



## The British Astronomical Association Historical Section

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### From the Director

*Mike Frost, Director*

It was great to see so many of you at Greenwich for our joint meeting with the Society for the History of Astronomy. Didn't we have a great day!

It was a pleasure to work with the Society for the History of Astronomy; especially Roger Hutchins, who did so much of the organisation. I hope that we will be able to hold more joint meetings in future (but not every year, as combining meetings means one less for the year between the two societies). Both societies gained new members during the day, and I hope that Kevin Johnson's presentation (delivered on behalf of Roger Jones, who was unable to attend due to illness) on the SHA's county-based survey of astronomical history will encourage BAA members to contribute.

I'm sure that Madeline Cox would have loved the day. The meeting started with a minute's silence in her memory. This was a meeting that Madeline had planned for several years and it is sad that her untimely passing earlier in the year meant that she never got to see it. I am also grateful to Kevin Kilburn, who took over on a temporary basis as SHA chair and was my co-host on the day.

Our next section meeting will be on Saturday 21 May 2016, at the Quaker Meeting House, School Street, Liverpool. It's where Liverpool Astronomical Society hold their meetings and comes recommended by them. More details to follow in the next newsletter; for now, please make a note in your diaries!

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There were many special moments during the course of March's meeting. One of my favourites came right at the end of Tony Kinder's talk on 'The Empire of the BAA', detailing his long-standing researches into the membership of the BAA.

At the end of his talk, Tony told us that he had some unresolved questions about the BAA membership, and the question he most wanted to have answered was whether or not Walter Llewellyn Hughes had ever been a BAA member. He told us that Hughes might be better known to us under his pen-name of Hugh Walters; he wrote science fiction for young adults.

In an instant I was taken back 40 years to my early teen years. I loved Hugh Walters' books – *Mission to Mercury*, *Journey to Jupiter*, *Spaceship to Saturn*. And

I bet I'm not the only member of the BAA to feel the same way!

Hughes's story is very interesting. He ran a furniture business in Bilston in the Black Country, and had no interest in writing until one day he was asked to speak to the local Rotary Group about space exploration, and then to a science fiction day at his local library. Reading up for this talk, he was unimpressed with the way space travel was portrayed in fiction. He thought he could do better, and started writing his own books; unwilling to use his own name, he mixed it up to come up with Hugh Walters.

The books featured a cast of solar system explorers whose names came straight back to me after a gap of decades – the upper-class English astronaut Chris Godfrey, and his erstwhile rivals, turned friends and colleagues, Morrey from America and Serge from Russia, who joined forces to explore the solar system for the United Nations. Best of all was the diminutive Brummie schoolboy Tony Hale, who grabbed his chance to travel into space when an emergency space capsule was too small for the other astronauts. I'm sure Tony was the hero of many a young wannabe astronaut – like me!

Walters' books were very successful, both in the UK and abroad. Walters himself told how, after writing several adventures, he received a letter from a young girl in California asking why there were no girl astronauts? Fair point – and so the telepathic twins Gail and Gill joined the later adventures, to the trepidation and breathless curiosity of both young Tony and the teenage male readership!

I haven't read the books in decades and would love to dip into them again (second-hand copies are surprisingly expensive, so if anyone would like to lend me a copy, please get in touch!). If I did read them again, I suspect I would notice a few things. First, how they encapsulate Britain's attempts in the 60s to convince the world it was still a major player – how we would have loved there to have been British astronauts during the Moon race! Second, I'm sure the technology would be rather dated; an occupational hazard for 'hard' science fiction writers of the last 100 years.

I stopped reading Hugh Walters' books around 1974, moving on first to adult sci-fi by the likes of Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein, then grudgingly to the rest of literature. Walters carried on writing sci-fi novels, although I'm told that in his later works he attempted to introduce religious themes, in a Narnia-like fashion, and these proved to be less successful with his readership.

Walter Llewellyn Hughes published twenty-four novels between 1957 and 1986. He died in 1993.

