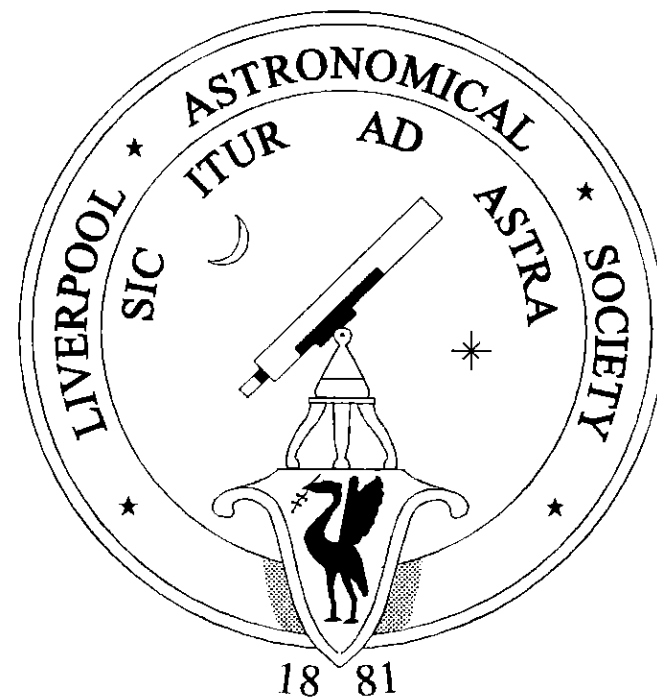


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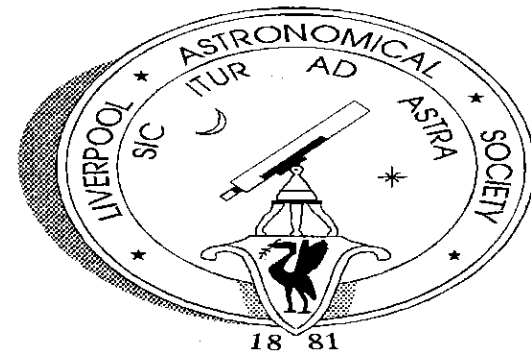
1996

THE HISTORY OF  
THE  
LIVERPOOL  
ASTRONOMICAL  
SOCIETY



THE LIVERPOOL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY  
- OVER 100 YEARS OF  
ASTRONOMY ON MERSEYSIDE

THE HISTORY  
OF THE  
LIVERPOOL  
ASTRONOMICAL  
SOCIETY



compiled by

GERARD GILLIGAN

from contributions by

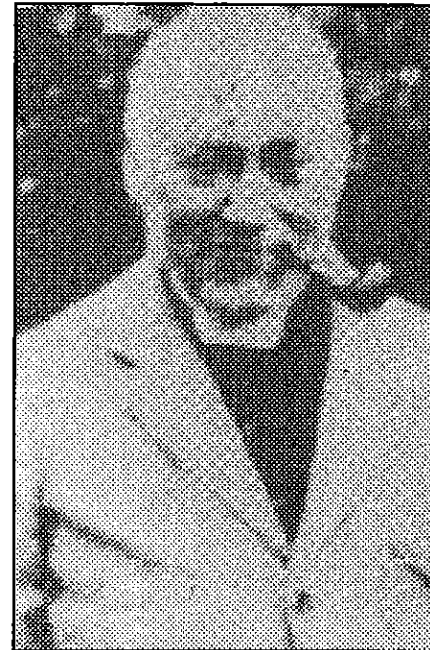
Alan Sanderson, Dr. Eric Jones (Liverpool A.S.)  
and Kevin Kilburn (Manchester A.S.)

