

Primary Source:

Charles II's Charter to the Royal Society



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Introduction

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King Charles II's 1662 and 1663 charters establishing the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge represent the formal legal documents that created Britain's premier scientific institution. These royal charters granted the Society official authority and royal backing for its scientific work. The original 1662 Royal Charter gave the Royal Society permanent rights to conduct experiments, collect specimens, correspond with foreign scientists, and control its own publications. King Charles essentially created the first modern scientific academy with complete legal independence, ensuring it could advance experimental science without interference. The charter excerpts below come from the 1663 version, which expanded on some of the Society's organizational and membership details, but gave the Society the same rights and prestige.

Discussion questions

- What connections does King Charles II make between scientific advancement and imperial expansion?
- How does this charter establish formal institutional authority for science?
- How does this document show the Royal Society's intended global scope?

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Source: Excerpt from Henry George Lyons, *The Royal Society, 1660-1940: A History of Its Administration under Its Charters* (Cambridge University Press, 1944), 329. The source excerpts have been edited and annotated for modern readers. The original text may be found at the location listed in this citation.

Note: Historical sources often contain language that modern readers may find outdated or offensive. Despite this problematic language, it is important to preserve it when analyzing history because it helps us recognize how perspectives and power dynamics have shifted over time.

Charles the Second, by the grace of God King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith [a title used by British monarchs since the 16th century], &c. [abbreviation for “et cetera,” meaning “and so on”], to all to whom these present Letters [official documents or declarations] shall come, greeting.

We have long and fully resolved [decided] with Ourself to extend not only the boundaries of the Empire but also the very arts and sciences. Therefore, we look favorably upon all forms of learning.

Still, with grace, we encourage philosophical studies [the study of knowledge, reality, and existence], especially those that, by actual experiments, attempt either to shape a new philosophy or to perfect the old.

In order, therefore, that such studies, which have not hitherto [until now] been sufficiently brilliant in any part of the world, may shine conspicuously [noticeably] amongst our people, and that at length [finally] the whole world of letters [academic and literary communities] may always recognize us not only as the Defender of the Faith [Christianity] but also as the universal lover and patron [supporter] of every kind of truth, we have set in motion a grand plan that will have a global impact:



Charles II, depicted with globes, maps, and ships in the background.



1873 illustration of the Burlington House in London, one of the later homes of the Royal Society.

Know ye [archaic form of “you”] that we, of our special grace [favor] and of our specific knowledge and mere motion [by our own will], have ordained [decreed], established, granted, and declared, and by these [present this document] for us, our heirs, and successors do ordain, establish, grant, and declare, that from Incorporation [the act of forming a legal corporation], and henceforth [from now on] forever there shall be a Society, consisting of a Corporate Name . . . which shall be called and named The Royal Society, a testament [evidence] to our power and influence.

Image Citations

Page 1:

John Riley, King Charles II of England (1630-1685), c. 1683-1684, The Weiss Gallery, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:King_Charles_II_of_England_\(1630-1685\).TIF?page=1](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:King_Charles_II_of_England_(1630-1685).TIF?page=1)

Page 2:

Jan Baptist Jaspers, Charles II as President of the Royal Society, c.1630–1691, CC BY-SA 4.0, Art UK, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_II_as_President_of_the_Royal_Society.jpg

The street facade of the Piccadilly wing of Burlington House in London, England, Illustrated London News, 1873, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burlington_House_ILN_1873.jpg