

# Sharon Slater's Secret History

## The Terror of Lightning and Thunder

**T**oday we know the dangers of lightning, and as a result, have buildings fitted with lightning rods and flame-retardant roofs. Unfortunately, this was not always the case, and thunder and lightning came with a range of dangers. In the nineteenth century, lightning was often referred to as 'electric fluid'. This was popularised by Benjamin Franklin following his attempts to capture electricity in the mid-eighteenth century.

One of the most violent cases of lightning that struck Limerick took place at half past seven on Sunday evening, 22 July 1827. It was described as so violent that it was never surpassed in the memory of the oldest inhabitant. The storm began with an extremely hot and sultry atmosphere, the clouds hanging low and heavy, evidently surcharged with noxious matter. Then thunder and lightning burst forth, accompanied by heavy rain.

The Limerick Chronicle reported the spectacle in the city. It began with a few straggling flashes of lightning, followed by a distant roll of thunder. Then rain fell in torrents, and a sudden noise, resembling a quick running discharge of muskets 'as if from a whole line on a field day, produced a terrific effect'. This was, they claimed, 'apparently tearing up houses from the very foundation'. The flashes of lightning were so bright, they 'illuminated

the horizon to a vast extent, exposing, at intervals, the moon and stars twinkling in curious form through the dense clouds'.

The thunder, which rolled quickly after each lightning strike, was compared to 'the discharge of heavy field ordnance'. The destruction of this storm was felt not only in Limerick but also in the surrounding counties of Clare and Tipperary, with several individuals losing their lives and immeasurable property damage left in the wake of the storm.

The home of the Fitzgeralds of Rootagh, Ballysheedy was one of those struck by lightning. Mary Fitzgerald was extinguishing the house fire when the flash, almost invisible, passed in the doorway. Mary was 'struck by the electric fluid, and became a livid corpse in an instant'. The impact was so strong that it threw her husband to the floor, where he remained motionless. The couple had five children, though luckily only one of their daughters was hit by lightning. It struck the young girl on the heel, tearing the shoe and stocking, but failed to injure the foot. The young girl was also holding an infant, who escaped without injury. The lightning then 'directed its course to the fire-place and escaped through the chimney'. This was after it hit and killed a pig in the house. This was not

the only animal killed during the storm: a cow died on the neighbouring lands of Cottage.

The Dundon family lived in a thatched cottage in Annaholy, near Castleconnell. The lightning hit the roof and set it alight. It also caused the windows to explode. Some of the furniture and farming stock, which was stored in the cottage, were destroyed in the conflagration. Fortunately, the family were not injured. The Dundons were eating dinner in the upper storey of their cottage when the storm hit. They moved to the lower storey, but after a few minutes Mr Dundon decided they would return upstairs. When ascending the staircase 'a strong sulphurous smoke poured down against them'. Mr Dundon ran outside to find the roof in a blaze. While outside he also spotted a short distance away the maids prostrate on the ground, in shock but relatively unharmed, with their milk pails scattered about the field. The fire in the cottage was quenched with the help of neighbours. All the while, the Dundon's infant child lay in Mrs Dundon's arms, 'apparently lifeless from the effect of the thunder', though the child later recovered from the shock.

Finally, George O'Callaghan of Maryfort, near Tulla, Co. Clare, had two farmhouses

unroofed. In several instances, men and women were thrown to the ground by a sudden shock, and for a few moments were deprived of sight, while in other places the grass was completely bronzed, and the earth torn up by the lightning. It is quite probable that other accidents may have occurred in the country, where its fury was most to be dreaded.

In May 1831, at Rockvale, Newport, Co. Tipperary, the house of Rev Matthew Moore was struck by lightning, which carried away part of a stack of chimneys and split some of the walls. The lightning penetrated the interior of the building and in its rapid course devastated whatever it passed over.



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The great kitchen flags were torn up and split asunder and nearly all the window sashes were dashed to pieces or materially damaged. Several of the room doors were burst open. Mrs Moore, who was exiting the house with two decanters, was struck, causing the glass to fly from her hands. She was wearing a silk dress at the time, which was thought to attract lightning but also a cotton apron that was thought to repel it. The wires for the internal bell system were melted completely. There were about twenty people in the house at the time, all of whom escaped without injury. It was in such a state of destruction that the following day four policemen were posted to the house to prevent looters from gaining access.

On a Sunday in June 1842, the lightning at Knockfierna killed a blacksmith by the name of Fox, while two others who were unnamed were killed during the same storm in Ballingarry and Charleville. Again, as with the storm of 1827, animals were also killed and these included a colt which was the property of Godfrey Ball, Esq. of Ballinakill.