## THE HISTORY OF THE LIVERPOOL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

In 1880 the Rev. T. E. Espin of Wallasey Rectory, Birkenhead, wrote to the *"English Mechanic"* proposing the formation of an amateur society aimed at organising and coordinating observations. The following year, 1881, the Liverpool Astronomical Society was founded. In correspondence to *"The Observatory"* in 1883 the then Secretary, Mr W. H. Davies, described how the Society originated at the close of an astronomical lecture, (of the *Royal Astronomical Society*) when:-

*"... it was proposed by three or four of the audience that a study of the science would be facilitated if amateurs would meet at stated intervals and compare the results of their observations..."*

An unforeseen difficulty was that not all participating members owned telescopes. The solution was to procure a small stock of 2-inch object glasses and some lengths of brass tubing with which to make telescopes. Soon a small society of ten members resulted, each equipped with the means of making observations. By the end of the first session, thanks to contributed papers from the R.A.S. and other active amateurs, the membership had grown to seventeen although the initial interest in making observations had waned somewhat and only half of the members were active. Nevertheless, by the end of the second session the membership had grown to seventy and by 1882, had increased still further with the Society becoming self supporting.



*Rev. T.E. Espin who can, without argument, be considered as the founder of the Liverpool Astronomical Society*

*"A Catalogue of Red Stars"* were widely read, other members included:- the Rev. T. W. Webb, author of *"Celestial Objects for Common Telescopes"*, Mr. Arthur Mee; editor of the famous *"Children's Encyclopedia"*, Mr. J. Ellard Gore; author of many astronomy books and translator of Camille Flammarion's *"Popular Astronomy"*, Mr. T. G. Elger, whose book and lunar map were renowned.

Largely due to the efforts of Mr. Davies, the L.A.S. rapidly expanded. It became world famous with branches on the Isle of Man and as far afield as Pernambuco, (now Recife), Brazil and in Australia. The Pernambuco branch was formed in 1886 under the Secretaryship of Mr. G. W. Nicholls when the number of local members reached fifty-one.

From the outset a popular monthly Journal was published and attracted a large number of leading amateur and professional astronomers to the Society. In addition to T. E. Espin, whose books *"An Elementary Star Atlas"* and

Other well known members were Dr. Isaac Roberts, Mr. James Gill, Captain William Noble, Mr. W. F. Denning and Sir Howard Grubb. Associate members included Sir Robert Ball; the Royal Astronomer of Ireland, Mr. G. Calver; telescope maker, Giovanni Schiaparelli, who first described the "canals" of Mars, the American astronomer, Asaph Hall, who discovered the two Martian moons Deimos and Phobos, Professor C. Piazzi Smyth, Miss Agnes Clerke; author of the "*History of Astronomy during the Nineteenth Century*" and Otto Struve; Director of the Pulkowa Observatory.

Mr R. S. Newall, of Gateshead, who owned one of the largest refracting telescopes in England, (*a 25" Cooke*) which he subsequently presented to the University of Cambridge was a member and, in February 1887, even His Imperial Majesty, Dom Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil, joined the Society.



*W. H. Davies who became the Society's first secretary.*

The Annual General Meeting of 1886-1887 was held at the Headquarters of the Royal Astronomical Society at Burlington House, Piccadilly, London. This was at the suggestion of the President, T. G. Elger, in view of the national character which the Liverpool Astronomical Society had assumed. At the meeting it was reported that the LAS had 440 members and there was the suggestion that ordinary meetings be held in different towns and cities throughout the country. By 1889 hundreds of copies of the Journal were being sent to members all over the world and "*The Observatory*" advertised that it published reports not only by the Royal Astronomical Society but also by the Liverpool Astronomical Society. The Society grew from strength to strength.