So was he ever a member of the BAA? We can find no trace of a membership application, and his name never appears in the Journal. However ... I made a few enquires among my friends in the Midlands astronomical societies, and discovered that he was close to a nephew, Chris Branford, who was a BAA member. If anyone knows anything of Chris, we'd love to hear of him, or better still from him. The BAA connection may also have been suggested by an interview of Hughes in the *County Express* in 1978, which claimed he was in the British Astronomical Society – might this have actually been the Birmingham Astronomical Society?

As always, I'm sure the BAA membership can shed light on this? Did anyone out there ever meet Walter Llewellyn Hughes? Did you ever buy a sofa off him? Or did he sign your precious copy of one of his books? Please let us know!

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The year 2015 marks the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the British Astronomical Association. The very first meeting took place on 24 October 1890, at the Hall of the Society of Arts, John Adam Street, just off the Strand, and was opened by William Henry Maw, the temporary treasurer. He handed over to Edward Walter Maunder, of the Greenwich Observatory, who read a report he and others had prepared.

The first act was to vote for the president and senior officers. Captain William Noble was elected the first president of the BAA, and a council was elected. This included two female members, Agnes Clerke and Margaret Huggins; this in notable contrast to the Royal Astronomical Society, who didn't allow female members at all until 1915. The names of the council and officers read like a roll call of British astronomy – William Huggins, Thomas Gwyn Elger, Lord Rosse, Isaac Roberts, Revd T E Espin, and others.

What would the founding fathers of the BAA have thought of the state of astronomy 125 years on? I think they would have been astonished by the progress of the last century and a quarter – black holes, big bangs, pulsars, quasars, close-up pictures of the planets, probes roving the surface of Mars – and, of course, men walking on the Moon. Such things were the dreams of Jules Verne in 1890 (and how Hugh Walters' books reminded me of Verne) but seem almost routine to us today.

But I also think that the founding members of the BAA would look with some pride on the accomplishments of the Association over the last 125 years. We were set up to promote excellence in observational astronomy and I think we have delivered – BAA members have discovered comets, asteroids, novae and supernovae in abundance. And we have an unbroken record of observations (severely tested by war, of course, but unbroken nonetheless) of priceless value. When professional astronomers want to know about the behaviour of changing astronomical objects

such as variable stars, over periods of decades, they turn to us, and to our fellow societies around the world. Can we imagine what astronomy will be like in another 125 years? The experience of the last 125 years suggests that we can barely guess what discoveries lie ahead. But it also suggests that there will continue to be a place for our Association, and for the dedicated amateur observers who fill its ranks.

## Apology

*Lee Macdonald, Newsletter Editor*

A brief apology for the slight delay in sending out this edition of the Historical Section Newsletter. This was due to my being engaged in preparing my PhD thesis (on the history of Kew Observatory) for submission to the University of Leeds. This is now done, and I thank members for their patience and understanding.

## Light in Darkness

*Stewart Moore*

Historical Section member (and former BAA Deep Sky Section Director) Stewart Moore has sent the following extract from the *South London Press*, a local newspaper of the Southwark area of London.

Stewart was reading this newspaper in the course of some family history research and came across this report of an astronomy lecture in 1907. Stewart comments:-

'I was amazed at just how long and detailed it was for a local paper. And well written in the slightly flowery style of that era. Meeting reports (of any meetings) in my local paper never usually exceed 10 lines and are often full of errors.

'I wonder if in 100 years' time we will look back on current meeting reports with similar amusement.'

Taken from the *South London Press*,  
Saturday 8 February 1907

### Light in Darkness

#### Astronomy at Camberwell

Under the auspices of the Camberwell Green Scientific Society, a very interesting and instructive lecture was given on Wednesday evening at Wrenroad lecture hall by Professor Gregory, FRAS. (Professor of Astronomy, Queen's College, London). It was entitled "Light in Darkness."

