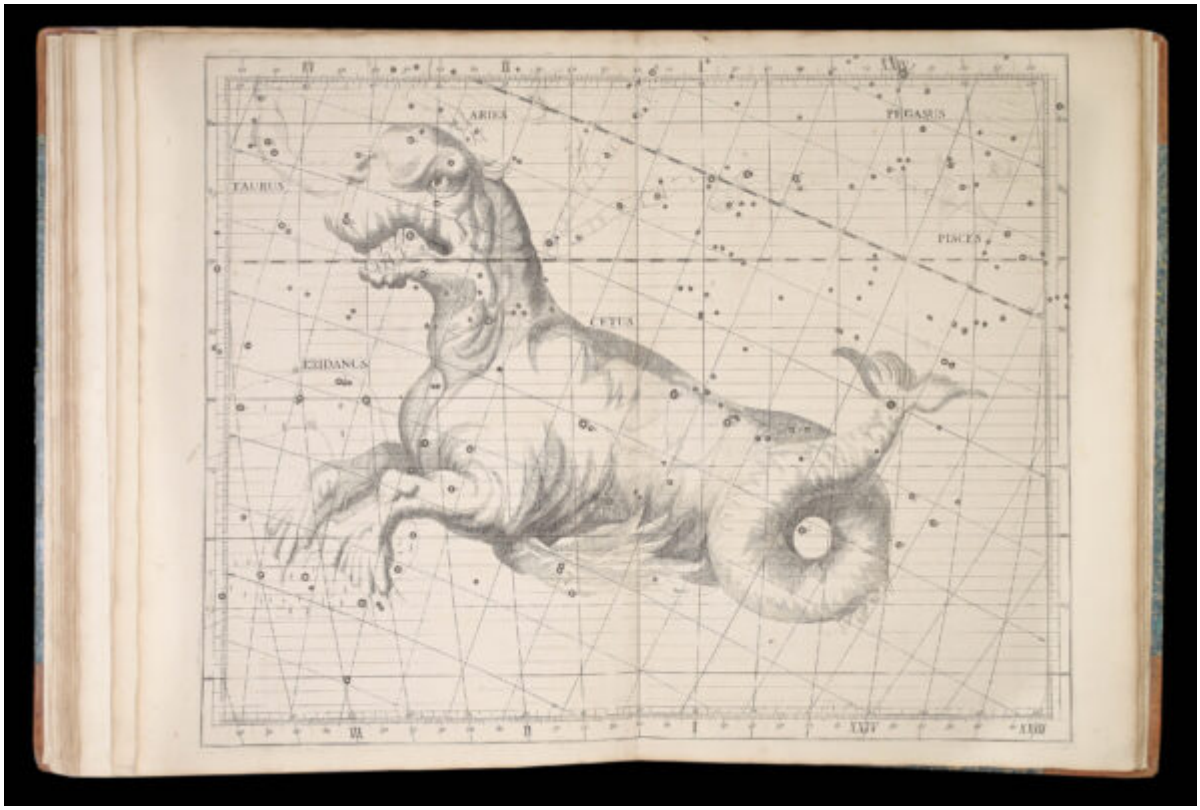

Folio (535 by 395mm), engraved portrait of Flamsteed by George Vertue after Thomas Gibson, vignette title-page, dedication leaf, 9-page introduction, list of subscribers, 27 double-page engraved charts on 28 mapsheets (chart of Hydra Crater on two joined sheets), all mounted on guards, by James Mynde and Abraham Sharp, Cassiopea title trimmed to within upper neatline with minor loss, Taurus trimmed to within lower neatline with minor loss, Pisces and Sagittarius lower part of image with tear skilfully repaired, engraved head- and tail-piece and an initial; contemporary, calf-backed blue marbled paper boards, blue morocco, gilt lettering-piece to spine.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE REACHES FOR THE STARS

Atlas Coelestis. By the late Reverend Mr John Flamsteed, Regius Professor of Astronomy at Greenwich.