Unfortunately, not all was as well as appeared. The Society was in both the public and professional eye and it is evident that certain criticisms were being levied at it. One particular comment, by Isaac Roberts, resulted in a letter from W. H. Davies to "*The Observatory*" in June 1886, attempting to put the record straight. This addressed various criticisms including shirking of the workload by the originally active members once the initial novelty had worn off, overspending to the extent of eight pounds during the 1884-85 session (*due to the provision of an extra 160 bound volumes of the Journal*), comments regarding the change to the usual date of the annual meeting and that assistance with the running of the Society should be delegated to local volunteering members in Liverpool rather than to members outside the area or paid helpers. (*Roberts felt that the LAS should be more of a local society rather the international organisation that it had become.*)

Astronomy classes under the direction of Mr. J. Gill, were started in 1884 in Liverpool, Douglas and at other branches. Certificates of Competence were awarded. Observing Sections, under the direction of an elected leader, were also formed. They included Double Star, Variable Star and Star Colour Sections; the solar system was catered for by the Solar, Lunar, Jupiter, Saturn, Meteor and Comet-seeking Sections. In August, 1887 the Solar section, under the direction of Miss Elizabeth Brown, organised a trip to see the total eclipse of the Sun from Kinescham, Russia.

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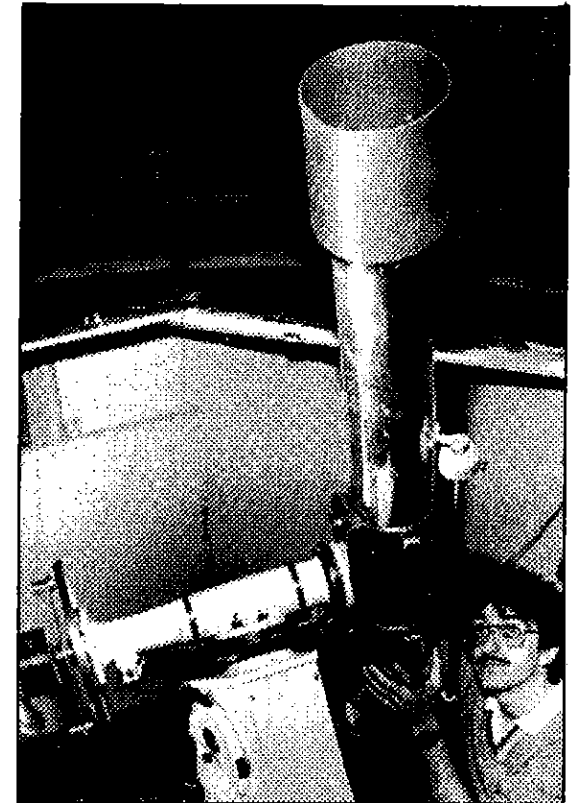
The situation came to a head in 1889. The Society's finances were in serious trouble. Large sums of money were owed to the printers. The Treasurer resigned and the situation was made worse by the death of the President and the Secretary falling ill.

While these matters were being addressed in Liverpool, Mr. E. W. Maunder of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, urged by Miss Brown, began pressing for the founding of a national astronomical society to be based in London. In October 1890, the British Astronomical Association was formed with the observing sections and section leaders transferred from the temporarily paralysed Liverpool Astronomical Society. With the aid of a substantial sum of donated money and members joining from the original astronomical society, the B.A.A. flourished whilst the L.A.S. shrank to become a local society based in Liverpool and the surrounding area.

In the years that followed, the Liverpool members cleared the outstanding debts. In 1894, Mr. W. E. Plummer, Director of the Liverpool Observatory at Bidston Hill, became President and held the office until 1919. This still stands as the longest continuous term of office held in the Society's history.

During the 1890's, the Liverpool Astronomical Society quietly continued as a local society for its regional members, several of whom played an important role in the administration of the Manchester-based North Western Branch of the BAA formed in 1892 and whose area was deliberately excluded until October, 1894.

