

## How Mercury holds clues to the origins of The Stationers' Company

By Julian Venables, astrologer, horoscopes writer & novelist.

The purpose of this article is to introduce briefly and make known to you historical insights from my astrologer's perspective, and from which you might like to then draw your own conclusions.

In August 2017 I attended one of the Stationers' Company lectures at the Guildhall library, given by past master Helen Esmonde. She explained that the origin of the Stationers' name in the 13/14th Centuries was shrouded in 'mystery'. Looking at the origin of that word shows it comes from the early 14c. Anglo-French 'misterie' which means a hidden spiritual significance, mystical truth or meaning.

I decided this was a good opportunity to don my detective's hat as in my specialism as an astrologer, I often find the deeper meaning and significance through understanding the often overlooked mystical science. I started to ponder on what the Stationers' Company's origins might be within an astrological context.

In recent years I have done much research on the history of the City of London in order to write my first novel "The Astrologers Apprentice" for young adults, which is based on the true story of England's most popular 17th century astrologer William Lilly, who predicted to the day the Great Fire of London 15 years before it happened.

During the research I studied the great architect Christopher Wren's map of London (Figure 1) that he designed after the fire. It was never used but it remains a fascinating historical document of what London might have been like.

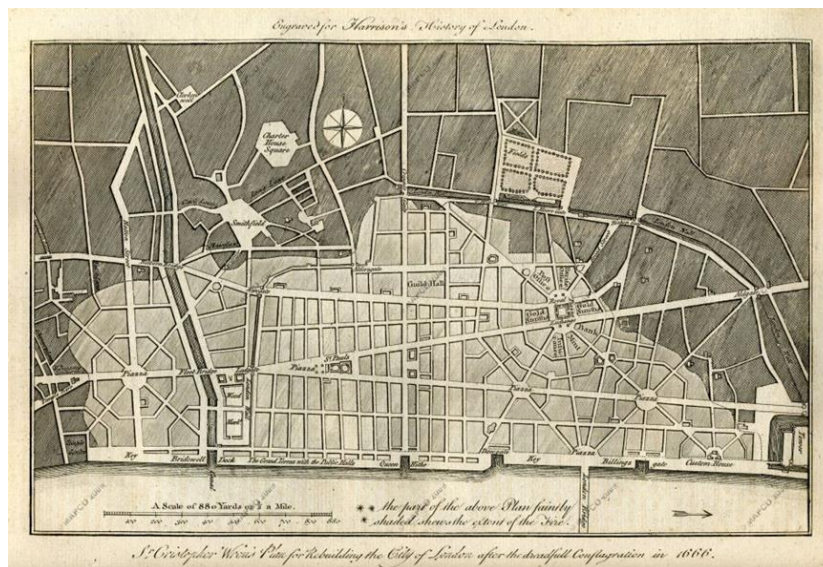


Figure 1: Christopher Wren's map of London designed in 1666.

Looking closer at the map I noticed Wren had included the astrological symbol of Mercury, placing it at the top of Fleet Street right beside Ludgate. (Fig.2)

