# DESCARTES

c. 1596 - 1650

René Descartes was French, but this didn’t stop him being quite good at his job. He was a Mathematician and a Philosopher. Philosophers think lots. In fact our friend René thought so much that he had to stay in bed every day till midday mainly to get his head around his ideas, but also because he was a sickly individual. Philosophy sounds like a good job.

René used to think about Mathematical ideas – mostly geometry (the Maths of pretty shapes). One day, while he was waiting for his long-suffering maid to bring him his breakfast, he was lying in bed staring at the ceiling. He noticed a big fly crawling around and suddenly became obsessed with the idea of describing to his maid where the fly had been, without pointing.

And then the best idea of his career hit him. He imagined a grid on the ceiling, numbered from 0 upwards. He called this grid a pair of axes, and used the numbers to read off coordinates such as ‘the fly started at the point (4,2). This means 4 along and 2 up on the grid. Today we remember the order by saying ‘*along the corridor, up the stairs*’, or ‘*X is a cross, wise up*!’ This bit wasn’t René’s idea though – it is far too simple for a great philosopher.

When he told his maid, she pretended to be interested not realising the importance of his discovery. Within a few years it was being used in Mathematics, Physics, Geography and many other areas, and today his name is immortalised by the correct name for his idea – **Cartes**ian coordinates.

René also came up with the statement, *‘I think, therefore I am’*. Personally, I think, therefore I am confused.

*Another quote from Descartes:*

‘Perfect numbers, like perfect men, are very rare.’