A 5-inch Cooke refractor and 2-inch transit telescope, donated to the Society in 1889 by Mr. Thomas Glazebrook Rylands of Highfields, Thelwall, Cheshire, helped the Society retain its independence. The instruments were offered on condition that Liverpool Town Council would provide a site for an observatory, of which the L.A.S. should have the use for three nights each week. The Society undertook to provide funds for the project and the offer was put into the hands of the Parks, Gardens and Improvements Committee. An original application to build an observatory at St. James Mount, now occupied by the Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, was turned down. But a site for the observatory



*The Society's fine 5-inch Cooke refractor, donated by T. G. Rylands of Warrington. The telescope is currently housed in the Society's City Observatory in William Brown Street.*

was obtained above the Nautical College, where the L.A.S. meetings were subsequently held, adjacent to the City Museum. Students of the Nautical College were admitted to the Society as Junior Members for a annual subscription of two shillings.

In 1914 the secretary H. H. Waters had written a valuable booklet on "*Celestial Photography*" and a reproduction of his photograph of Comet Morehouse 1908 appeared in a later L.A.S. Journal. At about this time the Society was officially invited to provide an exhibition at the Franco-British Exhibition and after discussion with Sir Norman Lockyer various historical telescopes and photographs were sent in so that probably some of his and Dr. Isaac Roberts prints would go in.

In August 1905, another solar eclipse expedition, to Spain, was undertaken by several members. During the 1907-1908 session, the President gave a public lecture on the forthcoming 1910 apparition of Halley's Comet.

The L.A.S. suspended operations, and its meetings in the observatory, at the outbreak of war in 1914. But regular meetings did begin again during the autumn of 1922. However the observatory was left unused until the 1950's.

Indeed, in 1950 Mr. Alan Sanderson had paid a visit to the municipal observatory at Edinburgh. This had impressed him and he met with the Director, Mr. Matthew, who told him that the Liverpool Society was still in existence. Mr. Sanderson was very interested and he decided to join upon the return to Liverpool. However it took several months of investigations before he was able to locate first the Treasurer and then the Secretary, who lived in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The Secretary agreed to call a meeting at the home of the L.A.S. President, Mr. William Geddes, on Friday, May 9th 1952. It was resolved to recommence operations but because no one would take on the responsibility for the Society, Mr. Sanderson agreed to become Hon. Secretary.

The Society had been at a low ebb for many years and members of long standing were quite elderly. With the aim of restarting the monthly meetings, and with the help of Mr. Pepper, who wrote for the Daily Post, Mr. Sanderson publicised the Society in local newspapers and arranged lectures and meetings at the Royal Institution, Liverpool. Thanks to his efforts membership steadily rose to nearly a hundred. The following is taken from his account of the events.

Mr. Sanderson set about recovering the property of the Society, particulars of which he gleaned from some of the Journals still held in the City Library. The L.A.S. Library was found, in cardboard boxes and bundles, in the cellar of a local bookshop. In his own words

*"...the shop has changed hands and I received great help from Mr. Clive Wilson, of Wilson's Bookshops, who generously tracked down and handed over those books which had already been sent to their other shops..."*

Fortunately, Mr. Wilson knew that the books were not part of their stock and that they actually belonged to the Liverpool Society.

The telescopes had been left unused since the First World War and were in a derelict condition. The object glass from the 5-inch telescope had been removed during the second World War when American troops had been billeted in the building. The telescope was covered in a thick shroud of dust. The tube was split open, the racking mechanism of the focuser eaten away with dust, and the finder....gone. The sidereal clock was an empty skeleton with no case, no works and the governor seized. The dome was off its runners but otherwise appeared sound, as did the supporting column of the telescope mounting.

Mr. Sanderson's initial thoughts were to replace the Cooke refractor with an 8.5-inch reflector that he had made for himself and he wrote to the Education Department of Liverpool Corporation asking permission for the Society to resume meetings at the observatory. He quickly received the reply to the effect that the college was suffering from lack of space and that it was not possible for the Society to resume its pre-1914 privilege of meeting there.

