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The Machine That Crawled After Light: Grey Walter’s Tortoises

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Robot vacuum cleaners that wander around the floor by themselves and return to their charging dock when the battery runs low have become ordinary household items. Yet few people know that a machine showing similar behavior already existed in the late 1940s, before computers were even widely used. Built by a British brain scientist, this machine wore a round shell and crawled slowly about on three wheels. It approached light, changed direction when it bumped into something, and went back to its home when its power ran low. Because of how it looked and moved, people called it a tortoise. These a