“Dear and Serviceable to Each Other”: Benjamin Franklin and the Royal Society of Arts

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In 1756 Benjamin Franklin, a fifty-year-old Philadelphian who, having attained a personal fortune from his successful printing and publishing business, devoted his time to public affairs, educational and philanthropic schemes, and scientific experiments, was elected into the membership of two London institutions: the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge, and the Society instituted at London for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.

Unlike the Royal Society, which was nearly a century old and possessed enormous esteem in the international scientific community, the Society of Arts, or “Premium Society” as it was often called, had only recently come into existence.¹

It had been founded after an extensive and largely fruitless canvass, by William Shipley and ten other enthusiasts, meeting at Rawthmells Coffee House in Covent Garden on 22 March 1754. Soon after there appeared in the daily and evening newspapers a notice announcing the Society’s first offers of “premiums” or rewards. These were for discovering cobalt, for raising and curing madder, and for the best drawings by boys and girls. Shipley informed his American friend, Dr. Alexander Garden of South Carolina, about the progress of his society, and received from him a copy of Franklin’s “Plan for promoting of Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America” and a suggestion that premiums should be offered for the cultivation of vines, planting mulberry trees, raising hemp and flax, and making potash in Carolina.

Thus the elements that would make the Society of Arts attractive to Franklin were already in place. It was a scheme for the public good

¹ It became the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in 1908.
carried on by “disinterested” private individuals, it was concerned with the practical application of scientific knowledge, and it sought to encourage economic development in North America as well as Great Britain. No wonder he responded favourably to an invitation he received from Shipley in 1755, to become a member of this new Society even though, as he was to write many years later, he “had no expectation then of ever going to England, and acting with it.”\(^2\) The conflict between the Assembly in Pennsylvania and the Penn family in London suddenly made Franklin’s presence in the imperial capital a political necessity. After a dangerous and lengthy sea voyage he reached the Bear Inn, Southampton, on 26 January 1757. Then after stopping for a few days with a friend in Mill Hill he and his son William took lodgings in Craven Street, a turning off the Strand near Charing Cross, which was to be his home for the rest of his stay in London.

Craven Street ran from Charing Cross to the river. Franklin was thus in easy walking distance of the Society of Arts’ offices, which were on the corner of Castle Court, Strand, until 1759; in Denmark Court, Strand, from 1759 to 1774, and then in their present-day Adelphi home.\(^3\) He attended the meeting that recommended the appointment of William Chambers as the architect of the Denmark Court premises and it was in this magnificent, though insecure, building that most of his work for the Society took place. An exception was his attendance at a committee meeting held at an inn in Marylebone in 1761. It is also possible that he was present at some of the Society’s annual dinners, which were held either at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand, or the St. Alban’s Tavern, Pall Mall.

He would, of course, have been used to travelling about the town and city to attend the Royal Society in Crane Court, Fleet Street, Dr. Bray’s associates at Mr. Bird’s bookshop in Ave Mary Lane, or in the “Club of Honest Whigs” at the St. Paul’s Coffee House nearby, and later at the London Coffee House in Ludgate Hill, the literary club at the Prince of Wales Tavern in Conduit Street, the Philosophers’ Dining Club at the Mitre in Fleet Street, and, returning westward, the Board of Trade offices in Treasury Passage, Whitehall, and, on certain memorable occasions, the Houses of Parliament in Westminster.

Though familiar with the major monuments of the metropolis from his visit in 1725, he would have noticed the new bridge over the Thames at Westminster, completed in 1750, and would have seen in the late 1760s the extraordinary riverside development that the Adam

\(^2\) See below, reference 47.

brothers named after themselves “The Adelphi,” and would certainly have been aware of the house they built there for the Society of Arts during the last years of his stay in London. What Franklin enjoyed most about the capital was the sense it gave him of being at the centre of things. In contrast to his home in faraway Philadelphia, he now found himself within a stone’s throw of Charing Cross, the place where Samuel Johnson found “the full tide of human existence.” Like Johnson he gained intellectual stimulation from the company he met in clubs, coffee houses, taverns and drawing rooms, and like him he was drawn into the circle of “Nobility, clergy, gentlemen and merchants” that formed the Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.\(^4\)

Benjamin Franklin’s association with the Society of Arts falls into five phases: an initial period of correspondence, 1755–57, when he agreed to join the Society but did not imagine he would ever be in London to attend its meetings; his period of active involvement, which began in September 1757 and lasted until he left for America in August 1762; a second period of correspondence from America, 1762–64; a period of occasional attendance and interest that lasted until his final departure from this country in 1775; and a last period of indirect association through his friendship with William Shipley, Joshua Steele, Caleb Whitefoord, and Samuel More, ending with his letter to the latter dated 1789.