Professor Gregory remarked that the cluster of stars known as the Pleiades, clearly visible in the sky at this time of year, provides an interesting instance of the revelations of astronomical photography. This group, and the constellation of Orion, are of remote antiquity. In the Book of Job, which dates back to very early times in the history of the human race, they are referred to in the words, "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion?" Six stars can be counted in the group by persons possessing average eyesight, and few people can see more than seven with

certainty. Using his small telescope, Galileo was able to detect 36 stars, and this is about the number seen with an ordinary opera-glass. With a large telescope as many as 500 stars can be viewed with sufficient distinctness to permit their positions to be determined, and nearly five times this number have been photographed in the same region. In other words, the photographic plate shows nearly 2,500 stars in a part of the sky where only six are visible to average eyesight. But this is not all, for photography has proved that the bright stars of the Pleiades are not merely points of light but islands in a vast sea of luminosity.

A single wisp of this nebulous material was all that had been seen, even by observers using the largest telescopes, before photography became the handmaid of astronomy. Here, then, we have evidence of the most definite character that the chemical plate is able to detect and portray celestial glories which are quite outside the range of visibility of the most acute observers using the best light-grasping instruments in the world. Photography has revealed many other immense areas of luminous material of too spiritual a faintness for the eye to discern with any optical power. We are therefore naturally led to ask whether there is any limit to the extensions of knowledge of invisible matter in the universe. New methods and new instruments bring new worlds to light, and it would seem that this triumphant progress must continue with the march of the human intellect. There are, however, reasons for believing that a rough inventory of the contents of the universe around us can be made with the methods of inquiry at present available.

As the result of many years of patient labour, the late Dr Roberts was led to conclude that photography had practically exhausted its efforts to extend the knowledge of our universe of stars. It has already been remarked that when a sensitive film is exposed to the sky in an astronomical telescope, or camera, the number of stars or extent of nebulosity depicted by it increases as the duration of the action is prolonged. The longer the photographic plate faces the sky the more faint stars and nebulous streams are impressed upon its retina. It would seem, therefore that by increasing the sensitiveness of the film, or lengthening the duration of exposure to celestial light, astronomers might hope to continue to add new regions to the empire already gained for knowledge.

Apparently this is not the case. Dr Roberts found that there is a limit to the powers of photography applied to the heavens, using the most sensitive chemical plates, this limit is reached by an exposure of from 10 to 12 hours. Exposures of longer duration than this do not reveal additional stars or nebulous realms. So far can the astronomer go with his camera, but no further, and no new secrets are revealed to him, however long he waits.

It thus appears that though there is no boundary in space, which can only be conceived as infinite in extent in all directions, there is a limit to the number of stars and other celestial objects which constitute our universe. The stars can be numbered, but no sounding line has yet been imagined which will reach the end of space. Upon the darkness of infinity the stars are

projected, here in rich profusion, there comparatively few: but even if we assumed the whole heavens to be covered with clusters like the Pleiades, the number of stars in all parts of the celestial sphere would only amount to 35,000,000. Star clusters are most abundant in or near the Milky Way, which itself consists almost entirely of numerous stars too faint to be seen as individual points of light by the naked eye, though collectively their rays produce the appearance of "a broad and ample road whose dust is gold and pavement stars" The actual number of stars which make up our visible universe must be less than 150,000,000 and in all probability it does not much exceed 100,000,000. To refer to the stars as being infinite in number is thus merely a figure of speech just as it would be to describe English speaking people, who also number about 100,000,000 as an infinite population.

## Hunting Halley

*Mike Frost*

At the end of the Greenwich meeting (see Editorial on page 1 of this newsletter), many of us retired to the nearby 'The Admiral Hardy' to sink a few pints and chew over the proceedings. Bill Sheehan and Jay Pasachoff had other ideas. Bill suggested that they take a walk through Greenwich Park to visit Edmond Halley's tomb. I said that whilst I was happy to accompany them on a stroll, I wasn't sure exactly which church Halley was buried in. There was a church spire visible from the south end of the park, but it might not be the right church. In the end Bill and Jay decided that they would pass on the opportunity. I spent the next hour or so in the Admiral Hardy, then joined Bill and Debb Sheehan, Jay and Naomi Pasachoff, Roger Hutchins of the SHA and his friend Gloria, and Catherine Hohenkirk of HM Nautical Almanac Office, for a very enjoyable dinner in the De Vere hotel where many of us were staying.

