

FLAMSTEED ASTRONOMY SOCIETY

Minutes of the eight Annual General Meeting of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society held on Monday 8th October 2007 in the Lecture Theatre of the National Maritime museum

Present: 41 members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society and Claire Hyde, Head of Communications and Development.

1. **Apologies:** Apologies for absence were received from Martin and Jane Male, Sharon DeMello, Janet Chittock, Marion Fowles, Susan Ryall and Richard Fuchs.
2. **Minutes** of the AGM held on Friday 6th October 2006 had been circulated to all the members and were approved by the meeting.
3. **Report by Chairman**

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the eighth annual general meeting of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society. I would like to extend a special welcome to Claire Hyde. Claire is Head of Communications in the Museum and, under the new arrangements for Founder Members; she is, so to speak, our manager and mentor.

Once again we have had a successful and busy year. The most important event was the opening of the new planetarium and galleries at the Royal Observatory in May. In July about 130 members and guests toured the Weller Galleries, enjoyed a special planetarium show and rounded off a good evening with a glass of bubbly. For those of you who missed it, we will be holding more planetarium shows during the year. Indeed in September we used the planetarium for the telescope workshop when Tony Sizer demonstrated right ascension and declination. What a lovely toy to have at our disposal. On behalf of the society I would like to congratulate the museum on the completion – on time - of the new build – and here I would remind members that we donated £1,000 to the Universal Appeal last year. We look forward to many more occasions “up the hill” in the future. Whilst on the subject a move is afoot to enhance the regular Evenings with the Stars events, turning them into an open evening with opportunities to tour the galleries, have a cup of coffee at the café, which will remain open and attend a planetarium show as well as viewing with the 28” telescope. I mention this as it has been suggested that some of us might like to set up telescopes in the courtyard for members of the public to do some amateur viewing – possibly a first for many – so watch this space – we shall be calling on our volunteers a great deal more as the year progresses. This will not affect our private hour of viewing after everyone has gone and the excitement has died down.

As the museum is eager to promote the Observatory there are other plans which may involve the FAS and David shortly will report on volunteering activities with the Solar Viewing programme throughout the past year.

We, as usual, have had a full lecture programme and have been extremely lucky to have attracted the customary star line up – The Astronomer Royal for Scotland Professor John Brown not only talked about **The Magic of the Sun** but kept us entertained with his repertoire of magic tricks. Our only problem was that we were moved from the lecture theatre at the last minute to the grandeur of the Great Hall of the Queens House, where the acoustics are very difficult, for which we apologise.

We are always incredibly lucky in attracting knowledgeable and eminent lecturers; I suspect that that this is due to the attractions of the Royal Observatory - not just the fame of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society! We have explored eclipses, in particular the solar eclipse of 2006 with Dr Francisco Diego; Professor Andrew Coates discussed the disappearance of **Mars' Water** – a very relevant subject considering recent speculation about reserves of water below the surface in Mars. We followed Dr Eric Dunsford on the excitement of **Triumphs and Disasters in Space Science** and Dr Martin Heath, from just down the road –the Greenwich Community college – talked about **Habitable Planets beyond the Solar System**. One particularly fascinating subject, which was entirely new to us, but especially relevant because of the museum's magnificent and comprehensive collection of medieval Islamic instruments was a visit from Dr Emilie Savage-Smith Professor of the History of Islamic Science at Oxford University. She took us through **Mapping the Skies in Medieval Islam**.

In May our good friend Dr Carl Murray – visited us again at Greenwich to update us with a fascinating talk on the progress of the **Cassini mission to Saturn** – Carl has discovered even more satellite moons and we really think its time there was now a Murray Moon named in his honour.

Our own members have not been idle and we have continued the programme of 10 minute talks before the main lecture when brave members discuss their pet subjects. David Waugh and Terry Goodman kicked off with an utterly fascinating and well researched piece on **Astronomy for the Blind**. Then David Redfern's **Drawings from Mars** and Mark Duwe **Demystifying Astronomy** spring to mind. David, we are waiting and hoping one day that you will have an exhibition of your paintings and have a special preview for all of us at the FAS – we wish to see much more. Mike Dryland did an update of the most recent developments in astronomy...a **News in Briefs**– in which he also showed several members' pictures of the Lunar Eclipse – we are eagerly awaiting more news in briefs in future Mike.

However, we do not always spend our time in lecture theatres or glued to the eyepieces of various telescopes – in fact we are a hale and hearty lot. Last September we joined Graham Dolan on a meridian line walk through the East End which was not only healthy (I'm not going to mention the cream tea) but a revelation, as we explored little known highways and byways. The highlight came when we climbed the hill to listen to an exposition of the workings and history of the Airy Transit Circle – from the horse's mouth so to speak – the greatest living expert on the Airy – FAS member Gilbert Satherthwaite

Another highlight was our overnight visit to Jodrell Bank in April. The weather was beautiful – Dr Ian Morrison – our guide was knowledgeable and welcoming and the hotel had a sort of faded grandeur but managed to provide us with a companionable and happy dinner– all in all an excellent and friendly weekend.

