material rewards, however, were slow in forthcoming, and it was not until 1595/6 that Elizabeth's many offers of preferment at length bore fruit in his being made warden of the college at Manchester, where he remained until November 1604. He died in December 1608.

Dee had undoubted skill and learning in mathematics and astronomy. But he had a penchant for the mechanical applications of these sciences, as is made clear, for example, in his learned introduction to the first English edition of Euclid, 1570, and from the day when he impressed a Cambridge audience with a wonderful stage device in the production of the *Pax* of Aristophanes, Dee suffered unduly from the prejudice of the ignorant who saw in his brilliance proof of his

intercourse with evil spirits. Unfortunately, his studies and activities tended more and more to strengthen this prejudice. There was nothing wrong with his astrology, for this was still a respectable sister or mother of astronomy, nor even with his alchemy, for scholars of repute were at the time active in their search for the 'philosopher's stone.' But Dee definitely parted company with sincere students of science when he began to hold intercourse with spirits. It is difficult to explain the origin of his belief in these spirits or to estimate how far he was led to believe in them by the optical illusions created by his curious piece of so-called magic glass. However that may be, he allowed himself to be imposed upon by the rank impostor, Edward Kelly, whom he took into partnership and whom, especially during their sojourn in Bohemia, 1585-8, he entrusted with the task of invoking the spirits and interpreting their messages. It is small wonder that James I refused Dee's petition that he might be cleared of the slander that he was or had been 'a conjuror or caller or invocator of spirits.'

It is not possible to assess the value of Dee's works, as most of the seventy-nine he composed still remain in manuscript form. But it would seem to be certain that if he had adhered to pure science and steered clear of the esoteric or the occult, he would rank among the foremost British pioneers of science.

Authors

John James Jones, (1892 - 1957)

Dr Llewelyn Gwyn Chambers

Sources

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

The private Diary of Dr John Dee, and the catalogue of his library of manuscripts, from the original manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford and Trinity College Library, Cambridge (London 1842)

The Compendious Rehearsal of John Deehis dutifull declaration, and prooffe of the course and race of his studious life ... and of the very great injuries, damages, and indignities, which for these last nine years he hath in England sustained ... made unto the two honourable commissioners, by her most excellent Majestie thereto assigned, etc. (1726), vol. 24
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Further Reading

[BL Cotton. Ch. XIV.1.: Genealogical roll of the descent of John Dee ... showing his kinship with the Sovereigns of the House of Tudor](#)

Wikipedia Article: [John Dee](#)

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