

**MINUTES OF THE NINTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE FLAMSTEED
ASTRONOMY SOCIETY**

held on Friday 26th September 2008 at 6.45 p.m.
in the Lecture Theatre, National Maritime Museum.

Present: Lin Potter (Chair) and over 50 members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society, Kate Bishop, Head of the NMM Membership Dept.

1. Apologies: Roy Allen, Robin Gilbert, Alan Evans, Sue and Bob Yates, Pat Wainwright, Deborah McGarvey, Peter Kitcherside, Malcolm Porter, Stephen Wakeford and Rose Dowd.

2. Minutes of the AGM held on Monday 8th October 2007 had been circulated and were approved by the meeting.

3. Chairperson's address by Lin Potter

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the ninth general meeting of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society. I would like to extend a special welcome to Katie Bishop who as many of you know is our Membership Manager and a very competent one at that!

This year has been an action packed and successful year.

As usual, we have had a full lecture programme and have been very lucky again in attracting knowledgeable and very eminent lecturers.

In October Dr Robin Catchpole of the Institute of Astronomy, Cambridge, and formerly Senior Astronomer at the Royal Observatory Greenwich, revisited his old haunts to tell us about Stellar Evolution.

In November Mike again ran a very successful Book Mart. I think I bought 25% of the books but to date have only read about 5%.

After the Book Mart our very good friend Dr Francisco Diego from UCL came to talk to us about "What the stars have done for us: from Astrology to Astrophysics". As always he was fascinating and there were some very pretty pictures too!

The Christmas party in December was a jolly event with fun, fizz and healthy food prepared by M & S. There was also a somewhat controversial talk on the Star of Bethlehem by Rod Jenkins. The museum kindly extended the shop opening hours to allow us to purchase some excellent Starry & Sparkly Xmas Gifts.

January was Flamsteed Telescope month. John Griffiths of the ROG, held a public workshop on how to use a telescope and several Flamsteed members helped out on what was a busy and successful evening, which was followed up in March, when John again ran another telescope workshop for beginners.

In January Martin Taylor was taken ill and fortunately for us our very own Dr Darren Baskell stepped into the breach with an excellent planetarium show.

In February Ben Edwards, visiting Associate Professor of Volcanology at the University of East Anglia – gave a lecture on using volcano – Ice interactions to decipher the Climate History of Planets.

We stuck to the “KISS” principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid) with a ten minute talk by Flamsteed member Malcolm Potter in March, which was followed by a talk on the Herschels from Andrew Burns, President of the Wiltshire Astronomical Society.

“Who, what and when, Progress in the Big Questions in Astronomy”, was looked at in April by Dr Chris Lintott of ‘The Sky at Night’ and Oxford University.

Also in April we were honoured to have a visit from Colin Pillinger, Professor of Planetary Science at the Open University. He gave a talk on “Space is a Funny Place” and kept us captivated and amused with tales of his life, space and of course Beagle 2.

Not all of our events happened in the lecture theatre or at the ROG. We held our usual fun picnic in July preceded by an excellent workshop given by Flamsteed member Rob Willett on how to build mounts for binoculars.

Last September we walked the Willetts Way with Curator of Horology David Rooney. Willetts, if you recall, was responsible for introducing British Summer Time. He lived in South East London. On a beautiful sunny day, David showed us various memorials in a two hour stroll around Chislehurst and Petts Wood.

In May we took a coach trip to Herstmonceux Science Centre, previously home to the RGO (Royal Greenwich Observatory) after it left Greenwich. Thankfully this time there was no arctic weather, just glorious sunshine.

This year the NMM Members Scheme has been most successful and the symbiotic relationship between the Museum and the Society continues unchanged under this scheme.

The Partial Eclipse on August 1st was a great success and thanks are due to all Flamsteed participants. It was the first event that Darren Baskill organised and he did a magnificent job – there was fame too for our very own Mike Dryland who appeared on the Beeb news (for 3 secs at 1 o’clock only! John Griffiths got 2 minutes – Ed). Roughly 500 people viewed the partial eclipse throughout the morning.

On Sunday September 21st Fred Watson, the public face of astronomy in Australia, spoke to us on the subject of ‘Navigation and the Interplanetary Superhighway’. He gave a fascinating talk and was most entertaining. This lecture was open to members of the museum – including Flamsteed members and their personal guests. It was followed by a reception where Fred chatted and signed his book -- “Why is Uranus upside down”

Dr Marek Kukula – the Museum’s new Public Astronomer has joined us this year. Mike posted his very impressive professional details on the website and Flamsteed members will meet him when he gives us a short introductory talk about himself and his new job on 13th October.