One other topic must be touched upon as we said good bye and thank you to our friends at the Friends! All of you will be aware of the new regime, as upon the disbandment of the Friends organization – in line with several other national bodies - the museum started an in-house Founder Members scheme instead. I shall not hide from you – no doubt you have already guessed - that there have been teething problems, but thanks to the kind and hard working offices of Claire – here this evening – and Norman Reed, Director of Finance – we are seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Most importantly they agreed that we significantly reduce our subscription rates to be more in line with other amateur astronomy societies, although here I must point out that nobody else has this magnificent and special venue as a playground.....There may be just over 100 of us but we are a vocal lot and at times Claire and Norman must have felt we numbered 1,000 or more!

There is a lecture and social evening to come, so it just remains for me to thank Claire and Norman again and of course also the hard working and dedicated committee for all their support and backing.

4. Volunteers Solar Viewing Report 2006-2007 by David Waugh

This past year has been a very successful one for our Coronado solar viewing programme, despite the bad weather for much of the summer period.

In the past we have attempted to observe on one weekend in each month. A small team of volunteers were booked up in advance, sometimes months into the future. As perhaps 2 out of 3 sessions were cancelled due to poor weather, quite a lot of frustration was created by this approach.

Now we aim to run a public observing session every weekend in the year. One of the organisers asks for volunteers, as soon a good weather is indicated.

This system has worked very well. The Coronado Corps has been able to run about a dozen shows this year, and indeed we would have had a record year if the weather had not been so miserable. Moreover the teams have been bigger – with up to six or seven volunteers running the telescopes and handing out leaflets. This is a definite improvement on previous years; we can now spend more time talking to the public, explaining what can be seen and communicating our enthusiasm for astronomy. Indeed members of the public have had a one-on-one chat with one of our explainers – a much better visitor experience than before, when Coronado Corps members were usually limited to operating the telescope.

We have also had a big contribution from those members who brought along their own Coronado telescopes. We have often been able to deploy two or even three telescopes,

shortening queues and giving really enthusiastic punters the opportunity to look through more than one scope and spot the subtle differences in performance. So many thanks goes to Rob, Peter and Mark for supplementing the societies own telescope. Our Coronado of course has now been re-mounted on a sturdy HEQ5 – much more resilient and less likely to break down.

We have made steady progress in translating our leaflet into additional languages. We have added Chinese and Polish in the last year. (Thanks to those who arranged these) But we still need more. Any additional Eastern European languages, Hindi or Portuguese would be welcome

These leaflets make up for the language barrier that would otherwise exist – explaining the various solar phenomena (with their specialist terminology) is almost impossible unless the visitor has really good English.

Not only have we gained new translations but we have added to our stock of Technicolor laminated diagrams and photographs, which have proved so helpful in providing explanations beyond the standard leaflet.

Five members have been trained in the use of the Coronado, and others have been briefed on the HEQ5 mount. I should emphasise that the training is geared to the proper operation of the telescope preventing it, or members of the public, from getting broken. Members of the society who lack the training are still welcome to attend. There are plenty of jobs that need doing, handing out leaflets, answering enquiries, crowd control and even being bouncers at the end of the days viewing.

Many thanks to all the Coronado Corps members who were able to come along this year; I hope you found it great fun, just as our visitors did. The solar observing programme is now gaining considerable momentum and is certainly the most successful of our outreach activities. I feel certain that it will go from strength to strength in the coming years.

5. Observing report 2006-7 by Pat Wainwright

Observing this year has been planned at Blackheath, Cudham, Hazelwood, and Romney and at the ROG using the 28-inch. For the usual reasons, less has happened than has been planned, but this year we did have several successes.

In October last year there were several attempts by members to observe comet Swan and we held a spur of the moment observing session at Cudham recreation ground. Observations of the comet on that evening were inconclusive but members did appreciate the darker sky at Cudham.

Early in January there was another bright comet – McNaught. We did not manage a Flamsteed observing event but several of our members saw it and there are images on the website.

The highlight of the observing year was the total lunar eclipse on March 3rd. which a large group of Flamsteed members observed and photographed from Blackheath outside the park gates. For once, the weather was near perfect and we had a good clear sky that night.

As you will remember, there was a lot of cloud and rain this year so not many observing opportunities but in August we were guests at Hazelwood again for the Perseid meteors. We hope to continue using Hazelwood, which is a private, dark site, within reasonable traveling distance, for future planned events.

This year we tried adding observing sessions on to our normal monthly meetings when weather conditions are OK. We had one successful session on Blackheath after a museum meeting with a variety of telescopes including the Flamsteed telescope.

In January we held a beginners telescope workshop led by John Griffiths of the ROG. It was very well attended, demonstrating that there is plenty of interest in practical observing. Following the success of that evening, a follow-up intermediate workshop was held in September and we plan to repeat the beginners' session in January 2008

Blackheath "pub nights with optional observing if clear" have been a regular monthly event, usually the third Monday of each month. This year there were, surprisingly, a few clear nights and telescopes came out for views of the Moon, Venus, and Saturn.

