BRITISH SOCIETY FOR THE HISTORY OF MATHEMATICS

BSHM Christmas Meeting: Programme & Book of Abstracts

Saturday 5th December 2026
Online

1.30 - 2.30: AGM

2.30-2.40 : Welcome / quick break

2.40-3.20 : Benjamin Wardhaugh, *Counting from Blombos to cyberspace*

3.20-4.00 : Sarah Hart, *The Granddaddy of Algorithms*

4.00-4.20 : Break

4.20-5.00 : Ellen Abrams, *Rugged Abstractions: Toward a Cultural History of Modern Mathematics*

5:00-5.20 : Tom Briggs, *From Research in Progress to Network in Practice: Integrating History into Lower Secondary Mathematics Lessons*

5.20-5.30 : Break

5.30-5.50 : Clare Moriarty, *Infinitesimal Horrors – The Surprising Ultrafinitism of Flann O'Brien's The Third Policeman*

5.50-6.30 : Christopher Hollings, *Incompetence in the History of Mathematics*

6.30-6.40 : Close of Meeting

Abstracts

Ellen Abrams, University of Toronto
Rugged Abstractions: Toward a Cultural History of Modern Mathematics

In the early twentieth century, American mathematicians engaged with new forms of modern mathematics through the study of postulate systems. Like other forms of modernism, postulate theory and mathematical modernism more broadly involved new levels of abstraction, inward-looking scrutiny, and an explicit departure from traditional conceptions of "reality." As art historians have shown, this modernist relationship to truth and reality was often grounded in the disorienting cultural experiences of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and imperialism.

In this talk, I examine American mathematicians' early engagement with postulate theory in order to situate modern mathematics within Progressive Era conceptions of both knowledge and society. I argue that a back-and-forth process of comparing and improving postulates created space for a modernist, evolutionary approach to mathematical knowledge. At the same time, mathematical knowledge was tied to the broader early-twentieth-century discourse of "civilization," which relied on evolutionary narratives and an assumed superiority of white, male, "postulational" thinking.

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Tom K Briggs, Museum Educator and Maths Communicator (tkbriggs.co.uk)
From Research in Progress to Network in Practice: Integrating History into Lower Secondary Mathematics Lessons

At the 2025 BSHM RiP meeting, Jason Yip and Thomas Briggs introduced their study on embedding historical narratives into Key Stage 3 mathematics. Thomas's talk at the Christmas Meeting offers an update following the completion and publishing of that project, sharing final results and discussing how the findings relate to practical, school-based developments. Our mixed-methods analysis provides insights into the impact of historical context on learners of mathematics: whilst anxiety and confidence responses showed limited change, the intervention significantly boosted overall attitudes, enjoyment, and awareness of mathematics as a historical, multicultural human endeavour. Beyond these findings, Thomas will discuss translating their research into sustainable practice including contributing to teacher professional development events; and the inception of The History and Mathematics in Education Network (HaMiEN), a new initiative aiming to encourage and facilitate collaboration between people who have a vested interest in enriching mathematics and history education for secondary-age students.

Sarah Hart, Birkbeck, University of London
The Granddaddy of Algorithms

The Euclidean Algorithm is arguably the oldest mathematical algorithm still in use today – that's why computer scientist Donald Knuth gave it the nickname "the granddaddy of algorithms". In this talk we'll explore some of the highlights of its 2,300-year history: its ancient geometric origins, its part in the beginnings of complexity analysis, and its surprisingly varied modern applications, from nuclear physics to music.

Christopher Hollings, University of Oxford
Incompetence in the History of Mathematics

When reading modern (published) mathematics, we generally expect it to be correct, and it is easy, without thinking, to carry this expectation over to the mathematics of the past. It can therefore come as a surprise – although perhaps it shouldn't – to encounter mistakes in historical mathematical texts. But what do we mean by 'correct', and what counts as a 'mistake'? Difficulties in historical texts may arise from straightforward mathematical errors – 2+2=5, say – but they may also reflect changing views of what constitutes an acceptable mathematical argument. How, then, should we treat such passages, and to what extent are we entitled to amend them? I will explore these questions through examples from the study of ancient Egyptian mathematics, before considering how the same issues arise in teaching the history of mathematics.

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Clare Moriarty, University College Dublin and National Library of Ireland
Infinitesimal Horrors – The Surprising Ultrafinitism of Flann O'Brien's The Third Policeman

George Berkeley famously criticised the empirical adequacy of the Newtonian fluxionary calculus, describing its fundamental components as "the ghosts of departed quantities" in 1734. A much later (but no less quarrelsome) Irish thinker gave us a different framing of the anxieties that some experience when contemplating the infinitely small. Flann O'Brien's The Third Policeman is a masterpiece of modernist literature, but it also provides one of the most amusing characterisations of worries about infinitesimals from beyond the mathematical world.

Benjamin Wardhaugh, University of Oxford
Counting from Blombos to cyberspace

I'll offer a whistle-stop tour of the history of human counting, based on some of the stories in my 2024 book on the subject. We'll meet ancient prehistoric artists, Mayan kings, modern vloggers and more, and hopefully learn something about the range of things you can count, the range of ways you can count, and what they do and don't have in common. Counting is always more complicated than you think ….