I met up with Jay and Naomi the next morning at breakfast. Jay had been doing some research. Edmond Halley was buried in the churchyard of St Margaret's church, Blackheath. They had been right not to try walking there the previous night, as the church is not the one visible from Greenwich Park. Halley's tombstone had been removed, and forms part of the wall of the camera obscura within the Greenwich Observatory, but the tomb's location was known. I offered to drive Jay and Naomi to see Halley's tomb.

So we drove up the hill from the de Vere hotel, next door to the Maritime Museum, on to Blackheath Common, familiar to me as the start of the London Marathon. (Ask! I've started it twice, in 1984 and 1986, and finished it once; the other time I ended up in hospital). In central Blackheath we crossed the railway and then turned right into Lee Terrace. Half a mile along Lee Terrace we came to St Margaret's.

We started to look in the churchyard. We had neglected to make detailed notes on where exactly the grave was, but Jay recalled it was by a wall, so we started checking the graves by the side of the church. It

took ten minutes to ascertain that none of them had Halley's name legibly written on them.

We would have gone on to check the rest of the graves on the churchyard, but I spotted a lady making her way into the churchyard, to open the door into the church. We intercepted her and asked if she knew where we could find Halley's grave. Yes of course, she said ... it's in the graveyard across the road.

Ah, yes, that would explain why the church seemed rather less than 400 years old. The ruins of the original church were on the far side of Lee Terrace, surrounded by the original churchyard. We crossed Lee Terrace and inspected our second cemetery through the railings.

There was a display board just inside the cemetery outlining where the graves of famous inhabitants were located. It turned out that Halley and Mrs Halley shared a grave with another Astronomer Royal, John Pond (quite what Mrs Halley made of this, I don't know) and the grave was located by the eastern wall of the cemetery.

I tried the gate into the old cemetery. It wouldn't open.

So we knew where Halley's grave was, we just couldn't get to it. I assessed the railings between us and the cemetery. They were only a couple of feet high, sitting on a low wall. If I climbed onto the wall, lodged my foot into the base of the railings, and swung my foot over ... I could climb into the cemetery! Jay looked at me quizzically, and Naomi gave a disapproving look. Then Jay climbed up onto the wall and, like me, swung his leg over the railings and into the cemetery.

Now we knew where it was, we went straight to the grave. Pond's name was prominent, but Halley's name didn't appear at all, the gravestones having been removed to the observatory. We took pictures until there was nothing left to photograph, then had a stroll round the rest of the cemetery, whilst Naomi watched on from the other side of the wall.

Then it was time to climb out again. Fortunately the climb was symmetric, so we weren't at risk of being locked in. Nor did anyone strain anything. The lady who'd pointed us in the right direction was coming out of the church. As we made our way back to the car we passed her, and she asked if we'd found the grave. Yes, we said, but we'd had to climb in – it was a pity that the gate was locked.

It isn't locked, she told us.

I ran back across the road, pushed the gate again, this time a bit harder, and it opened...

So, if you want to visit Halley's grave ... make sure you go to the right church, don't expect a gravestone ... and try pushing the gate a bit harder.

Or you could try climbing the railings. It's more fun that way!

## **Enquiry: John Franklin-Adams**

*Bill Leatherbarrow*

Former BAA President Professor Bill Leatherbarrow has sent the following enquiry regarding the astronomer John Franklin-Adams (1843-1912):-

'I'm writing a brief entry on the Victorian amateur astronomer John Franklin-Adams for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. It would appear that he was born John Adams and assumed the Franklin bit later in life (and apparently sometime after his marriage). There is not much written on Franklin-Adams, and I have checked the obvious obituaries, dictionary entries and various other sources, but I have not been able to account for when and why he adopted Franklin as part of his surname. A nod in the direction of the USA?

