

MINUTES OF THE SEVENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE FLAMSTEED ASTRONOMY SOCIETY

Held at 6.45 p.m. on Friday 6th October 2006 in the Lecture Theatre of the National Maritime Museum

Present: Lin Potter (Chair) and 28 members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society

Apologies for absence: Polly Larner, Director of Friends, Martin and Jane Male, Angela and Tony Hooper, Rose Dowd, Stephen Wakeford, David Redfern, Lesley Bound, Malcolm Porter, Anthony Stokes, Norman Ellis, Julie Bevan, Allan Kelly, Richard Fuchs, Ria Verhagen, Brian Pearson, Roy Allen,

Matters arising: The minutes of the sixth AGM of the Society, held on Monday 10th October 2005, had been circulated to members and were approved by the meeting.

Chairwoman's report for year 2005-2006

Once again welcome to the Annual General Meeting of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society and I am happy to report that the FAS has had a very successful year, with an ever growing membership.

We were delighted to welcome nearly one hundred people to our star lecture in May when Sir Arnold Wolfendale, the fourteenth Astronomer Royal, talked about The Origin of the Universe. This is a record attendance for the FAS – in fact there was hardly an empty seat in the house.

This was the crowning lecture of a busy and varied lecture season, which ranged from difficult cosmological concepts to historical subjects and practical demonstrations. Professor Michael Joyce travelled from the Sorbonne on Eurostar especially to talk about Successes and Problems of Modern Cosmology – a theme which was continued by author Marcus Chown of the New Scientist with his excellent and clear exposition of the Universe Next Door.

Our very own astronomers at the Royal Observatory Dr Robert Massey and Graham Dolan also came to speak to the society. Robert talked about Comets- Messengers from Deep Space and rounded off an entertaining lecture by manufacturing a smoking and highly dangerous looking real life comet which was passed round the enthralled audience. I hasten to add that we followed all sensible health and safety rules throughout the evening.

Graham Dolan, education officer at the ROG, spoke about “Where East Meets West”, in which he discussed the astronomical basis of the Prime Meridian at the Royal Observatory. We followed this up last month by walking the line with Graham through East London – which brought us to places we had never visited before and proved excellent exercise as well as a fascinating tour. Indeed Graham assures me that there is more to see and we hope to arrange another walk next spring – this time taking in Trinity Hospital – and not forgetting the cream tea!

Those of our members who are interested in astronomical and scientific equipment were not forgotten either, as we held a well attended telescope workshop given by our good

friend Francisco Diego. In November, Ian King came to talk about and demonstrate aspects of astrophotography and wide field CCD imaging and Mike Leggett spoke about Astronomical Instrumentation before the Telescope.

Our planetarium evenings have always proved popular; Tony Sizer showed us Legends in the Sky and I assure you that we shall hold another planetarium evening shortly.

In May, 17 FAS members visited the Rutherford Appleton Laboratories at the kind invitation of Professor Richard Harrison. We were given an extensive tour of the whole site concluding with an illustrated talk about the laboratories' work. After our very successful trip to Paris 13 months ago, we have not ventured on a weekend visit this year, but there are plans in the pipeline, so listen out for announcements shortly.

I now come to our unique position amongst Astronomy Societies in the United Kingdom and that is our connection to the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Observatory. Last year we were probably more involved than ever before in joint ventures with the Observatory. Pat and David will shortly speak about our solar viewing programme with the public in the courtyard at the ROG and also the Evenings with the Stars. The FAS suggested and pressed for a public viewing session to mark the partial eclipse of the sun last October. We finally persuaded the powers-that-be that it would be worth opening the museum early that morning. In the event we were proved right, as over 500 people peered through thin cloud to marvel at this, the most exciting of astronomical phenomena...of course many of you "eclipse chased" to see totality and we shall be seeing some of your photographs and hearing all about it from Francisco shortly. We are hoping to arrange an event at the Observatory to mark the upcoming lunar eclipse next spring, despite the late hour.

Our members were also to the fore in manning the joint ROG/FAS stand at Astrofest - an experience which we all enjoyed, notwithstanding our aching feet.

We marked the continuing progress of building works at the ROG with a hard hat tour of the site, arranged by FAS member Julie Bevan. There will be another opportunity to tour the site this winter. We also arranged guided tours of the newly opened and refurbished galleries. Again we shall arrange similar tours of the new galleries when they open in the South Building next spring. There was also a visit to the reserve stores with Emily Winterburn of the ROG last June.