Undaunted, he wrote to Sir Alfred Shennan, leader of the Council, telling him that the Society had a long and honourable history, that it was flourishing once again, but that it had no observatory. There were two observatories on Merseyside, neither in operation. One was at Bidston and was devoted to tidal research, the other was at the Technical College where the Liverpool Astronomical Society's telescope was housed but to which permission to access the building had been refused. By return of post he received an encouraging reply from Mr. Magnay, Director of Education and meetings with Mr. Magnay, Dr. Bradbury; the City Architect and Mr. Butler; Principal of the Technical College, were arranged.

The first meeting was with Mr. Magnay, Mr. Sanderson being accompanied by the L.A.S. President, Mr. Geddes. It was explained to them that the telescope had been handed over to the Corporation by the Trustee appointed to the Society. At this, Mr. Geddes, who was a barrister and lecturer in law at the University, pointed out that this action had been *ultra vires* as they had received no mandate for such action by a meeting of the members of the Society. It was also pointed out that the telescope was a gift to both the City and the L.A.S. whereupon Mr. Magnay agreed that access to the telescope and observatory would be allowed. Mr. Butler, Principal of the College, finally agreed that the observatory could be used on Wednesday evenings.

Now came the task of restoration. Mr. Sanderson, with the help of Mr. Bayley, levered the dome back onto its track. The telescope was taken to a firm of metal workers in Duke Street and the crack was repaired for two pounds. Further repairs were carried out to the tube at the Nuclear Physics Laboratory. The steel worm on the drive was partially rusted away and was replaced with the help of a friend of Mr. Sanderson who worked at English Electric Ltd. The apprentices made the replacement as their test piece, at no cost to the Society, as they did with various other sundry parts of the telescope and mounting.

The driving clock was taken home by Mr. Bellis who restored this and many other brass parts. Two other members, Messrs. Keane and Litherland, students at the Nuclear Physics Laboratory, cleaned and restored the polar axis. They also painted the large box containing the transit instrument, which was part of the original gift from Thomas Glazebrook Rylands. A badly damaged micrometer eyepiece was also found.

Whilst this work was being undertaken, Mr. Smith (*who was Mr. Butler's assistant at the College*) found the 5-inch telescope object glass in a wooden case in the Physics Department. It was in good condition apart from corroded tinfoil spacers between the glass elements.

After consultation with the Liverpool educational authorities weekly meetings commenced at the observatory every Wednesday evening. These were in addition to the monthly meetings first held at the Royal Institution, Liverpool, and then as now, at the City Museum as it was then known, where the Society's library and slide collection is housed.

In 1953, Mr. Sanderson received a circular from the Royal Astronomical Society stating that they intended to dispose of a 15-inch refractor and twin photovisual telescope, which had belonged to the late Dr. Wilfred Hall of Newcastle upon Tyne, together with legacy of five hundred pounds towards its maintenance. Although an application was made for the big telescope, it went to Preston following letters of support from the Universities of Manchester and Liverpool. *(It was noted, with some bitterness, that Preston already had an 8.5-inch refractor at their observatory.)*

In 1955, Mr. Geoghegan took over as Curator of the Observatory and held the post until 1963. He was keen on astronomical photography and many photographs of the Moon adorned the walls of the observatory.

During the 1950's the Society maintained a steady membership of about a hundred. In the early 1960's, there was an attempt by a Government Inspector, to take over the observatory on behalf of the Technical College. This was resisted, aided and abetted by Professor Young, a governor of the college and one of the first to join the Society after its resurrection.

In April 1967, a fire on the floor below the observatory caused minor damage to the facilities. Mr. Sanderson, accompanied by Mr. Bayley, found that the observatory had been broken into. The object glass was dirty and an eyepiece missing. As the observatory was due to close for the Summer, it was deemed prudent to remove other items of value. Conditions were restored to normal by the commencement of the next session.