I. Correspondence and Election 1755–1757

The minutes of the Society of Arts for 18 June 1755 record that “a Plan drawn up by Mr Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, for establishing a Philosophical Society in America was read, and was judged to be an excellent Design, if it can be put in Practice, for the Improvement and Communication of Science among the British Colonies in America, and for carrying on literary Correspondences in Europe, but this not being sent to the Society, by Mr Franklin, nor coming within the Plan of this Society, no other Notice could be taken of it than to order that it be preserved.” William Shipley, who had founded the Society in the previous year and who was serving as its secretary, had laid Franklin’s plan before the Society, and with characteristic diffidence had kept his own name out of the minutes. We cannot know if he was satisfied with the outcome of his action, but at the suggestion of some of his friends he wrote to Franklin on 13 September inviting him to be a corresponding member of the Society. The letter reached Philadelphia in November, and Franklin replied to Shipley on the twenty-seventh, accepting membership of the Society and offering a subscription of twenty guineas to be used for the benefit of Great Britain. By June of the following year Franklin had learnt that his letter had “miscarried,” so he sent a copy. This arrived safely in London and was read to a meeting of the Society on 18 August, when Shipley formally proposed Franklin as a corresponding member. His election took place on 16 September 1756. It was arranged that Henry Baker, author of the Society’s constitution, should draft a reply that would be sent to Franklin in Shipley’s name. It contained this celebrated sentence:

Their Desire is to make Great Britain and her Colonies mutually dear and serviceable to each other.

Franklin’s generous donation of twenty guineas was accepted on
the understanding that it was to be used for the benefit of the empire as a whole.\footnote{London, Royal Society of Arts, MS Minutes (cited hereafter as RSA Soc. Min.) under dates, Guard Book 1: 87, 126; \textit{The Papers of Benjamin Franklin} (ed. L. W. Labaree and successors [New Haven: Yale University, 1959–]), cited hereafter as \textit{Franklin Papers}, 186, 257. See also D.G.C. Allan, \textit{William Shipley. Founder of the Royal Society of Arts: a biography with documents} (revised ed., London: Scolar Press, 1979).}

2. \textbf{Active Membership 1757–1762}

Franklin came to London in the spring of 1757. Having received a donation of $32 for the benefit of the Society from John Hughes, a fellow Philadelphian, he went down in September to the institution’s rooms in Castle Court, Strand, and attended his first meeting at 6 p.m. on seventh of that month. Besides Franklin, who was listed as “Esquire,” there were thirteen members present, including Lord Romney, the vice-president, who presided, Mr. William Shipley, founder of the Society, who held the office of register, and Mr. George Box, the secretary. Franklin could have had the opportunity of coming face to face with Mr. Henry Baker, the microscopist and active Fellow of the Royal Society, and with Thomas Hollis, Esq., the benefactor of Harvard. Proceedings began with the reading of the minutes of the previous week’s meeting and the election of two new members. The previous minutes were then given a second reading and “taken into consideration Article by Article.”

Henry Baker read a letter he had composed to be sent on behalf of the Society to Dr. Alexander Garden of South Carolina. The minutes show that this was approved, and we can imagine that Franklin, who was acquainted with Garden’s interest in botanical improvements, would have concurred. A letter from a person in Bristol who wished for information to help him in making salt petre was read, and the information ordered to be sent to him. Then it was Franklin’s turn to rise and read “an Extract of a Letter to him from Mr John Hughes Merchant of Philadelphia as follows ‘I herewith put into your Hands Thirty two Dollars, which I desire you’ll present to the Society you mentioned to me some time ago, and be pleased to let them know I commit it to their Direction to be laid out either for the good of Great Britain or America as they think proper’; which Donation was paid in by Mr Franklin.” It was then “ordered That the Thanks of the Society be returned to Mr Hughes for the above Donation; and also to Mr Franklin for the trouble he has taken in this matter.” One new member
was then proposed and the meeting was adjourned to “Wednesday Sept 21st at 6 pm precisely.”

Franklin did not attend this next meeting and he also missed the two that took place in October. He had suffered from illness at this time, but recovered sufficiently in November to resume his meetings with Thomas Penn, and to attend the Royal Society. The Society of Arts met weekly from 2 November but Franklin did not attend until 14 December, which was one of the four General Meetings prescribed to be held each year under the Society’s “Plan.” It was a crowded affair with sixty-seven members and the secretary present. Hollis, Baker, and Shipley were again present, as was Lord Macclesfield, PRS, whom Franklin had recently met at the Royal Society, and Thomas Penn, joint proprietor of Pennsylvania, with whom Franklin was at this time negotiating. Other notable members were William Chambers, the architect; Matthew Duane, the Roman Catholic lawyer; Robert Dodsley, the printer; John Fielding, the magistrate; Jonas Hanway, the philanthropist; Lord Viscount Parker FRS; Israel Wilkes, the brother of John; Jonathan Tyers, the proprietor of Vauxhall Gardens; and the Revd Dr. Thomas Wilson, chaplain to the royal family. Eighteen new members were elected, and a report from the committee appointed to determine the premiums to be paid for cultivating madder was approved. Two ladies who wished to submit needlework were told they were ineligible for rewards, as was the inventor of a handmill. A candidate for the premium for preserving ships’ timbers was told how he should proceed with his experiments, and the proposal for a premium for an engine for “blowing” meat was noted. A letter from Dr. Samuel Madden in Ireland was read, which contained the following prophetic reference: “I am rejoiced at Mr Franklin’s coming over with so good a Plan which to the shame of government has been overlooked such a number of years. If our Colonies be not properly modelled and protected nothing but Ruin and Disgrace can follow. . . .” A committee was appointed to revise the Rules and Orders of the Society, and arrangements were made for the translation and presentation of a Latin essay on cobalt. The minutes concluded by recording the proposal of nineteen new members for the Society, and fixing the dates of the next meeting. Before that, however, it was ordered, to the disappointment of posterity, “[t]hat the taking down the Names of the Members present at each meeting be for the future dispensed with.”