I would particularly like to thank my committee for their continuing support, enthusiastic ideas and hard work. Both Eddie and Mike have given informative and well researched short talks on The Bureau of Longitudes in Paris and Today's Big Reflecting Telescopes respectively. We are still hoping to encourage non-committee members to also share their interests and views with us on the short talk programme. Jonathan Ellenor recently took up the challenge and delivered an excellent 10 minute presentation about the sun.

Mike ran the annual book mart very successfully and please note - there will be another bookmart at the Christmas Party this year, so start sorting your unwanted books now. And should I mention another fiendish quiz, set this year by a new quiz master.

I would like to thank all of you who took the time and trouble to fill in the questionnaire that Pat Wainwright composed. Pat deserves special thanks for her hard work and skill in

drawing up the questionnaire and also collating the results. With this input we intend to incorporate member's ideas and suggestions into our future programme.

Jane will mention the new subscription rates shortly during the financial report. I would just like to thank the Friends and Polly Larnier in particular, for being so responsive to our suggestions and meeting us more than half way when we suggested that our subscription rates should move into line with those of the Friends.

I would now like to move a vote of thanks to Eddie Yeadon who is retiring from the committee this year. He held the post of Chairman for five years from 1999 and the post of Vice-Chair for the past two years. His contribution in helping to set up the Flamsteed Astronomy Society from its inception has been invaluable. Quite simply we could not have done it without him. To mention but a few of the tasks he has undertaken – he is the author of our new FAS constitution – a task which called upon all his considerable patience and negotiating skills. He helped steer the FAS to the unique financial position that it enjoys within the museum today and, perhaps most important of all, he has continually underlined the autonomy and freedom of the FAS to set its own agenda within the limits of the Friends' umbrella.

FAS Observing report 2005-6 by Pat Wainwright

Observing this year has been planned at Blackheath, Cudham, Hazelwood, and Romney and at the ROG using the 28-inch. As we have come to expect, however, far less has happened than has been planned, due to the weather.

Last autumn we used a new dark site at Hazelwood (near Cudham) for a successful members' evening observing Mars. We also planned a return visit on to look at meteors in January and Saturn in February but were beaten by the weather on two successive weekends. Hazelwood is a good site, fairly easy to get to for most members and we hope to use it again.

Blackheath meetings are an optional add-on to the regular pub nights at the Hare & Billet. There is light pollution, but it is still possible to observe the Moon, planets, and bright objects satisfactorily using binoculars and small telescopes. This year the only Blackheath observing was after our telescope workshop with Francisco Diego in January. Murphy's Law of observing weather conditions applied!

The recreation ground at Cudham was the planned venue for watching the Perseid meteors in August but, once again, the clouds moved in!

Romney sessions at Martin and Jane's home observatory have been planned most months around the time of new moon for deep sky observing. Martin has recently extended his observatory and now has two permanently mounted telescopes: the 14 inch SCT and a smaller one with CCD camera used for imaging. Although many evenings planned have had to be cancelled due to weather, several members have been down this year and found the journey well worthwhile.

We have the privilege of access to the 28-inch telescope after the public evenings with the stars. As usual, several sessions were clouded out, but when it was clear some of our members were treated to views this season of Mars, Saturn and the Moon with help from Tony Sizer and John Griffiths, to whom we are very grateful.

Pat showed the following Member's pictures to the meeting:

Mars – Malcolm Porter

M33 Triangulum galaxy – Martin Male

Moon through 28-inch – Tony Sizer

Comet Schwassmann-Wachmann – Martin Male

M27 Dumbell Nebula – Martin Male

Partial Lunar eclipse – Dave Redfern & Martin Male

M101 Pinwheel Galaxy – Martin Male

M13 Globular Cluster – Martin Male

Plans for the coming year: Blackheath pub nights are usually held on the third Monday of each month with observations of the Moon and planets afterwards, if the weather is clear and depending on what is visible, (the Moon and planets are being shy this autumn and not well placed at sensible times). Dates for viewing with the 28" are announced on the programme and Romney dates are still to be arranged.

We shall also plan some dark sky observing with members' telescopes at Hazelwood and a new site near Headcorn in East Kent.

Here's hoping for clear skies this year!

Coronado Hydrogen Alpha solar viewing project report by David Waugh

This year has been a successful one for the Coronado viewing sessions held one weekend every month – weather permitting.

We estimate that perhaps 3,000 visitors to the Royal Observatory have been able to observe the sun through our Hydrogen Alpha telescope since the last AGM. This has been achieved despite the cancellation of nearly half of the planned sessions due to cloud cover.