Author
FLAMSTEED, John; and Margaret FLAMSTEED

Publication date
1729

Publisher
[Margaret Flamsteed and James Hodgson],

Publication place
London,

Physical description
Folio (535 by 395mm), engraved portrait of Flamsteed by George Vertue after Thomas Gibson, vignette title-page, dedication leaf, 9-page introduction, list of subscribers, 27 double-page engraved charts on 28 mapsheets (chart of Hydra Crater on two joined sheets), all mounted on guards, by James Mynde and Abraham Sharp, Cassiopea title trimmed to within upper neatline with minor loss,

Taurus trimmed to within lower neatline with minor loss, Pisces and Sagittarius lower part of image with tear skilfully repaired, engraved head- and tail-piece and an initial; contemporary, calf-backed blue marbled paper boards, blue morocco, gilt lettering-piece to spine.

Dimensions
640 by 254mm. (25.25 by 10 inches).

Notes
John Flamsteed's (1646-1719) atlas was published posthumously in 1729 by his wife Margaret, assisted by James Hodgson. It was intended as an accompaniment to Flamsteed's catalogue of 2,935 stars, 'Historia Coelestis Britannica' (1725), also posthumous, and "the most accurate and comprehensive celestial audit of its day. Resulting from the establishment of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich by King Charles II in 1675, Flamsteed's catalogue and atlas could be seen as a demonstration that the realm of the British Empire extended to the heavens as well as spanning the terrestrial globe" (Ridpath).

The foundation stone of the Royal Observatory, which was set "upon the highest ground, at or near the place where the Castle stood", in the Royal Park at Greenwich, had been laid on the 10th of August 1675. John Flamsteed was appointed its first Astronomer Royal: "for rectifieing the Tables of the motions of the Heavens, and the places of the fixed stars, so as to find out the so much desired Longitude of places for the perfecteing the Art of Navigation" (Charles II).

A year later Charles II was invited to the first auspicious observation from the Royal Observatory, of a partial solar eclipse on 1 June 1676, in the company of distinguished visitors, but he did not attend. Thereafter Flamsteed began collecting data for a new star catalogue, the 'Historia Coelestis Britannica', "compiled entirely from telescopic observations of nearly 3,000 stars visible from Greenwich. After a controversial edition was published in 1712 by Edmund Halley (against Flamsteed's wishes; indeed he managed to collect and burn 300 copies) the final three-volume version was published posthumously by his widow in 1725, followed by this atlas in 1729. It was the largest and most accurate star atlas that had ever been published, and contained two planispheres designed by Abraham Sharp, one of Flamsteed's protégés in the Royal Observatory, and 25 maps of the constellations, engraved after designs by James Thornhill, the Baroque English history painter" (Royal Collection Trust).

Flamsteed also set his sights on improving on his predecessors, particularly the 'Uranometria' (1603) of Johann Bayer. Bayer had reversed many of the figures representing constellations, showing them from the rear (or God's eye-view) instead of the front (from earth), and so contradicting the traditional star descriptions: Ptolemy's "star in the right shoulder" of Orion became, on Bayer's chart, the star in the left shoulder) of Orion. "Since most stars were still referred to by their Ptolemaic labels, Flamsteed objected to Bayer's revisions as introducing unnecessary confusion into stellar astronomy, and so all his figures follow the traditional descriptions exactly" (Linda Hall Library).

By 1719 Flamsteed's lifelong infirmities had caught up with him and he died at the Royal Observatory on December 31st. Apart from a few charitable donations, Flamsteed left everything he possessed to his wife Margaret, for her lifetime, with her and her friend Ann Hodgson, joint executors. Unfortunately, most of the bequest consisted of £1000 invested in South Sea stock!! This left only Flamsteed's books and manuscripts. So, Margaret and James Hodgson, husband of Ann, edited and finally published Flamsteed's three-volume 'Historia coelestis Britannica' (1725). "Its contents were as Flamsteed had envisaged except for the 'Prolegomena' or preface, where it was judged politic to omit the section describing his dealings with Newton and Halley. Crosthwait and Sharp were responsible for finishing the technical side of the work; Mrs Flamsteed recruited artists

and engravers to complete the ‘Atlas coelestis’ (1729). Hodgson’s main contribution, as custodian of Flamsteed’s papers, was the long-term guardianship of his reputation” (Willmoth), which remained untarnished until 1835, but that’s another story.

Bibliography
Ridpath, ‘Antique Star Atlases’ online; Shirley, ‘Atlas’, C.FLAM-1a; Warner, pages 80-82; Willmoth for ODNB

Provenance

Price: £32000

Inventory reference: 20502