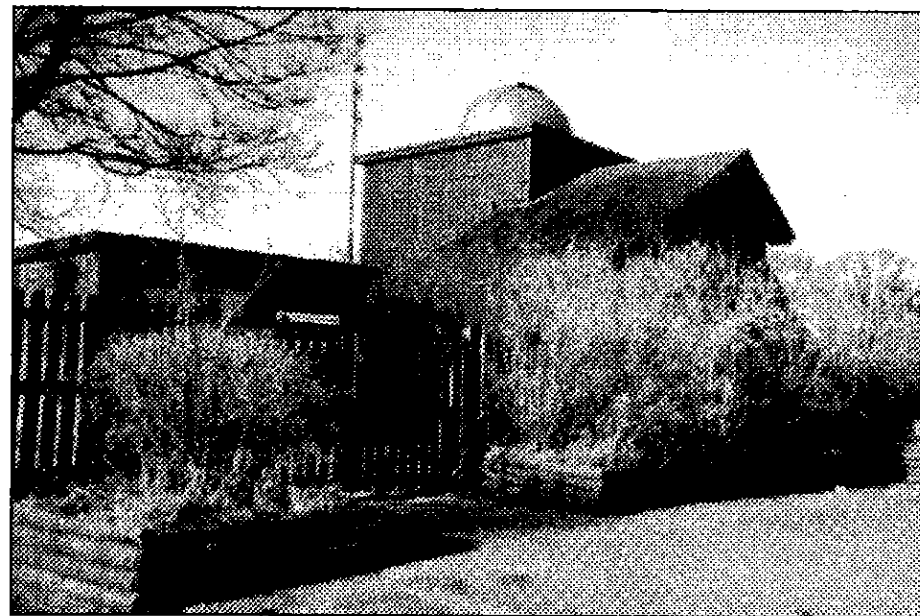
During the late 1960's and early 1970's, it was noticeable that there was an increase in membership whenever there was an Apollo moon-shot. Unfortunately, many of these new members left the Society when the Apollo flights ended in 1972. However, the Apollo flights were a good source of publicity for the Society. For example, the arrival of the Apollo 10 Command Module to the Liverpool Show in 1971 resulted in many new members, some of whom are still actively involved with the Society today.

In the 1960's and 1970's weekly meetings at the observatory continued to be well attended. Here members could discuss their own observing projects and interests. Various observing groups were formed and regular meteor watches were held under the dark skies of North Wales. An annual observing week in the Isle of Man was very popular and several members travelled to North and East Africa, Greece and America to observe Solar Eclipses.

As the Liverpool Astronomical Society approached its centenary in 1981, its activities continued to increase and enter new fields. The establishment of a computing section was of enormous benefit in supporting other sections within the Society. A direct benefit being the production of an Almanac, *"Astronomical Events for the Liverpool Area"*. This has become a scientific as well as a commercial success. A regular series of local societies meetings brought visitors from elsewhere in the North West region and joint meetings with the Junior Astronomical Society, *(now the Society for Popular Astronomy)*, were also very well attended.

To commemorate the centenary, the Liverpool Astronomical Society was host to a Provincial Meeting of the British Astronomical Association. On this happy occasion, the Society was greatly honoured when Lord Pilkington became its Patron.

As the Society moved into its second century it continued to develop. The donation of a 12-inch reflecting telescope, by Mr. Reg Platt, led to the resurrection of the idea of a new observatory away from city lights and a site near Cronton to the East of Liverpool was chosen. Money was raised but events overtook this project by the later donation of a 16-inch reflector from Mr. A. Robertson from the Isle of Man. This allowed even more ambitious plans to be laid with the prospects of the new observatory at the Pex Hill Visitor Centre, which was opened on March 20th, 1994 by Dr. Patrick Moore and houses the larger telescope and also accommodates a meeting room and a small dark room.



*The Society's Pex Hill Observatory at Cronton, near Widnes. The Observatory is built alongside the Knowsley Rangers' Visitor Center with the two groups providing an educational facility as well as being an observing center for Society members and guests.*

The L.A.S. is now registered as a charitable educational trust and takes its responsibilities seriously. Regular joint meetings are held with other astronomical societies in the region, which led to the formation in 1993 of the North West Group of Astronomical Societies (NWGAS). Young astronomers are encouraged by meetings specifically designed for their interests. The first Young Astronomers Day in 1988 saw 120 children attend and take part in various activities.

