A rare Almanack

The preparation and publishing of almanacs was an important feature of astronomical activity in the 16th–18th centuries (Capp, 1979). Studies by Cyprian Blagden (1954) of the records of the Stationers’ Company, which had a national monopoly of printing, from 1557 to 1695, except for the ancient University Presses of Oxford and Cambridge, (Gaskell, 1972), indicate that about 400,000 almanacs were printed each year, while more recently John Barnard (1994) has refined this figure to 337,000 for the year 1676/7. This implies that about one household in three bought an almanac each year.

Almanacs were published with the astronomical data calculated for the relevant locality, or else as national almanacs for special groups such as religious denominations; others were produced for smaller places where their compilers happened to live. This example, by William Davis, was for the small Wiltshire market town of Ludgershall, between Andover and Pewsey, which has today grown considerably to a population of around 4000. (The figure was kindly supplied by Mrs Miles of Ludgershall Library.)

Davis was active around 1687–1692 and described himself as a “Student in the Mathematics,” pill maker, practical garder, and surveyor, and as teaching writing, shorthand, arithmetic, geometry, trigonometry, and applying mathematics, use of Globes, the Art of Astrology, measuring boards, and gauging vessels, at his house in the town. Almanacs of his are recorded for the nearby towns of Broomham, Wilts, (1689) and Clandfield, Hants (1692) (Capp, op. cit., p304). E G R Taylor (1954) records that in his 1692 almanac Davis mentions a book he has written entitled The Surveyor’s Companion, but no copy of this seems to have survived, if it was actually published.

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