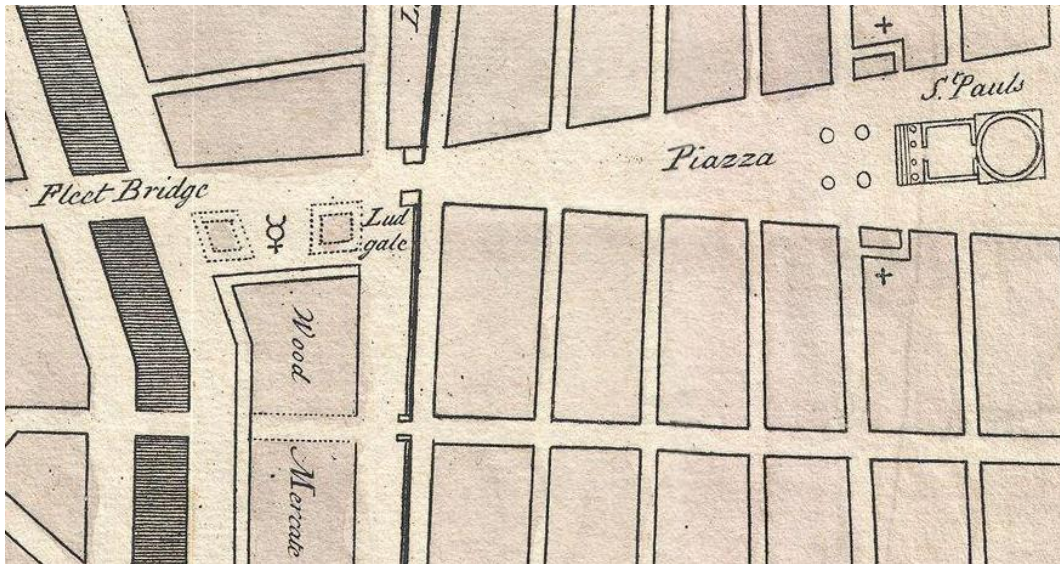


Figure 2: Close up of the Mercury Symbol in Wren's Map beside Ludgate

The Mercury symbol in astrology (Fig.3) rules and represents the principles of communication, mentality, thinking patterns, rationality, reasoning, adaptability and variability. Mercury governs schooling and education, the immediate environment of neighbours, siblings and cousins, transport over short distances, messages and forms of communication such as post, email and telephone, newspapers, journalism, writing and information gathering skills. Essentially it is Mercury's role to 'get the message across' in whatever form it takes.



Fig 3: The Mercury Symbol

To see that Christopher Wren had placed this symbol at the top of Fleet Street, which later on was to develop into the home of newspaper media, was a nod and a wink to his esoteric leanings, something that was extremely popular in the 17th century (for example his friend and contemporary Isaac Newton was an astrologer and alchemist; it was Newton's deep and profound study of those ancient arts that helped him formulate his Principia Mathematica in 1687).

But why did Wren place the Mercury symbol there? What else is it about the City of London that has a connection to the planet Mercury? That question is answered when one takes a walk around the Square mile.

The City contains a prolific number of friezes, statues and sculptures of the old Roman god Mercury (Fig. 4, 5,6,7,8, 9, 10, and 11. There are many examples; these are a select few. *Photos courtesy of Cathey Leitch*)

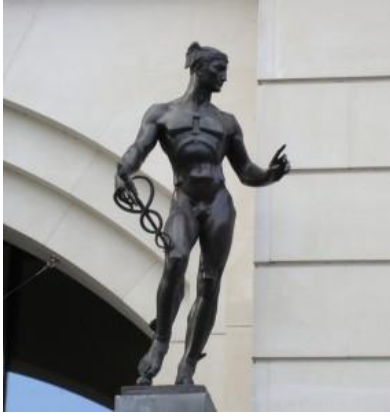


Fig 4: Mercury statue at 4, Temple Place Holborn.



Fig 5: Mercury House, 124 Theobalds Road.



Fig.6: Mercury on the former Daily Telegraph Building, 135 Fleet Street.



Fig.7 Mercury on the Adelphi Building, Adelphi Terrace.





Fig.8 Mercury with Britannia on the former NatWest Building, corner of Prince's Street & Poultry.



Fig.9 On the corner of Temple Avenue and Tudor Street.

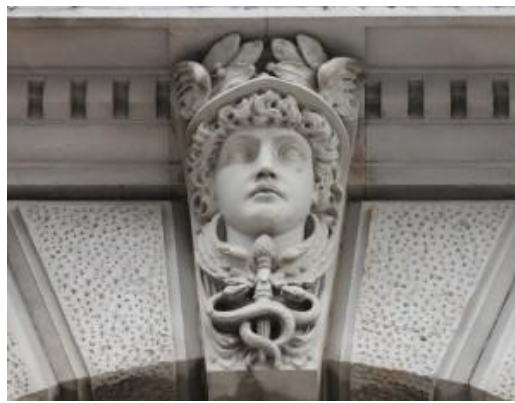


Fig.10: Mercury on 37-38 Threadneedle Street.



Fig.11: Mercury on 39-40 Lombard Street.

