

## John Napier – Also a theologian

Written by K B Napier  
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Remember your first clash with logarithms? And remember your teacher telling you they were devised by John Napier the mathematician? Well, did you also know that John Napier was a staunch Protestant who tried to steer Scotland away from Romanism?

John Napier of Merchison (1550-1617), whose name was variously written as Neper or Nepair, was also known as 'Marvellous Neper' because of his intellectual prowess. Born to Sir Archibald Napier, 8<sup>th</sup> Laird of Merchistoun, he went on to invent logarithms, 'Napier's Bones', and to make use of the decimal point common. His home, Merchiston Tower, is now part of Edinburgh University's complex.

Being one of the nobility. John did not enter schooling until he was 13 years of age, but this did not seem to hamper his intellectual development. It is rumoured that he dropped out of school, preferring to learn on the Continent. No-one knows for sure where he was, or with whom, but a letter from his uncle (who later became Bishop of Orkney) suggests he was schooled either in Flanders or France.

After he returned to Scotland, he married Elizabeth, daughter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Laird of Keir & Cadder, in 1572. We get an idea of his wealth by his purchase of Gartness Castle in 1574, bought with substance given by his father. Elizabeth died in 1579, leaving two children. John later remarried and had ten more children! In 1608 he moved into Merchiston Castle on his father's death.

We all know of Napier's mathematical ingenuity. But what of his theology? He was a very strong Protestant, though his history does not suggest he was that strong in the theology he advanced. He took a deep interest in the book of Revelation and, influenced by Christopher Goodman, he was an avowed anti-papist. With his interest in Revelation, he developed a chronology of the

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last days and tried to predict the Apocalypse, which, he decided, would occur in either 1688 or 1700. Obviously, his prophecy was wrong.

He wrote a dedication in 'Plaine Discovery' to James VI, in 1594, urging him "that justice be done against the enemies of God's church" (Roman Catholics). He urged the king to start by reforming his own family and court. The book was received well in Britain and in Europe. A new edition in English was required in 1611, the year the 1611 AV was published.

Unfortunately, his name as a theologian has been sullied by possible practices in the occult and astrology, alchemy and necromancy. He had a black rooster, which some say was his familiar spirit. The rooster was said to be used by Napier to divine the truth in those who stole from him.

Actually, his plan was quite clever. He coated the rooster with soot, and told the accused to stroke the bird. Those who were guilty would be hesitant to do so because they thought the bird actually spoke to Napier. Those who were innocent had no problem. When each left the room, Napier looked at their hands – the one with clean hands was the culprit!

Another incident that added to his supposed occultism was when he warned his neighbour that he would keep pigeons found on his property. People saw him scooping up docile birds and placing them into a sack, and they assumed he had used magic. In reality he had soaked peas in brandy before putting them in the ground the day before, so they could not fly away!

So, it would seem that efforts to call Napier a magician or occultist were based on his careful planning and wily nature. He was certainly very savvy, but there seems to be no evidence he was an occultist.

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