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6 RSA, Soc. Min., 7 Sept. 1757.
7 For Franklin’s activities outside the Society of Arts I have used the “chronology” in the various volumes of the Franklin Papers.
8 RSA, Guard Book 3: 119.
As a result of this measure we cannot be certain about Franklin’s presence on subsequent occasions. However, the minutes of the Society’s meetings continued to record the proposal and election of new members, the appointment of committees, and, after 1759, of committee chairmen. From this evidence and from the minutes of the committees themselves, which have survived from 1759 onwards, and which always recorded the names of participants, we can build up a record of Franklin’s continued service to the Society.

The Society’s committee system was in a state of evolution that would reach its final form in 1760. The constitutional “Plan” of 1755 mentioned only an annually appointed committee of accounts; such a committee would continue to exist throughout the century and beyond. Franklin was never a member. Though not mentioned in the “Plan,” the Society had since its earliest days felt empowered to appoint ad hoc committees. By March 1757, twenty-two such bodies had been used for various purposes. By this date a second standing committee had come into existence, called the “Committee of Premiums,” which in 1760 would be divided into six classes: agriculture, chemistry, colonies and trade, manufactures, mechanics, and the “polite arts.” Franklin would attend all of these. There was also another administrative committee, for correspondence and papers, from which, in spite of his publishing skills, Franklin was absent. A minute book for what would become the committee of miscellaneous matters occasionally recorded an attendance by Franklin.

The regulation relating to the composition of the Society’s committees had also taken time to evolve. In 1755 a rider was added to the naming of an ad hoc committee that “any other member of the Society” would be regarded as belonging to a committee should he “be pleased to attend.” The 1758 Rules and Orders laid down the rule that was to prevail until the nineteenth century: “Notwithstanding particular gentlemen are named for each committee, every Member that shall please to attend is of every Committee.”

The ad hoc committees were named at the time of their appointment, which might be at any of the Society’s meetings throughout the year. The use the Society made of them increased rapidly up to 1760 and then declined, probably as a result of the growing importance of the standing committees. Their sizes ranged from single figures to twenty or more. In special cases, such as the committee appointed on 1 November 1758 to examine handmills for grinding corn, the total could exceed fifty. This was the first ad hoc committee to which Franklin was named; his nomination is the only surviving evidence to connect him with the Society in 1758. The standing committees were named each November from 1759 onwards, and were often reappointed for successive years when the Society would resolve that “the
same Gentlemen who were named the last year for the several Committees, be continued the ensuing years.” Though he was not nominated to the committee of premiums until November 1760, the minutes show that Franklin spent hours at the Society on 3 February 1759 attending two meetings to discuss premiums for silk and tea, one to judge drawings, and an ad hoc committee meeting regarding the appointment of William Chambers as architect for the Society’s new premises in Denmark Court. A week later he was at a further premium committee to discuss myrtle wax, and on 24 March 1759 he was present for a discussion on silk. The latter date also saw him at a committee to discuss premiums for county maps. There followed a long period of absence, which may in part have been due to his negotiations with the Board of Trade, and was certainly affected by his travels to Scotland from 8 April to 2 November. At the end of the year he returned to the Society for a committee meeting on 28 December 1759, when the use of Zante grapes was discussed.10

Franklin’s attendances for 1760 began on 25 January, when the previous discussion of Zante grapes in the colonies was resumed. It is likely that he was present at the Society’s annual dinner held on 11 March at the St. Alban’s Tavern. At the end of March he attended the agricultural section of the premium committee on the planting of “Scotch Firs.”11 His committee attendances were then concentrated in the month of April. Spread over five days between the eleventh and the twenty-first, these April meetings were devoted to the whole range of the Society’s interests: agriculture, chemistry, colonies, manufactures, mechanics, and the polite arts.12 Also in this month Franklin for the first time proposed a member: Jared Ingersoll, a resident of New Haven, Connecticut, and a future Loyalist. From 16 July to 1 October the Society met only sporadically. It revived the custom of recording the names of attending members; Franklin was not amongst them. Throughout the summer he was busy with Board of Trade and Privy Council business. He toured the West Country and visited Wales from mid-September to 1 November. The latter month saw two committee attendances by Franklin: one on traps for rats, another on the design of a copper medal.13

10 Ibid., Soc. Min. and Minutes of Committees (cited hereafter as Min. Com.) under dates; Society of Arts, Rules and Orders, 1758.

11 The sections of the Premium Committee changed into separate standing committees during the course of 1760 without any special regulation from the Society.

12 RSA, Min. Com. (Agriculture) 19 April; (Chemistry) 18 April; (Colonies) 19 April; (Manufactures) 11, 18, 19 April; (Mechanics) 21 April; (Polite Arts) 17 April, 1760.

Although his name was not put forward as a candidate for election as chairman of any of the standing committees when the first annual ballot was held on 19 November 1760, and although Israel Wilkes and Sir Thomas Robinson were chosen as the two chairmen for colonies and trade on that date, the Society’s minutes for 3 December 1760 show the esteem in which Franklin was held amongst many of the members: “Dr Franklin being present his consent was asked for being one of the Chairmen of the Committee of Colonies & Trade which he accepted.”