When the Roman's originally established the trading port of Londinium around AD 43, they dedicated its existence, success and growth to their god Mercury, the winged messenger who acts as an intermediate between the will of the gods and the earthly affairs of man.

Mercury was a major god in the Roman pantheon being the patron of financial gain, commerce, transactions, travellers, trickery, and thieves.

Stemming from Mercury comes the Latin word for business and trade Merx (commodity) which today can be found in the words merchant, merchandise, commerce and mercantile (and coincidentally in the Mercers Company and the Merchant Taylors). The exchange or sale of wares and goods was so vital to the success of a trading port that Mercury's blessing was sought out by transacting merchants on a daily basis.

It can be said a successful merchant is one who possesses a quick mind and a fast tongue and who takes a decisive stance on the matters at hand. These are all important attributes of Mercury acting in one's favour.

Interestingly enough, as can be seen in the images, the mythical symbolic image of Mercury is of the youth wearing a winged helmet and sandals, which denote the deity's physical dexterity. Mercury is always seen holding its caduceus (its wand, like a Harry Potter character). The caduceus is represented as the two little horns on the mercury symbol (Fig.3), which serves two meanings: firstly to balance the two hemispheres of the brain for correct communications, and secondly as the conduit for interactions and interplay between two people (for example in business deals).

Mercury is also often seen pointing his index finger to the sky (Fig. 4 & 12), urging those Roman merchants to "look up" to attain success in their business endeavours.

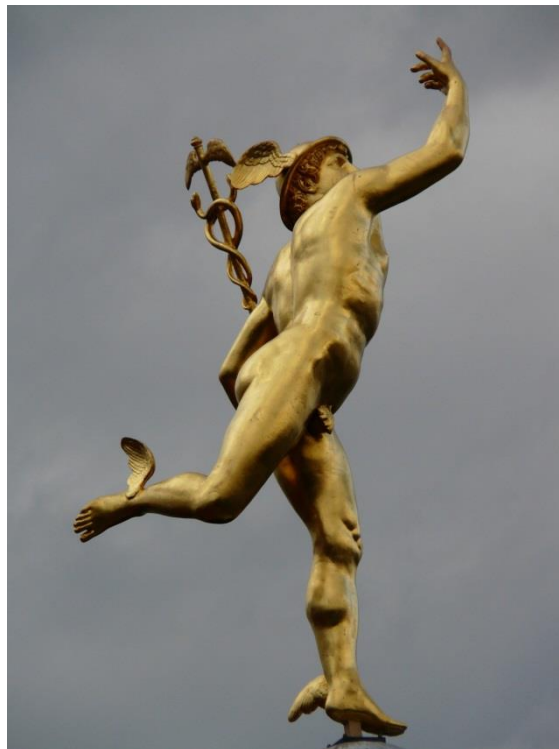


Fig.12: Mercury points upwards: Look Up!

The act of "looking up" is in fact to observe carefully the regular motions in the night sky of this quick and agile planet, particularly in its behaviour with the Sun over the course of each year.

Astronomy informs us that Mercury's orbit around the Sun takes 88 days, and its full phase cycle as seen from Earth takes approximately 116 days. This is called its synodic period.

In this way Mercury continuously alternates its position with regards to the Sun, to be seen either sparkling in the dawn sky of morning, before sunrise, or sparkling in the dusk of the evening, after sunset.

In between these alternating phases, it makes what are known as superior and inferior conjunctions to the Sun (superior: to go above or beyond; inferior: to go below or under).

This is why the Romans associated Mercury the god with Mercury the planet's speed and swiftness; however during the course of a year there are six times in which the planet 'appears' to 'slow down'

to no apparent motion as it appears to change its direction (which it doesn't but from our Earth orbit it seems to) See Fig. 13.

These six changes in direction are the three 'direct' stations and the three 'retrograde' stations (retrograde means as if going in reverse). In astronomy and astrology these are called its "stationary" points.

