

## The father of meteorology

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Cumulus clouds were among the categories named by Luke Howard

For cloudspotters everywhere, today marks the birth 250 years ago of Luke Howard, the man who gave names to the different types of clouds.

Howard was a London pharmacist and an amateur meteorologist since he was a boy. At the time it was widely assumed that clouds were merely “airy nothings”. But in this confusion Howard recognised families of clouds that could be identified by their shapes, sizes and heights and gave them names still used today. Cirrus were the fine wispy high clouds that looked like hair, cumulus were the puffy balls of cotton wool or great heaps of clouds, stratus were sheets of clouds, often dull, and nimbus were dark rain clouds. From these categories we get individual cloud names such as cumulonimbus, the thundercloud. But Howard also realised that clouds were dynamic — they could take on a life of their own,

growing and dying, even changing type, and were able to form intermediate forms such as cirrostratus.

This may seem obvious now, but when Howard published his work in 1802 it was a revelation, and not just for scientists. This new way of looking at clouds was an enlightenment for artists such as John Constable, JMW Turner and Caspar David Friedrich who began to portray clouds in a realistic light. Poets such as Percy Shelley and William Wordsworth also took great inspiration from Howard.

But he was much more than a cloud man. Howard helped pioneer studies of urban climates when he described how the climate of London was warmer at night than the countryside, and he also recognised how London's smogs often came in calm conditions. He came up with the notion of weather fronts, where warm and cold air masses can create dramatic weather.

And for years he made daily weather records of temperature, atmospheric pressure, rainfall and wind direction published in his book *Climate of London*. Indeed Howard became known as the "father of meteorology".