Franklin had already taken the chair earlier in the year. His absence from the ballot is difficult to explain. Perhaps like his friend Thomas Hollis he was diffident about accepting office and preferred to work behind the scenes for the benefit of the Society. Yet once Robinson and Wilkes, who were at this time shouldering many other committee responsibilities, had declined to serve, Franklin seems to have been the obvious choice to work in tandem with John Pownall, who had agreed to serve a week earlier. Pownall through his association with the Board of Trade was also well qualified for the office.\(^\text{14}\)

The last month of 1760 was therefore especially busy. At the committee of agriculture on 1 December it was recorded that “Dr Franklin gave an account of a very useful grass which had been lately propagated through several provinces of N. America called by the name of Timothy Grass.” On 8 December, Franklin was at a special committee on tea seeds and nutmegs, and the next day saw him present at the committee of colonies and trade when applications for the potash premium and the terms for the continuation of the offer were considered. The matter was resumed on the sixteenth when Franklin took the chair for the first time. On the eighteenth he was at a committee of mechanics to consider a letter about ship-building, and on the twenty-second and twenty-ninth at the committee of agriculture to discuss carrots and maize. A meeting of the colonies committee for the thirtieth is recorded in the minutes as being attended by “Dr Franklyn,” which we may take to be a variant spelling of his name.\(^\text{15}\)

Franklin’s first recorded attendance in the new year took place on 6 January, when he took the chair at the committee of colonies and trade, presiding over discussions about persimmon gum, botanic gardens, dyes from logwood trees, myrtle wax (of use in candle making), sericulture, American sturgeon, isinglass, hemp, silk grass, and opium.


\(^{15}\) RSA, Min. Com., as cited and under dates.
These matters together with the premiums for potash and pearlash occupied the committee in a great deal of research and administrative planning. It may be imagined that Franklin’s knowledge of conditions in the colonies was of great assistance. Though now himself in London he undertook to act, in conjunction with John Hughes, as one of the Society’s correspondents in Pennsylvania who would be responsible for paying and verifying the premium for silk production. The committee were expected to give their opinion on the cultivation of various products. They had access to Miller’s *Gardener’s Dictionary* and “frequently [found it] necessary to have recourse to the *Philosophical Transactions.*” Franklin was in the chair at a meeting attended by Lord Willoughby of Parham, like himself a Fellow of the Royal Society, when it was resolved to “recommend the purchasing of the annual volumes of the *Philosophical Transactions.*”  

Franklin had not missed a meeting of this committee since his appointment as a chairman and he maintained the record until the end of the session, being present on ten occasions, eight of which saw him taking the chair.

The concluding meeting, held on 16 June, brought him into contact with his fellow printer, Richard Cave, who did so much to publicise the Society in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, of which he was proprietor. The minutes are worth quoting to show the way in which the Society recorded its proceedings at the time:

**Strand, June 16th 1761**

Dr Franklin in the chair  
Mr Badcock, Mr Mackenzie, Dr Stephens, Mr Cave

Mr Cave delivered in a fair copy of the Description of Deal and Fir Timbers with the Prices in Peace and War *ruled* in different columns as desired.

Ordered that eleven copies of the Description as above mentioned be made, that one of the said copies be sent with the specimen of Deal &c to each place in North America which has been assigned for them.

Agreed to recommend to the Society that as the Account Mr Cave has delivered in at the request of the Committee of the expense of the Specimens amounts to £10.16s.4d. and as the Committee are of the opinion that another specimen be sent which he undertakes to provide and will be an additional expense and as he has trouble in drawing up a description of the said specimen and very frankly communi-

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16 Ibid., Min. Com. (Colonies) 17 April, 17 Feb. 1761, 20 Jan.; 3, 17, 24 Feb.; 3, 24 March; 10 April, 16 June, present 27 Jan., 14 April 1761. Reports from the Committee to the Society on hemp, Soc. Min. 4 March 1761.

17 In chair 20 Jan.; 3, 17, 24 Feb.; 3, 24 March; 10 April, 16 June, present 27 Jan., 14 April 1761. Reports from the Committee to the Society on hemp, Soc. Min. 4 March 1761.
cated their prices both in times of Peace and War, that the sum of £15 be allowed him in discharge of this account and in recompense of his trouble and service.

Other committees also required his presence. A meeting of the committee of miscellaneous matters attended by him on 19 May was of especial interest since it was held at the New Inn, Portland Row, and because it prepared the way for the spectacular experiment held on 22 May. On that date, a specially built three-storey house in Marylebone was set on fire in the presence of the royal princes and many members of the Society, with Franklin almost certainly among them.\textsuperscript{18} Early in June he had been present at a meeting of the committee of agriculture when the seeds of wild lemon were discussed and his friend Jared Eliot’s enquiry about “Timothy Grass” was given consideration.\textsuperscript{19} Two printed summonses preserved in Franklin’s Papers show that he was also expected to attend the committee of mechanics on 13 and 16 June to test “the comparative methods of tide mills.”\textsuperscript{20} The minutes already quoted show that on the latter date he presided at a committee of colonies and trade. He also attended the committee of chemistry, which was wrestling with the problem of how to sweeten “train oil” (a fish-based and evil-smelling substance), and he was present when the matter was resumed on 20 June.

