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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 3, 1930.

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BALLS OR POINTS?

On Sunday afternoon, June 18, 1764, the steeple of St. Bride's Church, in London, one of the architectural monuments of Christopher Wren, was struck and badly damaged by lightning. Dr. William Watson, a pioneer advocate of lightning-rods, published an account of this stroke, demonstrating that the steeple might have been saved from injury if it had been equipped with a rod. One result of this event was that the dean and chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral sought the advice of the Royal Society as to the advisability of placing rods on that edifice. The question was referred to a committee, of which Benjamin Franklin, Dr. Watson and other eminent authorities on electricity were members.

All members of the committee favored the installation of rods, but one, a Mr. Wilson, strongly urged that the rods should terminate in balls rather than points. Though he was overruled and pointed lightning-rods were erected on St. Paul's, the discussion launched at that time concerning the relative merits of pointed and ball-tipped rods raged for years. The controversy soon became mainly a political one. King George favored the "ball" party and ordered a large cannon-ball to be placed on the top of a conductor erected over his palace. Hence the court faction and the ultra-conservatives were aligned on the side of balls, while persons who agreed with Franklin and put their faith in pointed rods incurred the suspicion of being tainted with the republicanism of which Franklin was likewise a champion. Sir John Pringle had to resign the presidency of the Royal Society because he avowed himself an advocate of pointed lightning-rods!

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