

## The BAA Winchester Weekend, 2008 April 04–06



The BAA Winchester Weekend has been running for over forty years. Originally started by Alfred Curtis as an observing course, it has up till now been held at King Alfred's College in Winchester. However this year they were unable to accommodate us so Alan Dowdell, the course organiser, had to find another venue.

Sparsholt College, situated about six miles outside Winchester, was chosen so we could maintain our connection with the city. It is the UK's leading college for 'land-based industries', their description for agriculture, animal management, horticulture, forestry etc., so you can guess we were out in the countryside with the prospect of dark skies! It turned out to be a good decision to go there. Alan found the staff helpful while the campus was well laid out and easy to walk around. The accommodation was good, providing comfortable rooms with ensuite toilet/shower facilities and a kettle for making drinks. The food was excellent with a

good choice and generous portions and the staff were friendly. My only small criticism is that the dining area was a little small and we were rather squashed together. Also, I think many of us were possibly a little larger when we left!

The college bar was well run with a good selection of beer. It was a pleasant place to visit and enjoy a drink at the end of the day, a notable improvement on King Alfred's College.

We had the use of the lecture theatre, reception area and two rooms for trade stands and displays.

The BAA had its sales stand and did good business selling observing guides and other astronomical accessories while Peter Hudson brought books from the library to sell which the BAA no longer required. Commercial stands included David Bryant selling meteorites, unusual rocks and jewellery, Martin Lunn with Aurora Books, Ninian Boyle representing Venturescope, and Peter Wise with his Newise telescope. Bob Mizon brought the Campaign for Dark Skies (CfDS) stand, Guy Hurst set up a display for *The Astronomer* magazine, and Roger Pickard presented the work of the BAA Variable Star Section. Newbury Astronomical Society were the only local society to mount a display this year. Having these two rooms gave us a good-sized area for

coffee breaks, talking to people and browsing the stands.

After dinner on Friday the weekend proper started. Alan welcomed everyone and gave his usual warnings about returning room keys



A view of the main lecture hall



Top of page: Attendees at the 2008 Winchester Weekend. (Photo by David Briggs)  
Above, from left: Barry Bates, Alan Dowdell, Patricia Barber and Maddy Crow at the registration desk. (Except where noted, all photos by Ann Davies)

on time. This year, as a break with tradition, the Alfred Curtis Memorial Lecture was the first talk of the weekend rather than on Saturday evening. Roger Pickard, in his capacity as President, warmly welcomed Dr Arne Henden, director of the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO). In his lecture entitled 'Variable Stars', Dr Henden described many of the fascinating variable objects which amateurs can observe and talked about the cooperation which exists between professional and amateur astronomers and also how the AAVSO and BAA work closely together. His talk was well received and there were many questions. Arne was in the UK with his wife, having some holiday before going to Cambridge for the AAVSO/BAA meeting the following weekend. He stayed for the whole weekend which gave people lots of time to talk to him. The evening brought clear



skies and several dedicated observers took their telescopes out although the weather was getting noticeably colder. Weaker souls were to be found in the bar talking about astronomy.

After an excellent breakfast on Saturday we headed back to the lecture theatre for the first talk of the day. Would people be up and alert at that time? David Bryant, one of the UK's leading dealers in meteorites and impactites and an accomplished performer in front of an audience, had no trouble capturing peoples' attention. He found his first meteorite when he was eight and since then has had a lifelong interest in 'Space Rocks', the title of his talk. His enthusiasm for the subject, and his jokes, kept us all awake. After coffee Michael Foulkes, Director of the BAA Saturn Section, talked about 'Observing Saturn'. He covered the history of Saturn observations from Will Hay to the present day and stressed the importance of Section members continuing to make observations of the ringed planet. Mike always gives a good talk and this was no different. Clear skies allowed some solar observing during the lunch break.

In the afternoon Paul Haley brought his 'Magic Planet', a fascinating 3D digital



A view of the campus on Sunday morning

sphere illuminated from the inside which can display dynamic planetary surfaces, to illustrate his talk 'From Galileo to IHY'. Paul was a teacher and now does public outreach, bringing live space and astronomy to the classroom. Ian King then passed on his imaging expertise in a talk entitled 'A Taste of Simplifying The Art Of Astro Imaging'. While he could only scratch the surface of a complicated subject, I think this will encourage many of the audience to experiment for themselves.

Dr Robert Crittenden from the Institute of Astronomy & Gravitation at the University of Portsmouth gave the Saturday evening lecture, 'Dark Energy: What is it and Why Do We Need It?'. It was an excellent talk provoking many questions. We may see him again in the future! This rounded off a very full and interesting day. Most of us retired to the bar while a few hardy souls went observing. We had heard that snow was forecast, but didn't really believe it...

