

# **New Exhibition opens at Nelson Monument Celebrating 'Edinburgh's Forgotten Astronomer'**

A fascinating free new exhibition – part of a year-long series of events – opens in Edinburgh aiming to establish Charles Piazzi Smyth's place in Edinburgh's history. The exhibition, housed in Edinburgh's iconic Nelson Monument, presents Piazzi Smyth's photography, paintings and drawings, alongside a newly commissioned short film and interviews in what will be the first major exhibition in Edinburgh dedicated to the forgotten astronomer.

The location of the exhibition itself carries strong significance as in 1852 Piazzi Smyth started the Time Ball service which involved hoisting a large ball from the top of Nelson Monument which would drop at exactly one o'clock every day as a time signal to ships docked in Leith harbour.





In 1861 Piazzi Smyth added an audible element and set up the One O' Clock Gun service from Edinburgh Castle, stretching a cable all the way from Calton Hill to another clock on CastleRock, which fired the Gun. The cable is no longer in place but both the Time Ball on Nelson Monument and the One O' Clock Gun still remain active today, providing a daily reminder of Piazzi Smyth's legacy to the city.

Pioneering early photographer, accomplished artist, writer, meteorologist, traveller, enthusiastic investigator of pyramids and of course, ground-breaking astronomer and yet despite such achievements, very few will have heard of Charles Piazzi Smyth or of his innovative work, the influence of which is still felt around the world today.

Housed in the Nelson Monument Museum, the new exhibition aims to bring about a new awareness of Piazzi Smyth's work and that of his wife Jessica, forming part of a series of activity around the 200th anniversary of his birth.

In 1845 at the age of just 26, Piazzi Smyth was appointed Astronomer Royal for Scotland at the Calton Hill Observatory in Edinburgh, and also Professor of Astronomy in the University of Edinburgh. Whilst working as Astronomer Royal of

Scotland in the nineteenth century, Charles Piazzzi Smyth found that the polluted skies obscured the stars.

So, along with his new wife Jessica, he decided to take state of the art telescopes to Tenerife in 1856, climbing to altitudes of over 10,000ft. Thanks to his superb photography, scientific recording and drawings we can see how he clearly demonstrated why observatories should be at high altitude. It is through this work he can be said to have pioneered today's practice of positioning telescopes on mountain tops to obtain better observations.





As Astronomer Royal for Scotland he spent much of his time and did much of his work from the City Observatory on Calton Hill, which recently reopened to the public after 100 years and can be visited today.

Piazzi Smyth's later measurements of the Great Pyramid at Giza won him a medal, but his beliefs around pyramids caused him to



resign from the Royal Society and the Royal Society of Scotland after arguments about science and religion. His scientific legacy was marred by the controversy, regardless, his influence in the development of astronomy is undeniable, an influence which can still be felt in Edinburgh and across the world today.

Councillor Donald Wilson, Culture and Communities Convener for the City of Edinburgh Council, said: "This fascinating exhibition will really shine a light on one of Scotland's most important astronomers. Throughout his 40 years as Astronomer Royal for Scotland, Piazzzi Smyth did much of his work from Calton Hill and with his invention of the Time Ball service, it is extremely fitting to house this wonderful exhibition in the Nelson Monument.

"For hundreds of years, Calton Hill has been a cherished place for star gazers and has association with many prominent individuals from Scotland's history such as David Hume, Robert Burns and William Henry Playfair. Now it is time to spread the word about Edinburgh's forgotten astronomer, Charles Piazzzi Smyth and his place in Scottish history."

Regius Professor of Astronomy at the University of Edinburgh, Professor Andy Lawrence said: "Piazzzi Smyth and his wife Jessie are great Edinburgh characters but are forgotten in the city where they worked. Astronomers tour the world to observatories because of Charles' work. His scientific work underpins much of our work today.

"As we launch the exhibition, we are also beginning a grand Time Gun Public Experiment. As a first step, we just want to find out who can hear the One O' Clock Gun. Any day between Monday April 8th and Sunday April14th, we are asking citizens and visitors to listen out for the Gun, and let us know via social media with the hashtag #IHeardTheGun, and tell us where they were. Later in the year we will get more ambitious and time the delay all over Town!"



Charles Piazzi Smyth Exhibition at Nelson Monument (c) Ian Georgeson

A short film to accompany the exhibition has been created by Written in Film and can be [viewed here](#).

The exhibition is a partnership between Royal Observatory Edinburgh, Museums & Galleries Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh and the Astronomical Society of Edinburgh. The exhibition is part of the celebration of Charles Piazzi Smyth's 200th anniversary including a series of public talks, a citizen science experiment with the One O' Clock Gun, Lauriston Castle lecture; 'Stars, Time and Mountains' and a Symposium at the Royal Society of Edinburgh. More events and more information at [www.piazzismyth.org](http://www.piazzismyth.org)

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