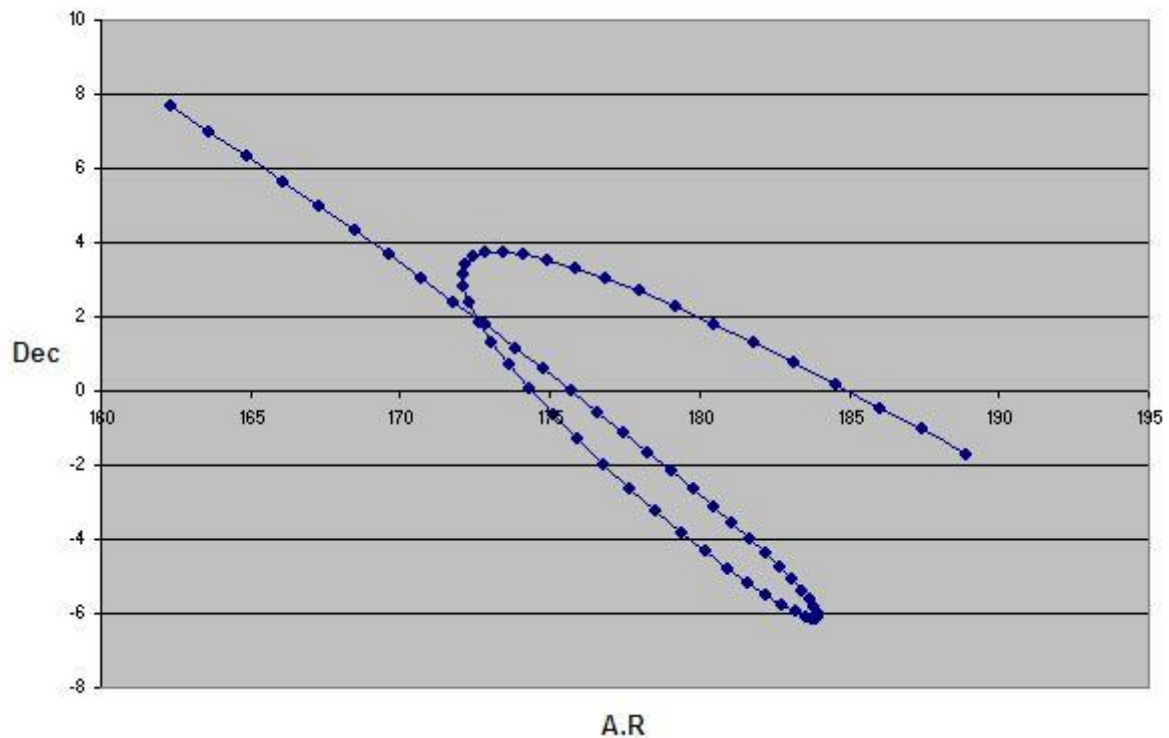


Fig.13: This diagram shows the apparent changes of direction on the path of Mercury with respect to its movement along the Celestial Equator by Right Ascension (RA) and Declination (DEC).

Right Ascension is the equivalent of Longitude and Declination is the equivalent of Latitude. The difference between Right Ascension and Longitude is that Right Ascension is measured in hours and minutes and not degrees East or West of the First Point of Aries.

In both astronomy and astrology the tight arc of the loop is known as its 'stationary retrograde' point and the slightly wider loop after the crossing point is known as its 'stationary direct' point.

The first entry in the online Etymology Dictionary states the word stationary is first found being used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and means "having no apparent motion" (in reference to planets). This comes from the Middle French *stationnaire* "motionless". The meaning "unmovable" is from 1620s.

Now, imagine if you will to travel back to the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when there were neither electricity nor clocks.

Each day after sunset man was presented with a vast and awe-inspiring night sky of stars, the dome of the celestial sphere, which fuelled his imagination and his continual wonderment at the meaning of his place inside God's universe.

Across this glittering infinite space, man would watch the seven visible planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and of course the Sun and the Moon) make their journeys across the sky following the path of the celestial equator, repeating the same courses year after year.

Over thousands of years of repeating cycles man noticed when different planets aligned at different times, or were at different positions in the sky, then 'correspondences' would occur simultaneously matching events on earth with the planets movements up in the heavens. This recording and comparing of correlated events became the origin of time keeping.

This led humanity to believe in the movements of the planets as bearing an influence on human and mundane (worldly) affairs. Hence by Roman times, there were specific deities (the visible planets) that needed to be appeased, listened to and personally understood in order for one to have a successful and happy life.

