

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

Held in the Lecture Theatre of the National Maritime Museum at 7.00 p.m. on Monday 10th October 2005

Present: Polly Larner, Director of Friends, the committee and 32 members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society

Apologies: Nicki Bearcroft, Lesley Bound, Angela and Tony Hooper, Peter Kitcherside, Chris Munro, Renate Muller and David Waugh

The minutes of the fifth AGM of the Society held on Monday 4th October 2004 had been circulated to all members and were approved by the meeting.

Chairperson's report for year 1st October 2004 – 1st October 2005

Welcome to the sixth annual general meeting of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society. I am delighted to see so many familiar faces here this evening and also to welcome some new members to our ranks.

Also we must extend a welcome to Polly Larner Director of the Friends of the National Maritime Museum who is representing the Friends Council at this meeting. As you are all aware we are a special interest society which is run and administered by the Friends on behalf of the museum which puts us in a unique position amongst the many astronomy societies in this country.

We have had another successful year of events, lectures and activities with an ever increasing membership. The move to the lecture theatre has consolidated our position within the museum as a mainstream body instead of an insignificant special interest group meeting in the small and rather uninspiring surroundings of the Discovery Room in the Observatory.

To reflect our increased membership and activity within the museum Eddie Yeadon undertook the onerous task on behalf of the committee of writing a new constitution for the society, which now reflects our greater numbers and activities. After much consultation with the committee and on one occasion all our members, who were invited to attend a discussion meeting, the constitution was eventually presented to Polly Larner and has now been adopted by the Friends Council. A copy of the constitution is available on request from Jane. I would like to extend the committee's warm thanks to Eddie for his extremely hard work and patience throughout six months of redrafting and negotiation. The final document should stand the Flamsteed in good stead through the years to come as we continue to expand and go ever forwards.

Last year we enjoyed a very varied series of lectures from a lively talk by Rosemary Selmes about her memories of a young astronomer in Herstmonceux to an impassioned plea for legislation to limit sky glow from Bob Mizon the co-coordinator of the British Astronomical Association Campaign for Dark Skies.

We were amazingly lucky to have Professor John Brown the Astronomer Royal for Scotland to deliver our star lecture on Black Holes and White Rabbits. As well as being a very talented astrophysicist, John is also a member of the Magic Circle so we were right Royally entertained by disappearing silver balls and jumping beans. The only slight disappointment being the lack of white rabbits. Incidentally just over 80 people were in the audience so we had the joy of having a practically full lecture theatre – something we hope to see more of this coming season.

In May over twenty members travelled to the Orwell Observatory near Ipswich where we climbed some 400 steps to the top of the tower to view their telescope followed by a tour of Hill House, Sir George's family home. A rewarding day out was crowned when we laid flowers at Sir George's grave in the little churchyard nearby.

Our other visit was of course our weekend in Paris – the weather was kind, Paris was looking its best, the hotel was sufficiently comfortable and friendly and really the weekend couldn't be bettered. Madam Débarbat took us on an exhaustive and very well informed tour of the magnificent Paris Observatory on the Saturday afternoon. It was 32 degrees in the shade so we all welcomed a jolly and rather liquid evening at a local restaurant afterwards. Several of our members visited Notre Dame, St Sulpice (for the alternative Da Vinci Code version of meridian lines!), Versailles, and The Pompidou Centre and cruised on the Seine; so we packed a lot into a lovely weekend. So good was it all that we want to go off again together perhaps this time to Edinburgh – and we hope that even more of you will be able to come next time.

Two of the highlights of the year were lectures by Professor Carl Murray and Professor Richard Harrison. Indeed at the Flamsteed we believe in going to the top as Carl Murray is one of the foremost experts in the world about Saturn and is a "British face" of the Cassini Project. A modest and fascinating man he has discovered two new moons in the rings of Saturn – sadly neither of which are to be called the Murray moon – and we plan to invite him back to the Society in 2006 to tell us more, an event simply not to be missed. Professor Harrison of the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory is a world expert on our nearest star the sun and again proved to be an accessible and interesting speaker. I think all our volunteers involved in the hydrogen alpha solar viewing programme we run here at the museum found their knowledge about the sun was much enhanced. We are hoping to take up his kind offer to arrange a visit to the laboratories next spring.

Our great friend Francisco Diego ran a telescope workshop in January – he will do another one early in the New Year and this time we will be inviting member's questions beforehand. Afterwards if the weather is clear we will take all the telescopes up to Blackheath to try out the techniques we have learned during the afternoon.

That brings me to looking at the stars – and our programme of volunteer training for the 28" telescope. Robert will tell you of the museum's plans to use our trained volunteers and Pat Wainwright is kindly going to talk more about our observing plans in a minute including Evenings with the Stars.

Similarly our Hydrogen Alpha Coronado public viewing project has gone from strength to strength and Mike will talk about that in a few minutes time. We must

take the opportunity now to thank Lesley Bound for all her work in coordinating the programme throughout the year. Unfortunately she couldn't come this evening but that shouldn't stop us expressing our appreciation for her unremitting efforts, hard work and organization.

We have yet to find an ideal dark field site in Kent – we are still searching and hoping.....and appeal to you all to keep your suggestions coming in. We promise to follow up all good ideas.

What else catches our attention as we look back through the past twelve months? The success of our first ever bookmart very ably conceived, arranged and carried through by Mike Dryland – so successful in fact that we are going to repeat it next month. The simply splendid singing of the choir at the Christmas party. Probably the first time the Octagon Room has rocked to the sound of Gospel singers since it was built in 1675. The concert really heralded Christmas for many of us. Then there was Mike's fiendish quiz at the Christmas Party. Look out for another one in December.