On 25 November 1761, Franklin was nominated at a Society meeting in company with Samuel Johnson and thirty-three others, to a miscellaneous committee charged with the task of examining a method of maintaining the purity of water. This committee met on 27 November, and on several occasions thereafter, but Franklin seems to have been unable to attend.\textsuperscript{22} Since the minutes of the committee of colonies and trade are missing for the autumn of 1761 we can only speculate about Franklin’s presence. He was elected \textit{in absentia} as first chairman of the committee on 18 November with John Pownall, as his colleague.

On 9 December he attended the Society: “Dr Franklin being present was pleased to signify his acceptance of the office of chairman of British Colonies.”

\textsuperscript{19} RSA, Min. Com. (Chemistry) 9 June; (Agriculture) 12 June 1761.
\textsuperscript{20} Franklin Papers 9: 322; Franklin MSS (American Philosophical Society), 68: 15, 16.
\textsuperscript{21} The Society met at fortnightly intervals in August, September, and October.
\textsuperscript{22} RSA, Soc. Min. 25 Nov.; Min. Com. (Misc.) 27 Nov. 1761.
It is possible that Franklin was also present at a Society meeting on 27 January 1762 when he proposed the wine merchant Caleb Whitefoord, who was his neighbour in Craven Street, and the banker Thomas Coutts, another Strand area resident, as members. Minutes of the committee of colonies and trade have survived for the spring of 1762, but they record no occasions on which Franklin took the chair and only one attendance by him. This was at a meeting held on 16 February 1762, when he was anxious perhaps to avoid exerting undue influence on the committee’s affairs.\(^23\)

On 31 March he proposed John Mill, who lived in Philpot Lane on the eastern side of the City. April, when he journeyed to Oxford to receive his honorary degrees, saw no attendances, but in May he was back at the Society, this time to attend a committee that would sanction extra assistance to his friend Dr Templeman, the secretary of the Society.\(^24\) He attended the committee of mechanics on 24 June, and on 7 July proposed James Oswald, the musician who lived near St. Martin’s churchyard. He received summonses to attend a committee on 16 July “to consider several letters referred,” and on 8 August left London for Portsmouth, whence he would embark for America.\(^25\)

3. Letters from America 1763

On his return to America, Franklin resumed his longstanding correspondence with William Strahan, the printer and bookseller who would join the Society in 1769. Strahan had written to him in May 1763, reporting on the latest news from London and saying how much his friends would like him to return to England. Franklin, who had just completed a long journey through the colonies, wrote from Boston on 8 August, “No Friend can wish me more in England than I do myself. But before I go, everything I am concerned in must be settled here as to make another Return to America unnecessary.”\(^26\) Four days later he wrote a letter to Dr. Peter Templeman, the physician and naturalist, who had been Secretary of the Society of Arts since 1760:

\(^23\) On 8 February 1762 following a request from the Society, the committee under Pownall’s chairmanship began a general review of the effect of the Society’s premiums offered for colonial produce. “A plan of a report” was prepared in time for a meeting on the sixteenth, which Franklin attended. He was not present when “[s]ome progress” was reported on the twenty-third, or at the final meeting on 27 February, when a preamble to the premium offer was proposed, containing a decidedly Anglocentric mercantilist emphasis, such as might well have caused concern to him as an American. (See RSA, Soc. Min. 30 Dec. 1761 and Min. Com. Colonies under dates.)

\(^24\) RSA, Min. Com. (Misc.) 17 May 1762.


\(^26\) Franklin Papers 10: 320.
Sir,

In my journey from Philadelphia hither, I have had the pleasure of meeting with sundry Persons in different places, who are attempting the Produce of Silk from the Encouragement offered by the Society. And am persuaded that in time you will see very considerable effects of that Encouragement.

The Produce of Potash, cheap enough to be exported with Profit to Britain, which had almost been despaired of here, and the Attempt nearly laid aside, is now revived by Mr Willard of this Country, who animated by the Society’s Offers, has persevered in prosecuting the Design, and at length has found a more easy, certain and much less expensive Process than what was heretofore known and used here, and which is said to produce a more perfect Commodity. He sends home by this Ship 23 Tons, hoping that the Society have continued their Premium on that Article for the Year 1763. He is very frank and candid in communicating his Method, and willing it should be made public for the general Good. I would therefore recommend to the Society a particular Examination of the Qualities of this Potash; and if it is found excellent, as I am told it is, that Mr Willard may receive some Mark of the Society’s Favour, though the Premiums offered for 1762 should happen not to be continued.

With sincerest Wishes of Prosperity to the Society, and Success to their most laudable Endeavour for the Public Prosperity, I am, Sir, Your most obedient & most humble Servant, B Franklin.27

In spite of the distance that separated him from the Society, Franklin was still clearly interested in its affairs. Having learned of the publication of Thomas Mortimer’s anonymous Concise Account of the Rise, Progress and Present State of the Society, he ordered a copy from Thomas Beckett, a bookseller who was a friend of Strahan and like Templeman a resident of the Strand.28

As well as offering rewards for American silk and potash, the Society also sought to encourage the importing of cured fish. A Philadelphia firm of merchants called Furman & Co. sent across sixty kegs of cured sturgeon in September 1764 and asked Franklin “to introduce their claim.” He accordingly wrote to Templeman from Philadelphia on 2 September saying that what he had “tasted of it here was excellent” but that, he explained, the likelihood of its qualifying for a reward “will depend on the merits of their Fish when it comes over to London.”29

27RSA, Guard Book 8, 8.
28Franklin Papers 10: 394.
29RSA, Guard Book 9, 49.
4. The Second Period of Direct Association 1764–1773