Two of our members: Martin and Jane Male have a home observatory in Romney Marsh and generously invite Flamsteed members to use it and enjoy the really dark skies. This year we experimented with a new flexible system for booking Romney sessions. Although a few members enjoyed successful evenings there, the system was not successful overall so for next year we shall be changing back to having some fixed dates around the time of the New Moon – weather dependent of course. The experience is well worth it as the sky is very dark and observatory well equipped with Martin's permanently mounted 14-inch SCT telescope.

One major privilege of Flamsteed membership is access to the 28-inch telescope after the public evenings with the stars. This year, despite problems with weather, equipment failure and maintenance work on the dome in March and April we had one successful evening viewing the Moon and planets. Once again we are grateful to Tony Sizer and John Griffiths for their time. For the coming season the dates are on the programme and website.

Here's hoping for clear skies this year!

6. FINANCIAL REPORT 2006 – 2007 by Jane Bendall

6. **Financial report for year 2006-2006 by Jane Bendall**

Good evening. You should have all received a summary of the financial report ending 31st March 2007. As you can see we have as usual ended the year in a relatively healthy position. This is mainly due to the unique privileges we are granted by the museum - who do not charge us for any of our considerable expenses – in other words you are sitting in a lecture theatre whose booking fee has been waived – being warded by stewards and a security team whose services are free to us. The expertise of the AV technician Danny up there is free of charge to us. I say this every year, but we have a many new members who may be unaware of the museum's generous financial relationship with the society.

The excellent news is that despite the demise of the Friends this symbiotic relationship between the museum and the society is to continue unchanged under the new Founder Members regime.

The other piece of good news is the reduction of the subscription rate for membership of the FAS which Lin has already mentioned.

At the beginning of 2006 we decided to introduce an inducement to the museum's GCSE and Introduction to Astronomy students of a free year's membership of the FAS – a sort of taster in the hopes that they find it fun and stimulating and will be willing to pay up next time round. We wait to see with interest how many of you are going to rejoin this season. The special offer is to continue with new students as it seems to have proved successful.

Rejoining and joining – a thorny problem. I apologise to you all for the confusion and delay – not of our making – indeed not of anyone's making – mostly to do with incompatibility of the Friends and the NMM's computer systems. Can I assure you that the problems seem at last to have been ironed out – Claire is on the case!

Let me explain – it has been agreed with the museum that we shall roll both subscriptions into one – that is the museum still requires us all to be Founder Members as well as FAS members but we shall not get those irritating reminders that we owe money twice a year but only once - this will operate from the date you owe your old Friends (New Founder Members) subscription, not from the date you joined the FAS. Renewal letters have been distributed this evening and if you have not collected one please do so before you leave.

Although for accounting purposes our accounts are small beer and are actually being amalgamated into the FM's accounts, we are being permitted to have a separate "paper" account, which means that we shall always be able to monitor outgoings and balances. It also means that we shall be able to continue to donate our surplus to specific astronomical projects within the museum chosen by the committee. For example we have just been given permission to buy a secondhand hydrogen alpha telescope to expand the ever popular public solar viewing programme at the ROG. We have also spent some money upgrading our own Flamsteed telescope, especially the tracking device...which came up in the Coronado and viewing reports.

If you would like a copy of the breakdown of our expenses please ask me – it's all pretty straightforward. You will note the modesty of our lecturer's fees and expenses, which is very welcome.

I feel I should explain my position more fully. Up to now I have been paid by the Friends to run the society – the rate was £6.00 per hour to attend meetings. I originally asked for this in the bad old days, as I knew only too well, being a member of museum staff for 23 years, that volunteers were not perhaps fully valued and I wished to remain in the loop. I am not a volunteer I am nominated by the museum to the committee - not elected. I have now negotiated a honourarium payment of £250 per annum instead of an hourly payment. I hope that this is acceptable to you all.

Finally I must thank museum staff; it may seem to you on the outside that there have been glitches and there have, but we have always find cooperation, friendliness and a great willingness to meet us more that half way throughout the museum – witness the reduction in subscriptions and we value and thank everyone concerned.

7. Election of committee members

Lin Potter, Mike Dryland, Pat Wainwright and Peter Kitcherside are all willing to stand again for the committee. David Waugh has resigned owing to pressure of other commitments and Lin thanked him for his hard work and sterling efforts especially in regard to running the Coronado Hydrogen Alpha solar viewing project.

Two nominations had been received:

Roger Geeson was proposed by Peter Kitcherside and seconded by Michael Dear

Mark Duwe was proposed by David Waugh and seconded by Bernie Dillon.

As there were no other nominations an election was deemed unnecessary and both members were accepted unopposed onto the committee.

8. Any Other Business

Eddie Yeadon asked about the new arrangements for direct debits laid out in the Founder Members letter members had received that evening. He pointed out that the wording was not very clear – Claire Hyde replied that they were hoping to persuade those people who were not on direct debit already to move onto the system. Friend's accounts are being closed and therefore the members who were paying Direct Debits into the Friends will now have to close those DD and open new DD to be paid into the museum instead.

There were no further questions and Lin Potter closed the meeting.