At the time of Halley's Comet, in 1985-86, observing weekends were open to the general public at Croxteth Hall & Park, and including the use of telescopes, slide shows and lectures, and were a great attraction. These are now held at least once a year and are attended by well over a thousand people, given good weather.

On the observational side, members are continuing to develop new techniques and are producing more refined results reflected in increasing numbers of published scientific reports and papers. For several years a continuing series of solar eclipses have taken members to Kazakhstan, the U.S.A., North Africa, Indonesia, Finland, Mexico, South Pacific and more recently Chile and India.

In 1990 the Society welcomed the B.A.A. to Liverpool again when it celebrated its own centenary. A very full programme was arranged including a reception, an exhibition, a Provincial Meeting of the B.A.A., a public lecture and a formal dinner at Liverpool University. In addition to the then President of the B.A.A. the late Mr. Colin Ronan, other dignitaries in attendance included Sir Francis Graham Smith; the 13th Astronomer Royal, the Lord Mayor of Liverpool; Mrs. Dorothy Gavin, and Dr. Patrick Moore, the well known author and broadcaster.

The Society is now developing its astronomical observations and research in and around modern electronic technology, with computer-controlled telescopes, C.C.D. cameras, and was one of the first amateur astronomical societies to obtain a World Wide Web Internet home page with the assistance of Liverpool University. The historical aspect of Astronomy is not overlooked with the Society adding its advice and membership to the Royal Sun Alliance Insurance Lassell Telescope Project. This is a long term project to build a replica of William Lassell's 24 inch-telescope - a telescope that the Liverpool astronomer and brewer used in October 1846 to discover Neptune's largest moon, Triton, just 17 days after the planet itself was discovered.

Throughout its long history, a rule of the Liverpool Astronomical Society has been and will continue to be, the providence of help and assistance to those people possessing small telescopes and a guide to all sharing a common interest in the great science of astronomy.

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This history was originally written by the late Mr. Alan Sanderson and updated by Mr. (now Dr.) Eric Jones in January 1991 and Mr. K. J. Kilburn of Manchester Astronomical Society, in October 1993. It has recently been updated by Mr. G. Gilligan May 1996.

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## PAST PRESIDENTS OF THE LIVERPOOL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

1881~1996

1881 - 1884	Mr. R. C. Johnson
1884 - 1885	Rev. T. E. Espin
1885 - 1886	Mr. I. Roberts
1886 - 1887	Rev. T. E. Espin
1887 - 1888	Mr. W. F. Denning
1888 - 1889	Mr. T. G. Elger
1889 - 1890	Rev. S. J. Perry
1890 - 1893	Mr. W. D. Hotchinson
1893 - 1894	Mr. J. Gill
1894 - 1919	Mr. W. E. Plummer
1923 - 1925	Dr. H. Wichello
1925 - 1928	Mr. W. H. Watts
1928 - 1931	Capt. J. C. Drummond
1931 - 1935	Dr. H. Wichello
1935 - 1938	Mr. W. H. Watts
1938 - 1942	Mr. R. W. Eldridge
1952 - 1954	Mr. B. Gedds
1954 - 1957	Mr. H. Davies
1957 - 1959	Prof. A. Young
1959 - 1960	Mr. J. Kershaw
1960 - 1961	Dr. F. W. Land
1961 - 1962	Mr. A. C. Sanderson
1962 - 1964	Cmdr. Dougherty
1964 - 1966	Mr. B. L. Bellis
1966 - 1967	Mr. R. K. Allan
1967 - 1970	Mr. A. S. Sharp
1970 - 1972	Mr. P. V. Sudbury
1972 - 1975	Mr. P. Leighton
1975 - 1976	Mr. P. V. Sudbury
1976 - 1979	Mr. J. Ravest
1979 - 1982	Mr. E. H. Strach
1982 - 1984	Mr. M. M. S. Ghorbal
1984 - 1986	Mr. J. E. Jones
1986 - 1990	Mr. A. Williams
1990 - 1995	Mr. R. Corrigan
1995 -	Mr. R. Kelley