Making hay was a dangerous activity during a lightning storm. In August 1895, a respectable farmer named O'Gorman, living a short distance from Rathkeale, was



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struck by lightning. The deceased was engaged in building a rick of hay when his steel fork was struck and he was killed instantly. Also, in February 1904, Patrick Dee and his brother William, at Meenoline, Barna, about four miles outside Newcastle West were bringing hay from the haggard to the cowshed when Patrick was struck by lightning and killed instantly.

On the night of 22 July 1898, James aged 30 and Edward aged 26, the sons of Michael Fitzgerald and Mary Naish were sharing a bed in their home in Kilmoreen, Kildimo. James was sleeping on the outside of the bed. At six in the morning, a thunderstorm passed over their house. A bolt of lightning entered the room, striking Edward on the leg, which immediately roused him from his sleep. Edward then tried to wake James, but was only getting a feeble reply so he removed the covers and found that the same bolt of lightning had struck his brother. Tragically, James had been hit in the chest and neck and only survived for a half an hour.

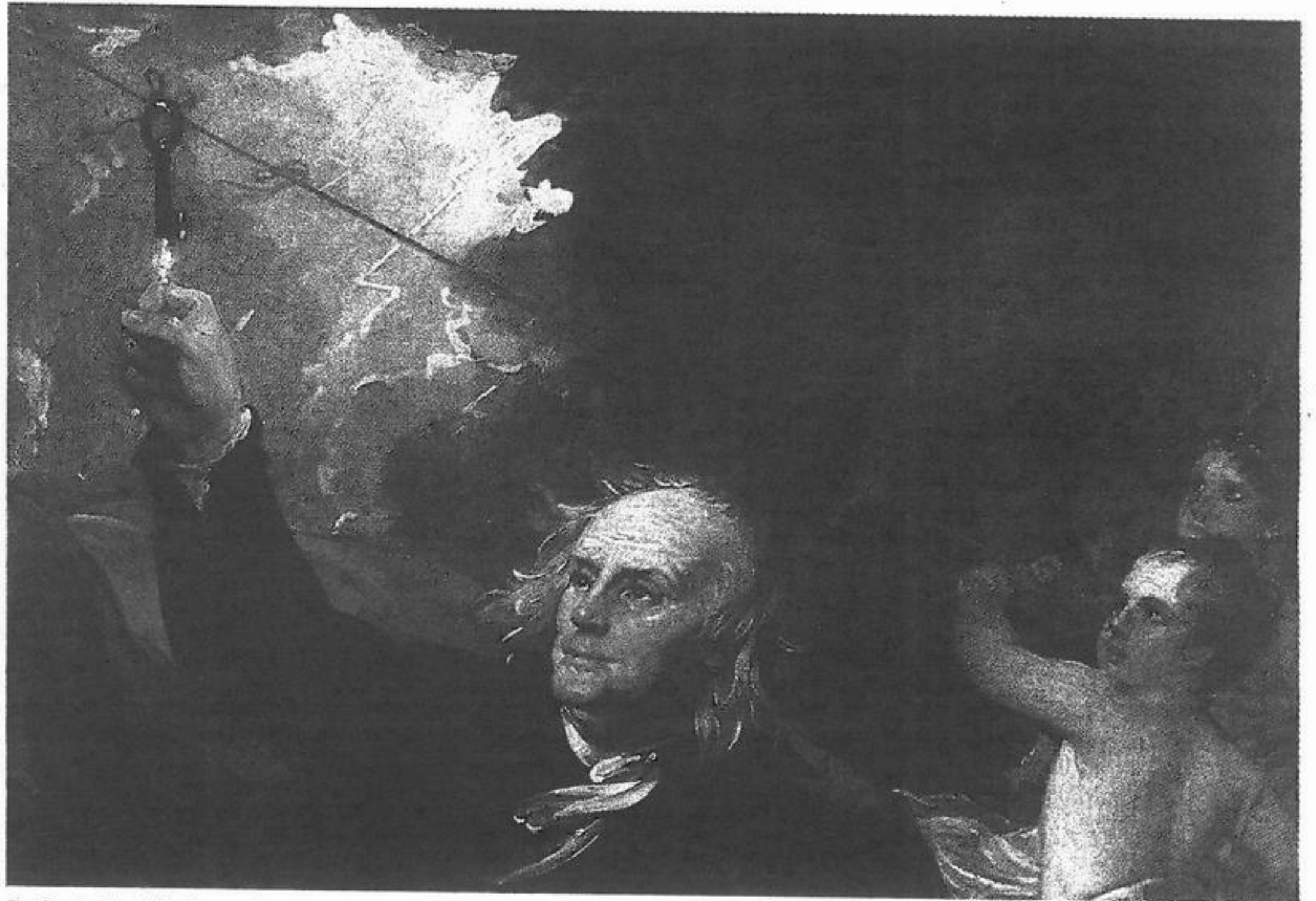
In 1914, lightning struck the chimney of a farmer's house in Glin, destroying the chimney and throwing the furniture around the room. That year a house in Knocklong, the home of Daniel Hoey, a



