

John Dee

Mathematician, navigator, astrologer, alchemist, cryptographer and spy: John Dee was a Renaissance scholar with an interest in many subjects.

Dee studied at Cambridge and was a Founding Fellow of Trinity College in 1546. He travelled extensively to universities on the continent, and both lectured and studied abroad, especially mathematics.

In 1565 Dee married and settled in Mortlake in a small house belonging to his mother. It was an ancient dwelling, with outhouses, orchard and garden, opposite the parish church and overlooking the River Thames. This placed him conveniently close to the royal palaces of Hampton Court, Richmond and Nonesuch, and close to Barn Elms, home of Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth I's spymaster.

Mortlake's position on the Thames was a great advantage as the river was a major highway to and from London, available for use in bad weather when the roads became impassable. This made Dee accessible to the many visitors who sought his wise counsel.

Once Dee had settled in Mortlake he was able to expand his library. He had four or five rooms filled with books, and an inner library of Bibles, prayer-books and devotional texts. He kept a special collection on navigation, which also held the globes given to Dee by Mercator, and many maps which were consulted by the travellers and ship's captains who visited Dee when planning their journeys. Totalling over 3000 books and a thousand manuscripts, his library was the largest in England at the time and placed Dee at the centre of intellectual life and influence.

John Dee was a favoured member of Elizabeth's court where he was known as the Queen's Astrologer. He was consulted whenever the Queen had worries about her health or political situation. She visited Dee at his home in Mortlake, either stopping as she passed by on the river or riding out across the fields from her palace at Richmond. She was interested in his scientific work, and presented him with books for his growing collection.

John Dee was 81 when he died in 1609, and he was buried beneath the original chancel of St Mary the Virgin, Mortlake. During the time Dee resided in Mortlake, the village became a destination for scholars, diplomats, learned men and royalty, all striving to learn from him. There is a plaque to the memory of this remarkable man in St Mary's.