Franklin returned to England at the end of 1764, leaving his son William behind as a corresponding member of the Society.30 There appears to be no record of attendances by Franklin at Society committees in 1765. He had, of course, been replaced as a chairman of the committee of colonies and trade. In January 1766 his presence was noted at two meetings of the committee of mechanics: the first, held on 7 January, to consider a wind-pump and the second, held on 9 January, to consider an invention of “engine cards” to assist in wool manufacture. Early in the following year he attended a meeting of this committee to consider a compass for surveying land that had been designed by Aaron Miller of New Jersey, which he had already recommended to the Society in a letter dated 29 October 1766.31 The committee minutes for 5 February 1767 contain this record:

Took into consideration the Reference to this Committee from the Society October 29th concerning an Improvement of the Compass for Surveying Land by Aaron Miller of New Jersey.

Read the Letters relating to it from Dr Franklin and Earl Stirling.

The Compass was produced and Dr Franklin explained the use of it.

Resolved that the Contrivance is ingenious, but as the Instrument to which it is applicable has been long laid aside on Account of the inaccuracy of the pointing of the Needle; and the Theodolite substituted in its stead; the Committee is of Opinion, it should not be recommended by the Society to the Public.

Resolved It is the Opinion of the Committee that the Protractor which accompanied the above Compass, is an ingenious Contrivance, but not an Improvement Applicable to Practice.

Resolved to recommend to the Society that Thanks be returned to Mr Aaron Miller for his Communication of the Compass and Protractor.32

This apparently unsatisfactory outcome did not affect his cordial relations with Dr. Templeman, who wrote to him in August asking him to deliver a letter to a correspondent of the Society in France.33

During 1768 the Society’s records are silent in regard to Franklin, but his son, William, had become an enthusiastic disciple of its ideas. He wrote to his father in March 1769 describing his efforts at model

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30 William Franklin was elected on 18 February 1763 on the proposal of William Small. 
32 RSA, Min. Com. (Mech.) under date. 
33 Franklin Papers 14: 241.
farming and asking for information about the Society’s latest experiments.\textsuperscript{34} At the same time a Connecticut physician, Benjamin Gale, was improving on the fashionable “drill husbandry”; he sent over two models of his chaff cutter to the Society (one having been lost at sea). On 31 May 1769, Benjamin Franklin was present at a meeting of the committee of agriculture when it was decided that the Society’s gold medal should be awarded to Gale.\textsuperscript{35} At the end of 1769 he proposed Joseph Jacob as member; we may assume he was present on this occasion, or at the meeting that saw Jacob’s election a week later.

On 11 January 1770 he sent to his friend John Bartram “some of the true Rhubarb seed” he had obtained from James Inglish of Hampstead, who had received the Society’s Gold medal for planting rhubarb in the previous year.\textsuperscript{36}

Public affairs were now occupying more and more of Franklin’s time. In the summer of 1769 he had received a model of a windmill pump from Thomas Gilpin, a wealthy Quaker merchant and inventor who lived in Philadelphia. Franklin promised to show Gilpin’s pump to the Society. In March 1770 he wrote to Thomas Gilpin about the latter’s windmill, saying that “I have till now been too busy to attend to such things, but I lately packed it in its Box and sent it to their store [e.g. the Society’s] and am next week to meet a Committee of theirs to explain it to them.” He was unable to keep his promise; the committee of mechanics had to proceed without his attendance.\textsuperscript{37} Two “blank” years followed and then on 18 March 1773 Franklin is recorded as attending the Society’s committee of mechanics when a model of a

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid. 16: 61.
\textsuperscript{35}RSA, Min. Com. (Ag.) under date.
\textsuperscript{36}Franklin Papers 17: 22.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid. 17: 104.
pump came up for inspection. On 19 October 1774 he proposed a candidate for membership, which might mean that he came to the Society’s new house in the Adelphi. His “alienation” from the mother country was now almost complete, and though he did not cut himself off from those of his English friends, such as William Shipley’s brother, the bishop of St. Asaph, who sympathised with the colonies’ grievances, he would have found that in the last resort the Society of Arts followed the cause of patriotism.

It is significant that the only committees attended by Franklin during the years 1767 to 1773 were those of agriculture and mechanics. He does not once seem to have been present at the committee of colonies and trade on which he had previously served as chairman. His “alienation” from the mother country was now almost complete, and though he did not cut himself off from those of his English friends, such as William Shipley’s brother, the bishop of St. Asaph, who sympathised with the colonies’ grievances, he would have found that in the last resort the Society of Arts followed the cause of patriotism.

It is significant that the only committees attended by Franklin during the years 1767 to 1773 were those of agriculture and mechanics. He does not once seem to have been present at the committee of colonies and trade on which he had previously served as chairman. He became disenchanted with the Society’s system of premiums and bounties for colonial produce. In 1770 he had written, “What you call Bounties given by Parliament and the Society are nothing more than Inducements offered to us, to induce us to leave Employments that are more profitable and engage in such as would be less so without your Bounty; to quit a Business profitable to ourselves and engage in one as shall be profitable to you; this is the true Spirit of all your Bounties.”

