

Henry Savile

For many perhaps Henry Savile is best known as the man who gave his name to the famous Savilian chairs of geometry and astronomy which have been held by such notable people as Henry Briggs, Edmond Halley and Christopher Wren, but the foundation of these chairs in 1619 was but the culmination of the important role Savile played in the development of mathematics in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

Savile displayed a talent for academia from a young age, enrolling at Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1561 when he was just twelve years old and excelling in subjects including mathematics, Greek, and theology. He then transferred to Merton College where he was elected a fellow in 1565 and graduated the next year.

In 1570, Savile began to lecture at Oxford in astronomy, introducing his students to the astronomical ideas of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, an extremely influential second century mathematical work dealing with the motion of the stars and planetary paths. In particular, this work proposed the geocentric model of the universe which was accepted for over a millennium until challenged by the heliocentric model of Copernicus, which Savile also taught to his students.

At this time Savile believed that mathematics was not flourishing, because students did not understand the importance of the subject, and there was no unified approach to the teaching of the subject – this was what motivated the foundation of the two Savilian chairs many years later. In Savile's own words, the chairs were established to deal with the fact that *'geometry is almost totally unknown and abandoned in England'*. Savile imposed precise conditions on the holders of these chairs to ensure that they had the desired effect on the standard of teaching of mathematics. For example, the holder of the chair of geometry was required to lecture on Euclid's *Elements*, Apollonius' *Conics* and the works of Archimedes, along with any background knowledge required to understand these texts. Another requirement was that the practical applications of mathematics were to be demonstrated to the students, and the professor was obliged to carry out research to ensure that the subject continued to develop. Similar restrictions applied to the holder of the chair of astronomy.

In 1585 Savile was appointed Warden of Merton College. As part of this role he expanded the library, and introduced the modern shelf system with which to store and display the books.

Aside from his mathematical achievements, Henry Savile is also renowned for his contribution in translating the King James Bible from Greek to English.



Memorial to Sir Henry Savile, Merton College Chapel

Dictionary of National Biography
Oxford figures: 800 years of the mathematical sciences
<http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Biographies/Savile.html>
http://kingjamesbibletranslators.org/bios/Henry_Savile/
Picture: https://www.merton.ox.ac.uk/sites/merton.ox.ac.uk/files/Savile-Memorial_300px.jpg