We have a terrific and comprehensive programme for next year – 2009: The International Year of Astronomy.

We survived the Big Bang – in fact there was an article in the Evening Standard entitled “World Survives the Big Bang”! (so far – It seems to have blown a fuse – Ed)

It’s a busy programme and will become more so when we work out further ways Flamsteed members can assist at ‘Evening with the Stars’ and the Museum Open Evenings.

The ROG/ NMM New Adult Learning Programme is packed full of interesting events. Mike has posted these on his website.

Kate runs a very busy Membership office and we as members have been able to participate in the many successful events over the past year.

Oh, and Mike was not the only one to achieve notoriety this year! Pat Wainwright’s photograph of the eclipse in Siberia ended up as ‘Picture of the Week’ on the BAA website.

I would like to conclude my summary with special thanks to my hard working and dedicated committee and of course to you, the members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society.’

4. Coronado sessions and observing activities a report by Roger Geeson

Good evening Stargazers. The principal question and the one I’ve been asking myself all day is – “What on earth am I doing standing here this evening?” I am of course simply standing in for our regular Volunteer Co-ordinator Pat Wainwright who is again globe-trotting in the cause of Astronomy. I think I was ‘volunteered’ but don’t recall precisely how!

To the Coronado sessions, I bring neither long experience nor any particular expertise, only enthusiasm for a fascinating participation in popular astronomy. However, my presence here clearly serves to indicate that you don’t have to be an expert to both experience and enjoy astronomy.

Fortunately, I shall not need to bore you for too long because I fear that the weather so far this year, and indeed the Sun itself, has been far from co-operative with us and as a result, Coronado activity has been conspicuously thin on the ground.

Whilst, as David Waugh advised last year, we certainly aim towards running a public Coronado session each summer weekend, the weather almost invariably frustrates those good intentions.

As will be appreciated, unless a couple of fairly reliable forecasts confidently predict an hour or three of reasonably unbroken sunshine, it is scarcely worth assembling a team of volunteers and getting everything set up, only to be blotted out for the session. Solar activity is of course itself also at a cyclical ‘low’ and even when the Sun does occasionally present itself for a period long enough to be worthy of an observation session being organised, as it has done on just a few weekends this year, it presents us with an almost totally bland, and blank, countenance.

It becomes increasingly difficult to enthuse to an incredulous youngster about solar viewing when all they can see is a perfectly regular and unsullied orangey-red circle in the PST eyepiece.

In fact so totally unmarked has the solar disc presented itself of late that we have even been accused by some particularly sceptical wags of attempting to 'con' them with a disc painted on the object lens! That's how hard it's been this year so far with the sole exception of the partial eclipse which we experienced on 1st August.

Although not too much solar viewing was possible, the Coronado Team kept up their interest with some initial training for the new and refresher training for the existing team members.

Earlier in the year the Team met to review past experience of viewing sessions and to discuss ways in which we could enhance the service we provide to the public. The manual was updated and one or two more translations of the popular handout were produced, although with so many global visitors to the Observatory, we do still get caught out occasionally. So, if anyone out there is fluent in Latvian, Tuareg or Uzbek perhaps they would be kind enough to see me afterwards.

It would be churlish to miss this opportunity to publicly thank Mark Duwe, a mainstay of the Coronado team, for providing us with a PST at a real bargain price. Much appreciated Mark.

The Society also provided a small team of volunteers to assist the Museum with the astronomy element of their "Grand Night Out" event in the summer and it is understood that the NMM was both delighted with and appreciative of our assistance, which contributed to what is believed to have been a very successful project. With regard to the Eclipse, so many boats were pushed out by the Observatory and the Flamsteed Society that it resembled a regatta! Those joint efforts were handsomely rewarded with an enthusiastic crowd estimated by some to have totalled about 500 during the morning.