Do you have any idea?'

Bill further comments:-

'Franklin-Adams' marriage certificate in 1879 still gives him simply as John Adams, but the 1881 census places him in a guest house in Brighton where he and his wife are given as Franklin-Adams. So I've narrowed down the time he adopted the double surname, but why remains a mystery.'

Franklin's wife was born Lucy Lillian Inman, so the name Franklin does not seem to be in honour of his wife.

Anyone who might be able to help should contact Bill Leatherbarrow at [w.leatherbarrow1@btinternet.com](mailto:w.leatherbarrow1@btinternet.com).

## **Enquiry: Tolkien and the 1927 eclipse**

*Kate Russo*

An enquiry received from Dr Kate Russo.

'I am doing some preliminary research about J R R Tolkien and am interested to know whether he observed the 1927 total solar eclipse. And if so, whether there is any historical record of this?'

I'm sure I'm not the first person to enquire about this.

Thanks for any guidance on how to proceed'

Anyone with information can contact Kate Russo at [umbraphillia@gmail.com](mailto:umbraphillia@gmail.com).

## History of Astronomy: online videos

Richard Pearson

Received from Richard Pearson:-

I have a keen interest in the history of Astronomy, and as the Producer/Presenter of Astronomy & Space which is a monthly 30m programme with a regular audience of about 60,000 world-wide, I have so far made two programmes with an historic theme: the story of the refractor, and this month the Godlee Observatory, here is the link:-

<https://vimeo.com/user19219213/thegodleeobservatory>

## SHA Autumn Conference 2015

The 2015 Annual General Meeting and Autumn Conference of the Society for the History of Astronomy will be held at the Birmingham & Midlands Institute, Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS, on Saturday 31 October 2015. Start time is 9:30am, finish time at 5:00pm.

Confirmed speakers to include:-

Allan Chapman: 'Sir John Herschel: Astronomer by Inheritance'

Rebekah Higgitt: 'Nevil Maskelyne and the role of Astronomer Royal'

Laura Carroll: 'Derbyshire Astronomers' (Madeline Cox's last completed research paper)

Phil Barnard: 'The Chance Brothers: their contribution to Astronomy'

Advance booking is strongly requested, as this helps facilitate the arrangements. The cost is £5 per person for SHA members; £10 for non-members. To pre-register, please contact Roger Hutchins, e-mail: [roger.hutchins@btinternet.com](mailto:roger.hutchins@btinternet.com).

## Further dates for your diary

**Friday 9 October 2015** 'Fred Hoyle Birth Centennial – his remarkable career and the impact of his science'. RAS Specialist Discussion Meeting to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Fred Hoyle. To be held at the Royal Astronomical Society, Burlington House, London W1J 0BQ. Start: 10:30am; finish: 3:30pm. Details: <https://www.ras.org.uk/events-and-meetings>.

**Wednesday 28 October 2015** 'The Antikythera Mechanism', public lecture by Professor Mike Edmunds. To be held at CELS, Nottingham Trent University, NG11 8NS, 8pm to 10pm. Entry is free, but must be booked in advance at:- [http://www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/events/9/home.aspx/event/170314/default/open\\_dome\\_event\\_-\\_the\\_antikythera\\_mechanism#details](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/apps/events/9/home.aspx/event/170314/default/open_dome_event_-_the_antikythera_mechanism#details)

**Saturday 2 April 2016** SHA and William Herschel Society joint Spring Conference, to be held at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution.

**Saturday 21 May 2016** BAA Historical Section meeting, to be held at the Quaker Meeting House, School Street, Liverpool, L1 3BT. Details to be announced.

**Thursday 9 to Friday 10 June 2016** 'From Sea to Sky: the Evolution of Air Navigation from the Ocean and Beyond'. Conference to be held at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. For details see:-

<http://www.rmg.co.uk/researchers/conferences-and-seminars/sea-to-sky>