But the Romans also needed to know precisely when the planets were due to interact and affect life on Earth, and thus the birth of astrology (astro- stars; logos- knowledge) came about.

Man's empirical observations of the heavens movements started to be recorded in order that prescience or foreknowledge could be attained when necessary.

One of the most sought after planets for its variable movements was Mercury- when it appeared to stand still for a few days six times a year, it acted at its most potent and powerful, and that was always recorded as affecting transport, trade and business (or any of the other things that Mercury rules).

Every time a Mercury "station" occurred it would always bring some "new thing" or "the news".

Sky observers or 'correspondents' would make a careful note of the planets motions from a 'fixed' position, particularly when Mercury was making its stations, as from experience, they knew the times when Mercury would be at its trickiest (whenever it deviated off its path along the Celestial equator). As always the message or the communication had to get through, mediation between two parties had to occur, and the gods had to get their message to earth.

Imagine how, in a largely illiterate sea port as London, there were only a few select men who could read and write such as the Limners and Scriveners. They were the diligent and dutiful recorders of the various celestial phenomena, including those all-important stationary points. The origin of the word Limner is associated to 'Lumen' (radiant energy, light) and Lucere (to shine). In medieval man's world of candlelight at night time, the five visible planets at night-time would be seen as emitting a radiant, shining energy in the night sky.

It is my supposition therefore that in early medieval London the Limners and Scriveners who specialised in the recording of the celestial movements, found themselves given a new name, "Stationers", turning the adjective "Stationary" into the noun "Stationer".

Navigation by the stars is at the core of shipping and trading by sea. It is an inherently risky business.

It follows therefore that when using an international sea trading port such as Londinium, the navigators of the ships coming and going into port and a safe harbour would take all their guidance by navigating by the stars. This was a vital and necessary art as any ship would be lost at sea without direction if it was not possible to use the stars as guiding lights.

Merchants and traders had a need to know what was going to happen out at sea on a long journey, and so Stationers, aware of repeating time cycles, advised and informed on a continuous and daily

basis. What we now know as the weather forecast was originally termed Astro-meteorology, the study of weather patterns correlating to the planetary cycles.

Therefore the role of the Stationer would most likely have been to inform the tradesmen, merchants and other commodity brokers of the correct times to set their ships to sail, and also the times to expect the safe passage of their goods and wares, the precious investments arriving at harbour from abroad, ready for sale.

The to-ing and fro-ing of all this business was to a great extent planned around the movement of the planets. A perfect example is the monthly lunar cycle which creates the pull on the oceans that makes high tides and low tides. All of the seven visible planets have their own influences on business and trade in different ways.

A ship packed full of a merchants commodities, couldn't leave the dock until high tide on the Thames. The safe passage of ships, as well as their contents and crew was so important to the efficient and successful running of the City that its merchants would be desperate to know, in advance, what was going to happen (this is the origins of the insurance industry).

This required 'foreknowledge' was such in demand, that one can imagine all the merchants 'pressing' together to get the latest information from the Stationers so they could plan out their business and their investments.

The word 'press' comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> century French presse, and means a crowd, throng or jostling mass. It's possible to imagine a Stationer with a pamphlet of his latest prognostications being crowded around for his valuable information. In this way once the printing press was invented, a press meant a "machine for printing". It was then the Stationers, forming themselves into a company, created the first printed almanacs for commercial sale on a regular basis.

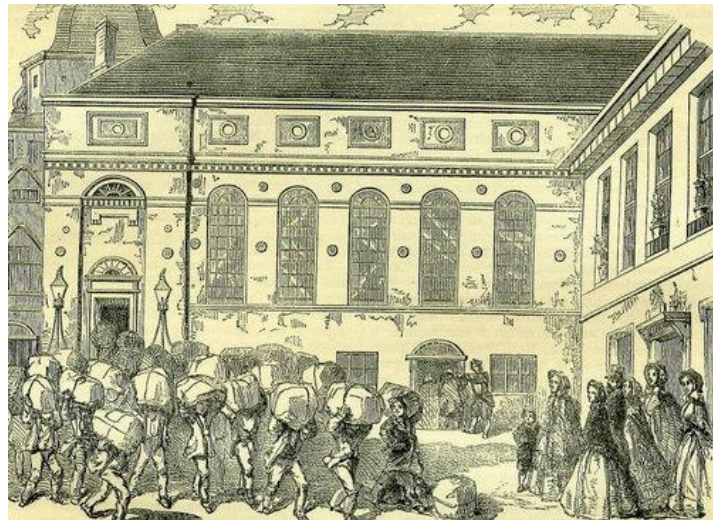


Fig 16: Almanac day at Stationers Hall. Clearly a popular publication...