5. The Final Phase 1775–1789

On 20 March 1775, Franklin left London for the last time. He was soon engaged in serving the revolutionary cause, yet throughout the war years he remained on the membership rolls of the Society of Arts. Though most of the American corresponding members ceased to be listed, Franklin, who ranked as a subscribing member for life on account of his original donation of twenty guineas, continued to be named. To correspond with him might have been regarded as a treasonable act, however. When the Society published its first Register of Premiums in 1778, the publication was sent to him anonymously by Joshua Steele, an active member and committee chairman of the Society.

Steele explained that it was “not sent to you by the Society at large, but by your Friends and Men of Honour, who know you are entitled thereto as a perpetual Member and who do not see any particular clause in the Capture, Prohibitory, or, as I may say, in the Amputation..."
Franklin’s association with the Society was known in France. The poet and inventor Adamoli wrote to him from Paris in January 1779, asking him if “from the knowledge he had of the Society” he could tell him whether or not foreigners were eligible for its rewards, and enclosing a plan for establishing weights and measures. Franklin replied from Passy that the “English Society of Emulation makes no Distinction of Nations in the Premiums they offer,” and telling Adamoli of the Society’s attempts to establish a universal standard of weights and measures. In May of the following year Charles Million, counsellor in the Paris municipal courts and an active member of the Parisian equivalent of the London Society, the Société libre d’émulation, received from Franklin the “programme de la société Royalle des arts de Londres sur les poids et mesures.” Evidently Franklin was still receiving the Society’s publications.

Some members of the Society were actually in Paris at this time. Benjamin Vaughan came over as an unofficial emissary of the British government and had secret meetings with Franklin in the steam baths at Pot de Vin. Edward Bancroft, future committee chairman of the Society, who became Franklin’s confidant in Paris, and who made occasional trips to London to collect intelligence for the Americans, was in fact working in the interest of Great Britain. Caleb Whitefoord, who served as chairman of the Society’s committee of colonies and trade 1778–80, had been Franklin’s neighbour in Craven Street and had been proposed by him as a member of the Society in 1762. In 1780 he sent a message via Mary Hewson, daughter of Franklin’s landlady in Craven Street. Mary wrote, “He [Caleb Whitefoord] desired me to make his best respects to you, and to say he does not despair of seeing you here: an event much wished for by many.”

They eventually met again in Paris in 1782 when Whitefoord served as secretary to the commission sent by the Government to make peace with the Americans. Although Whitefoord stood up stoutly for the interests of his country, some indications of his sympathy, as distinct from support, for the American cause are given in a letter he wrote some years later to the American Philosophical Society: “Your venerated President, the late Dr Benjamin Franklin, had for many years

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40 Ibid. 27: 569.
41 Ibid. 28: 410, 437.
42 Ibid. 32: 371.
44 Franklin Papers 32: 207–09.
honoured me with his friendship; and perhaps that Intimacy, which was the Pride and the Happines of my Life, may have in some Degree recommended me to your notice. . . . I have long been a sincere Well-wisher to America, and no-one lamented more the unhappy Quarrel between the Colonies and the Parent State: And having lent a helping hand to stop the Horrors of War, and to negotiate a Peace between the two Countries, I have the satisfaction to think, that I have not lived in vain."

The Society’s secretary, Samuel More, friend to Josiah Wedgwood and Joseph Priestley, had been elected, quite likely on Franklin’s proposal, a member of the American Philosophical Society in 1774. In 1786, when the troubles were over, the Philosophical Society sent out magnificent engraved diplomas to its members at home and abroad. More acknowledged his with enthusiasm.46 Three years later he wrote to Franklin, making kind inquiries about his health and referring to “the fire of liberty” that was spreading itself over France. The American sage, having experienced one revolution, was far from sanguine at the prospects of another. Franklin did, however, wish well to the Society and recalled quite clearly the original invitation he had had from “Mr Shipley” in 1755 when the institution was so very small:

To Samuel More Philadelphia 5 Nov 1789

Dear Sir,

I received your favor of July 25, but had no opportunity of showing any civility to the bearer whom you mention as coming under the auspices of William Franklin, Esq. as he did not show himself to me.

I am obliged by your kind enquiries after my health, which is still tolerably good, the stone excepted; my constitution being such as, if it were not for that malady, might have held out yet some years longer.

I hope the fire of liberty, which you mention as spreading itself over Europe, will act upon the inestimable rights of man, as common fire does upon gold; purify without destroying them so that a lover of liberty may find a country in any part of Christendom!

I see with pleasure in the public prints, that our Society is still kept up and flourishes. I was an early member; for when Mr Shipley sent me a list of the subscribers, they were about seventy; and though I had no expectation then of ever going to England, and acting with them, I sent a contribution of twenty guineas; in consideration of which the Society were afterwards pleased to consider me a member.

I wish to the exertions of your manufacturers, who are generally

excellent; and to the spirit and enterprize of your merchants, who are famed for fair and honorable dealing all the success they merit in promoting the prosperity of your country.

My best wishes attend you, being ever, dear Sir, your most obedient servant, B Franklin.  

Shipley himself appears never to have forgotten this initial support given to the Society in its early years. In 1786 he nominated Franklin as an honorary member of a local institution he founded from his retirement home in Maidstone. It was called, perhaps in flattering imitation of Franklin’s Philadelphia Society, The Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge in the County of Kent. Thus the cross currents of thought between the [R]SA’s founder and its most famous American member continued to produce beneficial effects.