## PAST SECRETARIES OF LIVERPOOL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

1881~1996

1881 - 1885	Mr. W. H. Davies
1885 - 1886	Mr. J. W. Appleton
1886 - 1888	Mr. W. H. Davies
1888 - 1889	Mr. W. E. Rowlands
1890 - 1891	Mr. A. W. Seffery
1893 - 1902	Mr. R. C. Johnson
1902 - 1906	Rev. R. Killip & Mr. M. V. Merrifield
1906 - 1910	Mr. R. C. Johnson
1910 - 1913	Mr. H. H. Waters
1913 - 1914	Mr. S. Veevers
1914 - 1922	Dr. H. Whichello
1923 - 1926	Mr. A. B. Bingham & Mr. H. N. Edge
1926 - 1929	Mr. H. N. Edge
1929 - 1930	Mr. C. Blythe-Blundell
1930 - 1931	Mr. H. N. Edge
1931 - 1937	Mr. C. Blythe-Blundell
1938 - 1939	Mr. C. H. Cohen
1940 - 1941	Mr. C. Blythe-Blundell
1952 - 1958	Mr. A. C. Sanderson
1958 - 1962	Mr. B. Geoghegan
1962 - 1968	Mr. J. E. Abraham
1968 - 1970	Mr. I. Stewart
1970 - 1972	Mr. P. Leighton
1972 - 1974	Mr. D. Bradburn
1974 - 1975	Mr. A. Rigby
1975 - 1976	Mr. J. E. Jones
1976 - 1977	Mr. W. J. Hesketh
1978 - 1980	Mr. R. P. Kelley
1980 - 1981	Mr. A. Williams
1981 - 1982	Mr. R. P. Kelley
1982 - 1986	Mr. A. Williams
1986 - 1987	Mr. G. S. Pace
1987 - 1990	Mr. G. Gilligan
1990 - 1992	Mr. D. Whittle
1992 -	Mr. K. Clarke



## PAST TREASURERS OF LIVERPOOL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

1881~1996

1881 - 1884	
1884 - 1885	Mr. J. Stead
1885 - 1886	Mr. G. C. Beecham
1886 - 1889	Mr. W. H. Davies
1901 - 1907	Mr. P. A. Coventry
1907 - 1922	Mr. A. R. Bingham
1923 - 1928	Mr. J. Heald
1930 - 1937	Mr. T. A. Wiggins
1939 - 1940	Mr. C. Blythe-Blundell
1941 - 1942	Mr. C. H. Cohen
1953 - 1954	Mr. C. H. Kirwan
1954 - 1957	Mr. E. Dyson
1957 - 1969	Miss M. Mitchell
1969 - 1973	Miss B. Anderson
1973 - 1974	Mr. R. J. Corf
1974 - 1976	Mr. G. Winstanley
1976 - 1981	Mr. D. Owen
1981 - 1987	Capt. A. Bole
1987 - 1991	Mr. F. S. Hughes
1991 -	Mr. C. Banks

AIMS OF THE LIVERPOOL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

The following is a quote from the Society's Rules and Constitution which were laid down in 1881. A copy of the Constitution may be obtained, free of charge to members, from the monthly meetings or from the Secretary.

*"To advance the science of Astronomy and promote research in Astronomy and associated sciences, to circulate information on Astronomical and kindred subjects by lectures, the publication of articles, books and transactions or otherwise, and generally to encourage and promote an interest in the said science or sciences. (primarily in Liverpool and in the neighbourhood thereof)"*