Until early this year we were compelled to set up our telescope down the hill at the rear of the National Maritime Museum, which is not a good place for finding visitors interested in astronomy. This was due to building work outside the Flamsteed building. We are now happily re-established back at the observatory. Many thanks are due to the observatory staff for finding a storage place in Janet Small's office.

Public interest in the sun is high- despite the solar minimum we are experiencing. We are building up a fine collection of foreign language leaflets explaining what we are attempting to do. However we do need to translate more of these. Our target languages include Polish, Chinese, Hindi and Portuguese.

If anyone can translate English text into one of these languages or knows of someone who can do this, preferably without charge, please let me know.

Special thanks are due to Mike and Eddie for running training courses. Thanks also to Mike Dryland for taking over from me when I was struggling with exams. Finally thanks are due to our volunteers for turning out on so many occasions to entertain the public.

Financial Report by Jane Bendall

I shall try to keep this report as brief as possible as everyone should already have had the summary of our accounts for the financial year 2005-2006.

I do hope that FAS members who have heard my financial reports in previous years will bear with me for a few minutes, as I shall inevitably repeat what I said last year, but it is important to put new members in the picture about the arrangements that we have in place with the Friends.

Firstly we have an agreement with the Friends that we shall donate 20% of our income to the museum – this means that – like the Friends - we can be treated as a charity and avoid VAT payments. Last year, you will recall that we presented a cheque for £1,000 to Dr Kristen Lippincott, the then Deputy Director of the Museum, towards the Universal Appeal. In previous years we donated the Coronado Hydrogen Alpha Telescope to the Royal Observatory. No doubt we shall shortly be in the position to make another donation to a suitable astronomical project or for some specialized equipment. This is always done, when we have built up a sizeable reserve account, in consultation with ROG staff and of course with the agreement of the Society's members

Our surplus this year it is £629.70 (after our donation). This is due to several factors, but the main one is the unique agreement we have with the museum. We are the only society/body/institution - whatever you like to call it - which is given all facilities free – the lecture theatre, the stewards, the security staff, cleaning staff, services of the porter/messengers etc are entirely free. This was the Director Roy Clare's initiative, so we are in an extremely privileged position. Roy Claire believes in the importance of the FAS as part of the Observatory's outreach programme. Therefore our overhead expenses, unlike all other users, are nil, apart from an annual donation of £250 to the Friends in exchange for office services and accountancy.

There is a more comprehensive break down of the accounts available from either me or the Friends office and if you have any specific queries please do get in touch. I promise you that I keep a very close eye on expenditure throughout the year.

Now to subscription rates. Lin has already touched upon the rather prolonged negotiations that took place last spring. The committee felt that FAS member's subscription rates should follow the same pattern as the Friends. For example a concessionary subscription for the Friends is £22.00 which is slightly under 70% of the full subscription, why was the FAS concessionary subscription 90% of the full rate? On behalf of the committee, Mike Dryland worked out what we hope is a much fairer approach, which was eventually presented to the Friends Council and was fully implemented last June. As a carrot to pupils attending the museum's GCSE courses we agreed - again with the support of Polly Lerner - to offer one year's free membership to GCSE students; this has proved a success and to date we have 9 new members who have come from the classes.

A simplified way of collecting subscriptions has been put in place – instead of paying a sliding rate, depending on when you join in the year, it was agreed that those people who joined after the New Year should not have to renew until the following September year – in other words they would have a few months free membership. Mind you don't think you can delay your normal renewals until 2007 and get away with it, BIG BROTHER or in my case BIG SISTER is watching you!

I must remind everyone that to be a member of the FAS you must also first become a member of the Friends, which is a rolling membership – this is a museum requirement and there is nothing we can do, or indeed wish to do, to alter that.

At the mid-summer point we had 92 members, I cannot give you the accurate number of our current membership although it is somewhere in the region of 50 paid up members, let us hope that we break the magic 100 this year.

Elections to the committee

Under the FAS constitution the committee has six spaces.

Eddie Yeadon has resigned from the committee and Lin Potter, Mike Dryland, Peter Kitcherside, Pat Wainwright and David Waugh, who are all serving committee members, stood for re-election to the committee. Jonathan Ellenor was nominated by Eddie Yeadon and seconded by Janet Chittock

As there were no other nominations an election was deemed unnecessary and the above candidates were appointed as committee members.

Any Other Business: No questions had been tabled and Lin Potter closed the meeting.