6. Apotheosis

In the year following Franklin’s death the Society of Arts gratefully received a cast of the Caffieri portrait bust of Franklin from a French admirer of the institution. In 1793, James Barry presented his engraving “Lord Baltimore and the Group of Legislators,” which showed Franklin in the illustrious company of Hugo Grotius, Bishop Berkeley, and Cardinal Pole. Yet Franklin’s association with the Society was neglected by early nineteenth-century writers on its history, who were more concerned to stress its contribution to the greatness of the British Empire rather than its connection with a founding father of the American Republic. S. T. Davenport’s 1868 history of the Society made amends. It referred to Franklin as “that truly great man,” and quoted some of his initial correspondence with the Society.

In the following year, 1869, Franklin was included by the Society amongst the prominent historical characters whose famous London residences it wished to commemorate by means of memorial tablets. A tablet was duly placed on No. 7 Craven Street in the belief that this was the house in which Franklin had lodged. In 1913 the London

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51 Jnl. [R]SA 18 (1870): 137.
County Council, which had taken over the work of erecting memorial tablets, informed the Society that it had made a mistake and that No. 36 Craven Street was the building that deserved commemoration. When No. 7 was pulled down the following year, the landlords returned the tablet to the Society, which donated it to the London Museum.

The Society took an active part in the celebrations of the 250th anniversary of Franklin’s birth in 1956. It received the commemorative medal struck by the United States Congress, and itself instituted an award, the Benjamin Franklin Medal. The Society’s medal, designed by Christopher Ironside, bears on its obverse a portrait of Franklin based on the Duplessis painting, and on its reverse a group derived from the Society’s eighteenth-century medallic designs showing a winged genius bearing a torch, flying upwards, above a group of putti engaged in industry and arts. The award was made annually “to individuals who have attained early distinction with promises of future achievement in the promotion of arts, manufactures and commerce.” In 1959, Franklin’s links with the Society were further commemorated by designating “a certain number of United States Fellows

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52 RSA, Council Minutes, 13 Oct., 17 Nov. 1913, 2 March 1914 (references supplied through the courtesy of Mrs. Susan Bennett, RSA curator).

53 Jnl. RSA 104 (1956): 425, 660; 105 (1957): 184. Also in 1956 the Royal Society of Arts presented the American Philosophical Society with the original manuscript of Franklin’s “Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge among the British Plantations in America.” In exchange the APS presented the RSA with the list of members sent by Shipley to Franklin, together with the sum of $1,000. See Jnl. RSA 104 (1956): 534.
as ‘Benjamin Franklin Fellows.’” In 1961 it was decided that in view of Franklin’s own work in the cause of better Anglo-American relations it would be more appropriate if the medal named after him were to become a means of acknowledging present-day endeavour directed to this end. It was accordingly agreed that from 1962 onwards the medal should be given “in alternate years to a citizen of the United States and to a citizen of the United Kingdom who in the opinion of the Society, has, in contributing to the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, forwarded the cause of Anglo-American understanding.”

In 1967 a new name was given to the principal room on the ground floor of the Royal Society of Arts’ House. The former “Repository and Library” became the Benjamin Franklin Room, where the Caffieri bust was given a place of honour.

“Benjamin Franklin House,” as No. 36 Craven Street is now called, was at this time the headquarters of the Society for International Understanding, but like many buildings dating from the early

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eighteenth century, was greatly in need of structural maintenance. The RSA assisted in 1977 in the formation of the “Friends of Benjamin Franklin House.” Three decades of fund-raising achieved the goal of restoration.56

The Anglo-American community of scholars working on the eighteenth century, the present-day Fellowship of the RSA in the United Kingdom and the United States, and those citizens of both countries and of the world who respond to the idea of human worth, may find in the history of Franklin’s connection with the Society of Arts a microcosm of the Enlightenment. Institutions like the Society of Arts, the British Museum, and the Royal Academy came of age during Franklin’s years in London. It was the time of Johnson and Garrick, of Reynolds and Wedgwood, of Robert Adam and Arthur Young, of Joseph Banks and Captain Cook. The revolutions and wars that lay ahead could never totally destroy those beliefs in the cultivation of human genius and the rules of taste that were the special legacy of the period.

Appendix: Members of the Society of Arts Proposed by Franklin57

Thomas Coutts, Esq., New Exchange Buildings, Strand, proposed 20 January 1762, elected 27 January 1762
Sir Charles William Blount, Upper Thames Street, proposed 9 December 1761, elected 16 December 1761
Jared Ingersoll, Esq., New Palace Yard, Westminster and New Haven, Connecticut, proposed 2 April 1760, elected 9 April 1760
Mr. Joseph Jacob, Coachmaker, St. Mary Axe, proposed by Dr. Franklin, Mr. John Smith, and Mr. Black, 6 December 1769, elected 13 December 1769
Edward Kennion, Esq., Princess Street, St. Ann’s, proposed 19 October 1774, elected 26 October 1774
John Mill, Esq., Philpot Lane, proposed 24 March 1762, elected 31 March 1762
Mr. James Oswald, Musician, St. Martin’s Lane, proposed 7 July 1762, elected 14 July 1762
Mr. Caleb Whitefoord, Wine Merchant, Craven Street, proposed 30 December 1761, elected 6 January 1762

57 Sources: R.S.A., Society Minutes under dates and RSA, MS Subscription Books under alphabetical sequences and dates.