Anna Laetitia Barbauld was born to the Unitarian Aikin family at Kibworth Harcourt in Leicestershire in 1743. Among the influential Aikins was Anna’s nephew, Arthur, who studied under Joseph Priestley and became a much-respected chemist, mineralogist, and scientific writer. Her father, John, was the headmaster of the Dissenting Academy in Kibworth and minister of the nearby Presbyterian Church.

Being surrounded by boys, she apparently adopted their high spirits, which her mother tried to discourage as being unseemly in a woman. After much pestering, her father agreed to teach her the classics, and she eventually studied Latin, Greek, French and Italian and many other subjects deemed unsuitable for a woman. Her mother at first wrongly thought her intellectualism would lead to a life as a spinster, but later she became proud of her daughter’s achievements.

In 1758 the family moved to the Warrington Academy, where her father had been offered a position as theological tutor. It provided a highly stimulating intellectual atmosphere with many influential names including, from 1761, Joseph Priestley, who became a close friend of the family.

At this time one of her many suitors (her mother need not have worried on that score) described Anna as ‘slender with an exquisitely fair complexion with the bloom of perfect health, her features regular and elegant, and her dark blue eyes beamed with the light of wit and fancy’.

She successfully published her first books of poems in the early 1770s.

She became romantically infatuated with Rochemont Barbauld, the grandson of a French Huguenot and a former pupil at Warrington. Despite warnings about his fragile mental health, she married him in 1774. They moved to Suffolk, where Rochemont had been offered a congregation and a school for boys in Palgrave. Soon afterwards, in 1775, she took the highly unorthodox step of persuading her brother to let them adopt one of his sons.
During this period Anna and Rochemont developed the small school for boys into the Palgrave Dissenting Academy, which grew steadily in stature and reputation. It offered a practical curriculum which included science and modern languages. Anna was an inspiring teacher and wrote instructional books for various ages which also included many scientific topics, both physical and environmental, including some meteorology. Her writings also include references to new inventions such as the Montgolfier balloon.

While on the subject of her science-related writing, I must mention what I personally appreciate most of any of her works. It is called The Hill of Science and it describes the various ways in which scientists climb towards ‘the Temple of Truth’. It is effectively a combination of Alice in Wonderland and Pilgrim’s Progress. We see the scientists Genius, Application, Virtue and Indolence run the gauntlet of past memory, heaps of rubbish tumbled down from upper parts of the mountain, the confusing ‘wood of error’, the ‘Muses of encouragement’, the ‘dark walk of allegory’, ‘crowds of appetites, passions and pleasure’, and the horrors of the ‘gulph of oblivion’.

The Hill of Science is well worth a read and I feel it should be compulsory for all new researchers. Together with our reading today, The Mouse’s Petition, it is readily available on the web.

By 1785, Rouchemont’s mental health had deteriorated and he was no longer able to carry out all his teaching duties. The Barbaulds left Palgrave and toured France. In 1787 they moved to Hampstead, where Rochemont was asked to lead another Presbyterian Chapel and Anna continued to do some private teaching.

It was in the following few years that she published some of her most famous important political works on major issues of human rights including:

The Rights of Woman;
Address to Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Act;
Epistle to William Wilberforce Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade;
and an anti-war piece: Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation.

In 1802 the Barbaulds moved to Church Street, Stoke Newington, where Rochemont became the morning preacher at the Unitarian Church on Newington Green. Newington Green contained a
disproportionate number of important dissenters from the 1600s to the 1800s. There were many Dissenting Academies, one of the most influential being Morton’s Academy, founded in 1667.

More details of the very many famous people who lived in Newington Green can be found in the book *The Village that Changed the World* by Alex Allardyce.

Back to Anna: a move here also enabled her to be near her brother John, as Rochemont’s mental health was deteriorating further. By 1808 he had become aggressive and escaped his carer and drowned in the nearby river. Anna was overcome by grief, but eventually returned to writing. In 1810 her massive work of fifty volumes on the British novelists was published.

Her last publication in 1812 was her most outspoken and notorious: it was a radical poem entitled *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, which depicted England as a ruin. She was so shocked by the aggressive criticisms of it that she never wrote again. It is now viewed by scholars as probably her greatest poetic achievement. She died in 1825.

In his memoirs Joseph Priestley calls Barbauld ‘one of the best poets England can boast’. Oliver Goldsmith, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth all praised her work. After a subsequent period when she became unfashionable, her contributions and writings are again much appreciated. Sadly, most of her papers and manuscripts were lost in the WW2 bombing raids.

A tablet in Newington Green Chapel reads:

*With wit, genius, poetic talent, and a vigorous understanding, she employed these gifts in promoting the cause of humanity, peace and justice, of civil liberty, of pure ardent and affectionate devotion. Let the young, nurtured by her writings in the pure spirit of Christian morality; Let those of maturer years, capable of appreciating the acuteness, the brilliant fancy, and sound reasoning of her literary compositions; Let the surviving few who shared her delightful and instructive conversation: Bear witness that this monument bears no exaggerated praise.*