Furthermore each Stationer would likely have wisely chosen a "fixed" and "immoveable" position in St. Pauls churchyard, just a couple of hundred metres from Thames riverside, a place where a hurried or exasperated merchant, jumping ashore and urgent to do a deal, offload his cargo or buy or sell merchandise would know precisely where to find their favourite Stationer with the information on which to base their trading activity.

So one can see how Mercury's ability to act as a go-between in business and trading matters, started in Roman Empire Londinium and has carried on through to the printing press and up to the present day. Stationers became rich and prosperous through their publishing of almanacs with specific



timings, and the mediating influence between the heavens and earth was integrated into London's continued growth and development over the centuries.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, so gradually over time the prescience of astrology seemed to be largely forgotten with the development of science. The popularity of the almanac waned somewhat, to be instead replaced in the mid-20th century with the hugely popular newspaper sun sign columns for the 12 zodiac signs.

It is estimated today that around the world 700 million people read their daily horoscope in the newspapers and magazines, all knowing "there is something about it" that connects their earthly lives to the celestial realms and how a bit of foresight, prediction or prognostication is a useful and valued tool in their personal lives as well as our modern and busy world.

As the Stationers' Company has a long history in the development of the almanac, then I would like to propose a revival for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, maybe in a digital format. I hope you have enjoyed these entertaining insights.

If you want to know more about astrology and media horoscopes or to discover more about historical London from an astrologer's perspective, please get in touch.

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23<sup>rd</sup> February 2017

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***Julian Venables is a novelist and content media writer (all formats of horoscopes) and a consulting astrologer.***

***Julian joined the Stationers Company as a Freeman on January 15<sup>th</sup> 2018; he is a direct descendant of Sir William Venables, a past Master of the Stationers Company and Lord Mayor of London in 1825.***

***He researched and wrote this article because he has developed a new creative concept for media horoscopes, which he proposes, will stimulate sales of newspapers and retain brand loyalty amongst readers. He is keen to discuss his unique commercial proposal to newspaper editors and fellow Stationers who could give it a suitable platform.***

### **References:**

- 1) [https://stationers.org/images/Helen\\_Esmond edited for website From Genesis to Google 3 August .pdf](https://stationers.org/images/Helen_Esmond edited for website From Genesis to Google 3 August .pdf)
- 2) From the Etymology dictionary:

### **stationery (noun)**

1727, from *stationery wares* (c. 1680) "articles sold by a stationer," from stationer "seller of books and paper".

### **stationer (noun)**

"book-dealer, seller of books and paper," early 14c. (late 13c. as a surname), from Medieval Latin *stationarius* "tradesman who sells from a station or shop," noun use of Latin *stationarius* (see **stationary**). Roving peddlers were the norm in the Middle Ages; sellers with a

fixed location often were bookshops licensed by universities; hence the word acquired a more specific sense than its etymological one.

### **stationary (adjective)**

late 14c., "having no apparent motion" (in reference to planets), from Middle French *stationnaire* "motionless" and directly from Latin *stationarius*, from the stem of *statio* "a standing, post, job, position" (see **station** (n.)).

### **limn (verb)**

early 15c., "to illuminate" (manuscripts), altered from Middle English *luminen*, "to illuminate manuscripts" (late 14c.), from Old French *luminer* "light up, illuminate," from Latin *luminare* "illuminate, burnish," from *lumen* (genitive *luminis*) "radiant energy, light," related to *lucere* "to shine." Related: *Limned*; *limner*.

Images of Mercury around the City are courtesy of Cathey Leitch