At least three Coronado PS Telescopes and an ingenious (mono) binocular projection set up were deployed, with these and four table mounted Observatory SolarScopes, all being manned by Flamsteed members. The Observatory's own Doctors Darren Baskill and John Griffiths were putting themselves about the area like ones possessed, giving both press and BBC interviews and answering numerous questions. As a result, the public had plenty of opportunity to observe an eclipse in action, albeit only partial, and to quiz both the experts, and some not so expert, on the event. We were extremely fortunate to be able to view telecasts of the actual 'full eclipse', beamed back from the Far East at about mid-day, on monitor screens in the Planetarium lobby and what an incredible spectacle those pictures presented. It was particularly encouraging to see the degree of enthusiasm with which adults and youngsters alike embraced the experience and hopefully at least some will retain the interest in astronomy generated that day. Pat Wainwright had of course gone all the way to Siberia to see the full eclipse 'in the flesh' so to speak and no doubt she will be telling us of her experiences, both good and not so good, in due course.

Aside from Coronado activities, the Society's members enjoyed numerous other related events among which were a very successful summer outing for 34 members to Herstmonceux.

Another evening/early morning spent reclining in a luxuriant and dark paddock observing Perseid meteors, of which we bagged no less than 27, or for the sporting amongst you 13 ½ brace, over about a two hour period!

We enjoyed further very useful Telescope workshops for beginners and above, courtesy of the Observatory experts John Griffiths and Tony Sizer.

Rob Willett organised and ran a very successful practical 'Binocular mount workshop' after which we picnic'd and saw a Planetarium show. I can personally vouch for the efficacy of a solid binocular mount, especially useful for when the D.T's set in!

Several members manned the NMM/ROG stand at 'Astrofest' in February at Kensington and took in some interesting lectures along the way.

Also in February, a number of us were able to indulge in a touch of 'Galactic' telescope viewing in deepest, darkest Romney, courtesy of Jane and Martin Male, and what fascinating evenings they proved to be. Special thanks to Jane and Martin.

Lastly, but by no means least, a number of diehards who should probably get out more culturally, continued to gather in the Hare and Billet hostelry on Blackheath on the third Monday of the month wherein they socialised, nattered on subjects diverse, sometimes even astronomy reared its mystic head, viewed an occasional heavenly body when seeing conditions allowed and partook of the odd noggin or two. I commend it to you -- although I think I may now recall, hazily, how it was that I got 'volunteered'!!

That's about it, for a year which has not been too remarkable astronomically speaking but has, nonetheless, been most enjoyable.

5. Financial Report by Jane Bendall

Good evening. This report is straightforward and should not take too long.

The big operational change from April 2007 is of course the winding up of the Friends and the advent of the Members. This has affected the way we run our accounts. The Friends was an independent organisation affiliated to the museum and Flamsteed was part of the Friends holding our own separate accounts. You will recall that the Friends were a charity. Their aim was make money to fund projects and acquire artefacts for the museum.

Now, as Members we are actually a component of the museum itself. Our subscriptions are essentially as much part of the museum income as proceeds from the shop or the Open Museum's lecture programme. Like other museum-wide departments we might have found ourselves in the position of bidding for an annual budget. Fortunately we were able to negotiate that, although we do not actually have a separate account, our income from your subscriptions is ring fenced and acts as our working budget. As of yesterday we had 113 paid up members with several new joiners and rejoinders in the pipe line.

As you can see from the figures we were allowed to carry our considerable reserve account through the change over. A very fortunate decision as we would have ended up in the red for the first time in the nine years of our existence. This was due to the difficulties over the first six months of last financial year when we had virtually no income. Teething problems within the new administration meant that we were not collecting subscriptions. Some of our members, through no fault of their own, did rather well out of the state of affairs, as at one point we were actually returning cheques and begging people not to pay! Now the new system of rolling subscriptions is firmly in place and we are catching up with ourselves and next financial year we should once more be in credit without calling upon our reserves. I look forward to the day when we shall be able to make a donation to some astronomical artefact or project within the museum again, which should not be too far in the future.

A more detailed break down of the figures is available to anyone who wishes. One comment which has been fed back to me is the rather hefty amounts we have spend under the heading of refreshments. The reason is simple- our numbers have grown and therefore the amount provided has grown – particularly the wine. I used to buy 6 bottles per event now I buy 10. We also held a large reception for 130 people when the new planetarium and observatory buildings opened at which we offered food and drinks. Then there is our Christmas Party - due to the stringent requirements of Health and Safety - we now order all our food directly from M&S - yes I know - there wasn't enough last year so I shall order more this time round. And of course we also have to buy our plastic gloves!