Throughout the year there have been regular monthly evenings at the Hare and Billet – when all our members are invited to come along for a chat, a convivial drink and given clear weather - viewing on Blackheath. If you are in the vicinity on Monday evenings – check the website for dates – do join us.

Our website is ever expanding and without exaggeration must be one of the most comprehensive and informative astronomy society website in the country....also one of the most amusing!

In summary an interesting and enjoyable twelve months, for which we thank the support of our members and the hard work of our committee. We are looking forward to another good year in 2006.

FAS Observing report

Observing this year has been planned at Blackheath, Cudham, Romney and at the ROG using the 28-inch.

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 we have suffered from cloud on most Blackheath evenings until September when we had a successful session, looking at Mars amongst other objects.

Cudham is normally used for special events where we need a darker sky. There was a meeting in January when people went out looking for meteors and comet Macholz. Cudham as a site is much better than Blackheath but not perfect and there are some concerns about the car park having been seen locked occasionally so if anyone knows of an alternative dark site within easy reach please tell one of the committee.

Romney sessions at Martin and Jane's home observatory have been planned most months around the time of new moon for deep sky observing but have been blighted this year by cloud on the planned evenings. Martin has an impressive 14 inch SCT

permanently set up in his observatory so it's well worth the drive down if we get a clear night. Martin also has a CCD imaging device and has shown us some of his results at Blackheath evenings.

Closer to home, we also had a number of dates reserved for using the 28inch in the ROG. Once again the weather confounded our plans but eventually we had some time on it and those who could make it at short notice enjoyed a tour of the Moon led by Tony Sizer.

At the start of this year the "observing group" was an informal sub-section of FAS. From now on observing will be part of mainstream Flamsteed activities and events will be organized by a committee member.

Future events include two Mars observing evenings on 18th and 24th November because Mars is going to be bright and high in the sky this autumn. Also Martin and Jane have given us some dates for Romney visits which will be on the website.

Blackheath dates will normally be 2 weeks after the main Flamsteed meeting for the month and this will be confirmed on the website. If anyone who wants to participate hasn't got email, please give contact details to a member of the committee and we'll make sure you get the information.

All Flamsteed members are welcome at all observing events. The only restriction is space at Romney so please check before going down that there is room. No equipment is necessary; bring what you have even if only a pair of eyes. Here's hoping for clear skies this year!

Solar Viewing Project

Mike Dryland reported on the activities of the solar viewing group on behalf of Lesley Bound who had sent apologies for her absence.

Mike paid tribute to Lesley's hard work and dedication in organizing the volunteer rota for duty with the Hydrogen-alpha solar telescope and was sorry to have to report that her work commitments now prevent her from continuing with this responsibility. The new Flamsteed committee will be seeking someone to take-over the duties.

Currently we have 21 members trained to use the H-alpha Coronado solar telescope and supervise at public viewing sessions and at least five more members are awaiting training. We are planning a training session for October 22nd (weather permitting) as part of the Museum's Trafalgar weekend celebrations. This session will also include gun drill on the 32 pounder cannon!

Mike reminded members that a minimum of two volunteers is needed to run each session.

The Flamsteed public solar viewing sessions since the last AGM have continued to be very successful and are most appreciated by the Observatory. Fortunately, we have been quite lucky with the weather as clear skies permitted just over half the sessions to proceed.

In particular the sessions for National Science Week in March 2005 were very popular, when six of ten scheduled sessions went ahead and we showed over 1100 visitors a view of the sun.

Our session for the recent partial solar eclipse on October 3, 2005 was most successful after a nail-biting start, but the clouds rolled back just in the nick of time. The next partial solar eclipse visible from Greenwich is Wednesday March 29, 2006 when only 16% of the sun will be obscured.

We now have an excellent range of handouts in seven languages including Russian and Japanese – many thanks to everyone who helped, especially Yumiko & Robert, Peter, Ian, Eddie and their contacts and friends.

The group is beginning to build a collection of worthwhile solar photographs – Tony Sizer's picture from March 17 appears on the handouts and Mike's picture from the eclipse has been added to the Transit of Venus pictures.

Finally, we have moved our sessions down-the-hill during the renovation work at the Observatory and have found that locating to the south of the west colonnades is a mixed blessing, so we hope to move back to the Royal Observatory as soon as is practicable.

On behalf of the committee Mike extended thanks to all those volunteers who have joined the project.

Financial report: A summary of the audited financial position of the Society for the financial year 2004/2005 had been sent to every member. Jane reported that the society's funds were in a very healthy state. There is now £2,846.28 in the Flamsteed reserve fund so we are planning to donate the agreed £1,000 to the museum's Universal Appeal at a suitable moment in the next month or so. Our surplus was due to the unique position we have in the museum; we have not been charged for the use of the site, stewards, security or technician support. As a society we are in an extremely privileged position.

Similarly many of our distinguished lecturers had waived their fees and had just asked for expenses.

As the Society is already aware, it had been agreed with the Friends, that we would pay 20 percent to them as a charity donation as an alternative to paying VAT. It has also been agreed that our surplus reserves would be used to buy equipment or fund projects for the ROG. This will only be done when our reserves are in a healthy position and with the agreement of the Committee, who will consult and inform the members at all times.

A more detailed break down of expenditure is available to members from the accountant in the Friends office

Elections to the committee

Under the new Flamsteed constitution the enlarged committee has six spaces.

The following names were submitted:

Lin Potter and Eddie Yeadon, who are both serving committee members, stood for re-election to the committee,

Mike Dryland who has been serving as a co-opted committee member, was nominated by Eddie Yeadon

Pat Wainwright was nominated by Stan Payne

David Waugh was nominated by Rose Dowd and Stephen Wakeford

Peter Kitcherside was nominated by Julie Bevan

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.