They were right! Sunday morning saw a blanket of snow covering the site. It looked beautiful but caused some worry, not so much because we might be trapped there with good food and the opportunity to talk even more about astronomy, but because driving home might be tricky. The lecture theatre was full for the first talk of the day by Peter Wise, well known to many as an innovative telescope designer and manufacturer. He gave a brief his-

tory of the telescope from the Bronze Age to the Space Age. It was a well-researched and thought-provoking talk, which hinted that optics might go much further back than many of us imagined. After coffee it was so good to see Neil Bone back giving talks and in fine fettle after his health problems of the past year. Neil is Director of the BAA Meteor Section and talked about 'Observing with Small Telescopes'. As an advocate of a minimalist approach to observing as far as equipment is concerned, he was promoting the benefits of using small telescopes. The talk contained much sound advice based on experience.



Top: Peter Wise with his 'Newise' telescope. Below, from left: BAA Vice-President Dr Nick Hewitt, course organiser Alan Dowdell, and Meteor Section Director Neil Bone.



Paul Haley and the 'Magic Planet'

The Members' Session on Sunday afternoon is a traditional feature of the Winchester Weekend in which members of the audience get the opportunity to describe what they have been up to over the past year. Bob Mizon gave his usual CfDS update, telling us about recent developments and encouraging us to get actively involved in promoting good lighting. Ron Arbour spoke about his recent supernova discoveries and showed the latest reincarnation of his venerable 406mm reflector. John Glasgow told us about Alfred

**Obituary**

**Peter W. Foley (1930–2008)**

Peter Foley, who died earlier this year, joined the BAA in 1973. He was born on 1930 May 29. After joining the Association he quickly became a keen member of the Lunar Section in those immediate post-Apollo years, and at a time when the one and only Patrick was, once again, the Section Director. By day Peter was the senior accountant for Burndept Electronics based at Erith in Kent (a mobile radio systems manufacturer) but by night he became an avid lunar observer and photographer. His main interest was in monitoring the lunar surface for transient lunar phenomena (TLP), alleged changes in the appearance of the surface. The prime regions where such events were suspected tended to be in and around the craters Gassendi, Plato and Aristarchus, although other ‘hot spots’ were monitored. Peter’s own favourite region was

Aristarchus and he spent hundreds of hours a year monitoring and photographing this formation, the brightest crater on the Moon. He wrote a paper on his 1975/76 observations of the crater which was published in the 1976 December *Journal (J. Brit. Astron. Assoc., 87, 33 (1976))*.

Peter’s prime instrument was a 300mm f/5.25 Fullerscopes Newtonian mounted on that company’s British made Mk IV equatorial head. The telescope was originally based at his former home at Wilmington near Dartford in Kent. In the late 1970s it was relocated to a somewhat Heath–Robinson domed observatory (bashed into a vaguely



**Peter Foley with Patrick Moore just after a Lunar Section meeting in the mid-1980s at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Jeremy Cook is visible in the background. Photograph by Martin Mobberley.**

spherical shape from sheet metal) in the back garden of his large detached home, ‘Tree Trunks’ at Nettlestead Green, near Maidstone. It was called ‘Tree Trunks’ for a reason. Anything that got between Peter and the Moon was sawn down, whether his wife Eileen approved or not.

Some of Peter’s lunar photographs of the 1970s and ’80s were very sharp indeed and he claimed his secret was using very slow film, with very long exposures, in the best seeing conditions. Photographs taken at f/25 on Ilford Pan-F (25ISO) with exposures of 3 to 5 seconds were his trademark. He claimed his 300mm mirror was a special one, polished to a very high surface accuracy by Henry Wildey. He was one of only a few observers who could capture some of the craterlets on the floor of Plato, as circles, in those pre-CCD days. He had some unconventional views however. One of these was that spurious colour was unrelated to lunar altitude, a view that drew some polite criticism in the lunar *Circular* from the master of lunar and planetary photography, Horace Dall.

At the end of 1977 Peter Foley agreed to take on the truly onerous task of editing and producing the monthly Lunar Section *Circulars* which were generated using a hideous stencil-based duplicating machine. At the same time Patrick took over as the TLP sub-section coordinator. In 1978 May Peter became the assistant director to Geoff Amery, and also took over from Patrick as TLP co-ordinator by the end of that year. So, by the start of 1979 Peter was well entrenched as the Section *Circulars* editor and production manager, the TLP co-ordinator and the Assistant Director. Few BAA members would ever want that sort of workload, but the *Circulars* came out from Nettlestead Green month after month.

Nine years later, during 1987 December, the Lunar Section director, Geoff Amery, resigned from his post due to work and fam-

**Winchester 2008: continued**

Curtis, the founder of the Winchester Weekend, and showed us a school photograph of Alfred aged about 12. He also showed a fascinating film of Winchester in Alfred’s time. David Arditti described the recent addition of a runoff roof section to his extensive observatory in North London.