To sum up - despite the glitches we ended the financial year 2007/8 in a strong position.

Here I must give thanks and credit to Kate Bishop and her very able team of Monika and Helen. As you know Kate is Head of the Members of the museum and since she took over the job, has with hard work and determination, put the Members on a sound and efficient footing. She is proving to be a great friend of the Flamsteed – many thanks Kate.

6. Elections to the committee

Lin Potter, Mike Dryland, Pat Wainwright, Roger Geeson and Mark Duwe were all willing to stand again for election to the committee but Peter Kitcherside decided to step down for the time being.

One nomination had been received

Mike Dear was proposed by Adrian Challinor and seconded by Roger Geeson.

As there were no other nominations an election was deemed unnecessary and Mike Dear was appointed unopposed onto the committee.

7. Any Other Business

a. Attendance at joint Museum and Flamsteed workshops and meetings: Lin Potter raised the problem of 'no shows' – we have a serious problem with nearly 50% of people who sign up for events not turning up. When we hold joint Flamsteed and museum events we are allocated free tickets that otherwise would be sold to members of the public. No-shows not only reflect badly on the Society, but also results in loss of income to the museum and leads to disappointment for people who have been turned away when there is no room. Lin appealed to members to only book when they intend to come.

b. Forthcoming events: by Mike Dryland

For the season 2008/9 the Society has planned a number of events jointly with other departments of the Museum:

Telescope Workshops for Beginners

Friday November 7th - “How to choose a telescope”

Friday February 6th - “How to use a telescope”

These are joint public/Flamsteed workshops led by Dr John Griffiths. Tickets are on sale at £15/£11 concessions and there is a limited number (20) of free tickets at each workshop for

Flamsteed members (please book via Mike Dryland). The workshops will both cover the same ground, a hands-on introduction to starter telescopes, although there will be some emphasis in the first (pre-Christmas) on what to consider when planning to buy a starter scope.

To offer participants a wider sample of starter scopes to examine and discuss, the Society also aims to field a small team of volunteers willing to bring and demonstrate their scopes at the workshops.

“Evenings with the Stars” with the 28-inch Great Equatorial refractor

The ROG is staging a greatly expanded EWTS programme this season with about 20 dates between November and end-March. The full schedule has been posted on the NMM website. The activities during the evening have been expanded to include planetarium presentations. If the weather is not clear other activities will also be offered. Tickets are on sale at £15/£11 concessions

The Museum has generously agreed that there will be 1-hour Flamsteed Society sessions on four evenings during the season starting at 21:30. Places at these sessions will be free to members. Numbers are limited and there will be the usual booking system via email to a designated Committee coordinator. Flamsteed members will be welcome to arrive early and watch a planetarium show etc. The provisional dates are as follows, but the Museum is willing to look at re-scheduling any sessions which are clouded-out –

Tuesday November 18th

Tuesday December 9th

Tuesday January 20th

Tuesday February 24th

Arrangements for access to the Park have been improved and the Blackheath Gate will be open for entry and exit, by car only, at designated times. There will also be a shuttle bus for pedestrians from the main museum during the public sessions, but exit after the Flamsteed session at 22:30 will only be possible by car and the Society will arrange lifts out of the Park where needed. We are still in discussion with the Museum about opportunities to field volunteer teams with small telescopes to supplement the 28-inch at some of the public EWTS events.

Family Evenings

The Museum is offering a series of Family events using small telescopes instead of the 28-inch. There will also be workshops and planetarium shows during these evenings. 5 dates are planned –

Saturday January 3rd

Saturday January 17th

Saturday January 24th

Tuesday February 17th

Saturday February 28th

The Museum very much wants the Society to field volunteer teams (at least 4 people per event) to help operate and supervise small telescopes belonging to the ROG. We will be consulting shortly on how many of these events we should commit to support, possibly 3 of the 5, and we hope we can rely on your participation.

“She’s an astronomer” Saturday January 31^{st a} special Family event is planned aimed at mothers and daughters. Female astronomers will be giving talks and the Museum would be very pleased if the Society could field a team of female volunteers to help operate small scopes etc at this event.

c. Astro Calendars:

The orders have arrived courtesy of Jim Kelly. Please collect your order from Mike, who also has a limited number of leaflets on Observing the Night Sky. Any surplus calendars and leaflets will be on sale at the Book Mart in November.

There being no other business, the meeting was closed.

V2 September 29, 2008