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railway signalman was also struck. It stripped the slates from a section of the roof and split the chimney.

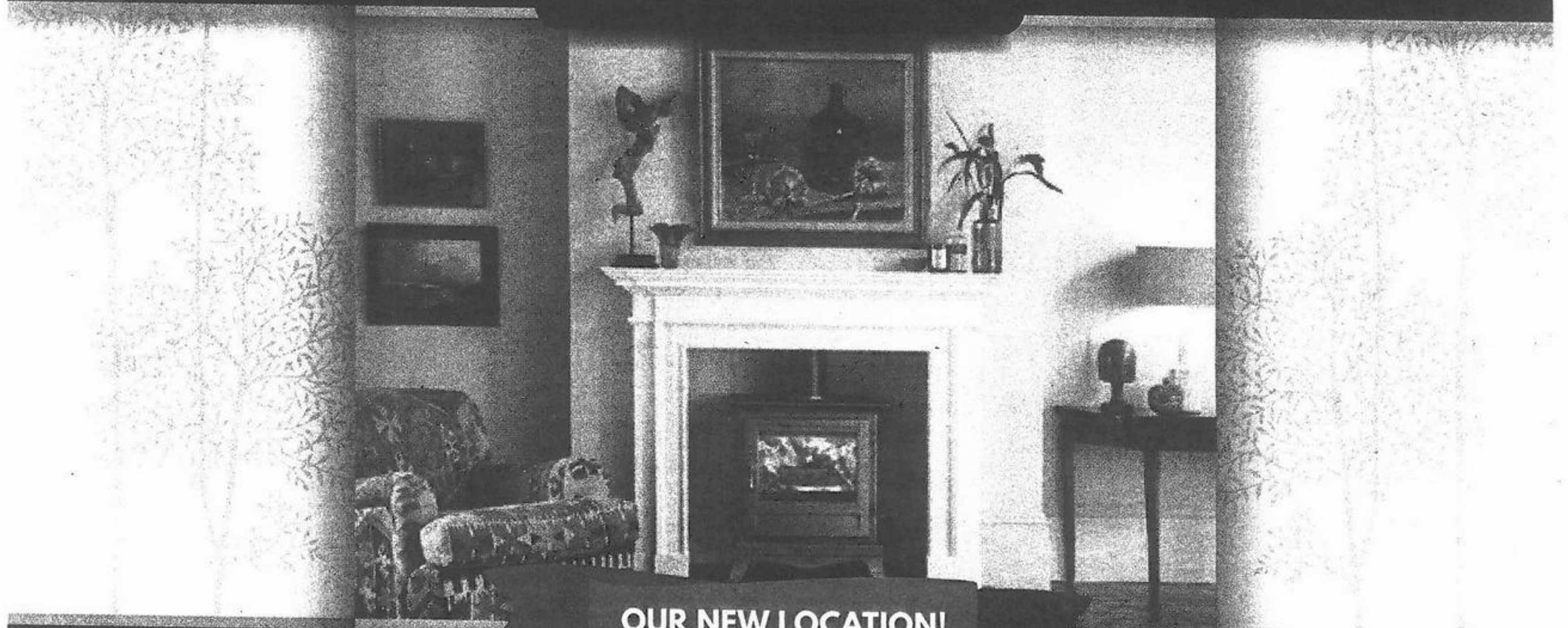
A number of insurance companies included lightning in their policies, as it was such a common cause of fire. In Limerick in the 1880s, you could take out cover with the Sun, Fire and Life insurance company through their agent John R Tinsly of Cornwallis Street. Due to these and other disasters, developments were made to understand lightning and how it conducts. As a result, all modern houses are fitted with a structural lightning protection system to help the lightning find a direct, safe and efficient route to earth.



Benjamin Franklin famously studied lightning



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