Finally Alan Dowdell brought the weekend to a close by thanking everyone involved in helping, especially Maddy Crow in the BAA office who had dealt with all the application forms and payments and was attending her first Winchester. He thanked all the speakers, those who had brought trade stands

and displays, Dave Briggs for taking the group photo, and his friends from the Isle of Wight who had handled the registration. He said it wouldn’t have happened without all the visitors and hoped we had enjoyed it. I thought it was an excellent event which might be the start of a new era of Winchester Weekends. Alan deserves our thanks for returning to the job he thought he had left behind years ago and for moving it on to a new venue and a new lease of life. The event was a sell-out this year, so book early for 2009!

**Ann Davies**



**Class IVA of St Thomas’ School, Winchester, in about 1913. Alfred Curtis is seated on the extreme right of the front row. (Photo courtesy John Glasgow)**



ily commitments. On Patrick and Henry Hatfield's recommendation to the BAA Council, the assistant director and TLP co-ordinator, Peter Foley, succeeded him. Peter took over from 1988 January 2.

Peter's four years (but for a month) as Section Director were marked by great energy and enthusiasm with many meetings being held and *Circulars* full of alleged TLP observations being produced. Peter wrote more than a dozen lunar updates and meeting reports for the *BAA Journal*. Members of the lunar Section committee of that era will recall Peter's liking for extremely pungent cigars, his almost permanent cough and tobacco-deepened drawl and also his ability not to hear any words of TLP dissent from anyone if they 'sat on my deaf side'. Peter expected his sub-section co-ordinators to always provide monthly articles for the lunar *Circular* and to provide Section material for the *BAA Journal* too. He was a hard task-master but expected everyone to devote themselves to the Section with as much energy as he did.

As well as his Section roles Peter made a large number of rather crude (but just about useable) TLP 'Moonblink' devices in his garage using metal, cardboard, superglue and staples... whatever worked! These enabled a series of neutral density filters and red/blue filters to be used to check alleged coloured events on the lunar surface and to measure the brightness of craters by extinction. On one occasion in the 1980s this writer recalls him proudly showing me (in his garage) a distinctly home-made (and very heavy) Moonblink device he had cobbled together, commenting 'I bet the Americans haven't got this sort of equipment'. I couldn't argue with that!

Peter was a hard working Director but did not tolerate any criticism. When *New Moon* editor Rob Moseley produced an unauthorised version of that occasional Section publication, criticising Peter, the BAA Council took notice. Moseley resigned from the BAA but various issues rumbled on. After a further fallout with younger members of the Section Committee Peter resigned as Lunar Section Director and Editor at the very end of 1991. At the 1992 February BAA Council meeting, after Patrick had held the fort for two months, Jeremy Cook was installed as the new Section Director and calm was restored.

Peter became very disillusioned with the Lunar Section after his resignation; he was only ever going to run the Section his way, or not at all. However he remained a BAA member and continued observing the Moon. He was also a keen artist in his spare time.

Eventually Peter did submit a few further lunar observations to the BAA and, on 2002 October 6 at 04:52 UT, he was one of only a handful of observers to witness a brilliant fireball break up over Kent. He

described it as 'bright enough to fully illuminate the bedroom, high in the south, ending at about 25 degrees above the horizon'. Peter passed away on 2008 March 1, aged 77. Eileen survives him.

Peter Foley was definitely one of the Lunar Section's more colourful and contro-

versial characters and, no doubt, many of those who worked or even crossed swords with him in the 1970s, '80s and early '90s will enjoy recounting amusing stories of him for many years to come.

**Martin Moberley**

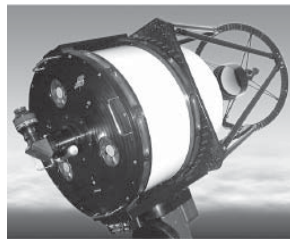
## New Honorary Members

Congratulations to the following, who have been members of the Association for a continuous period of fifty years at the start of the new session, and therefore now become Honorary Members:

	<i>Date elected</i>		<i>Date elected</i>
Mr R. J. Buckley	1958 Jan 29	Mr D. E. Renton-Cooper	1958 Jan 01
Mr W. M. Debenham	1958 Mar 26	Mr R. S. Seale	1958 Jan 01
Mr H. S. Ford	1957 Nov 27	Mr R. R. Staer	1958 Jul 01
Mr J. R. W. Hearn	1958 Jan 29	Dr G. A. Steigmann	1957 Nov 27
Dr P. M. R. Hemphill	1957 Nov 27	Dr S. C. Tillman	1958 Jun 25

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