



## Nottingham Astronomical Society celebrates 70 years... or does it?

### A history of Nottingham Astronomical Society

James Dawson and Brian Griffin

A letter in the Journal of the British Astronomical Association from 1951 is the first record in the astronomical press of the formation of a society in Nottingham for amateur astronomers<sup>1</sup>. The letter was written by A J Ashmore of Nottingham Astronomical Society and gives an account of the history of the Society up until that time. Mr Ashmore describes how he originally thought of the idea for a society in 1938 and despite making plans in 1939 the outbreak of war put a hold on the first meeting, which had been planned for September 1939. The inaugural meeting eventually

Venue	From	To
Mechanics Institute, Nottingham	1946	1964
Scouts Room, South Sherwood Street	1965	1966
YMCA, Shakespeare Street	1966	1971
White Eagle Club, Pelham Road	1971	1992
Djanogly City Technology College, Sherwood Rise	1992	2006
British Geological Survey, Keyworth	2006	To date

Figure 1: Past Venues for Nottingham Astronomical Society meetings.

Mr Ashmore goes on to describe the popularity of the monthly indoor meetings held by the Society, which consisted of official announcements followed by a formal talk on some aspect of astronomy; we still follow this format today and regularly attract 60 or more members and visitors. Most of the speakers at our formal meetings today are professional astronomers or well-known amateurs; speakers from last year's programme include: Marek Kukula; Paul Money; Ian Morison; Mike Edmunds and Colin Snodgrass. For the last few years the Society has held its monthly meetings at the British Geological Survey in Keyworth but we've met at numerous venues in the city over the years, as shown in Figure 1.

When the Society formed in post-war Nottingham, the indoor meetings were held in the Nottingham Mechanics Institute, a building, which had been standing since 1859, the second incarnation of the Institute after a fire destroyed the original building, which had only been completed in 1841<sup>2</sup>. When the Institute building was demolished and a new one built on the same ground in 1965 the Society moved to the Scouts Room for about a year and then on to the YMCA in 1966. The White Eagle Club was the venue for indoor meetings throughout the 1970s and 1980s and is fondly remembered by many still.

In 1992 the Society moved to the Djanogly City Technology College, named after the British textile manufacturer Sir Harry Djanogly. In 2006 we moved to the British Geological Survey (BGS) site in Keyworth and are very grateful to the BGS for the use of their excellent meeting room and facilities. In the early years of the Society observing sessions were held at the residence of the Director of Observing in Keyworth, Mr A W Lane Hall. However, following his retirement in the late-1960s and his subsequent move to the south of England observing sessions became very infrequent.

The demand for an informal monthly meeting to run in addition to the formal speaker programme led relatively new-comer to the Society Roy Sulley, in about 1971, to negotiate for the Society to use a meeting room in Gedling House in Gedling. At the time the building was owned by Nottinghamshire County Council and used by the

Education Resources Department as an education centre. Informal gatherings occurred there on the third Thursday of the month.

Subsequent discussions took place as to whether the owners would agree to the Society having access to the grounds at Gedling House; this

was finally granted and a steel pillar was erected on which to mount a pair of 25x100mm binoculars (allegedly acquired from a German warship after the end of the War), together with a concrete pier to mount an equatorial head



Figure 2: The opening ceremony of the concrete pier on which is mounted the With-Browning 8.5" Newtonian reflector at Gedling House. Left to Right: Mike Asher (Warden, Gedling House), Brian Griffin, Unknown, Alan Molloy, 'Spig', Robin Gray, Gordon Edwards, John Pressman, Roy Sulley. Unknown photographer.

for the With-Browning 8.5 inch Newtonian reflector. A photograph of the opening ceremony appeared on the cover of the NAS Journal for May 1979 (Figure 2).

Gedling House remained the venue for extra meetings and observing sessions until 1993 when the Council



relinquished the building and pier and steel pillar had to be dismantled. Today the Society has its own observatory in Cotgrave, to the south east of the city. The observatory houses a 24-inch (610mm) diameter reflecting telescope (Figure 3), focal length 96-inch (2438mm) f/4, on a



Figure 3: Nottingham AS 24" Telescope.

Image by Marcus Stone

bespoke equatorial mount with fork design. Construction of the observatory began in 1981 though plans for a permanent structure stretched back many years before this. The observatory is twenty feet in diameter and the domed roof has a retractable slit. The original dome started out life as the uppermost unit of an agricultural silo. The history of the planning and construction of the observatory is a story in its own right and we hope to put this together in due course.

#### Happy 70th Birthday!

As part of the Society's annual programme we hold a BBQ in the summer at the observatory for members and their guests. (Figures 4 & 5). We decided that the 2016 BBQ would be used to celebrate the Society's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. As well as sprucing up the observatory building and grounds in preparation for the event, the committee also set about contacting past members to invite them along. The earliest member we found was Alan Heath who first joined the Society in 1952 and who was elected president in 1958; an article about Alan appeared in Bulletin 26<sup>3</sup> and he features elsewhere in Bulletin 27<sup>4</sup>. Other past members who joined us at the BBQ included Greg Eisenhauer, Chrissie Wells, and Graham Shepherd.

Graham Shepherd joined the Society in 1962 and recalls using a duplicator to publish the Society's monthly newsletter at Mr Arthur Lane Hall's home in Keyworth. Graham also recalls being encouraged to undertake "useful work" by observing Jupiter and Saturn as the Society had two eager BAA Section Directors amongst its ranks; Mr W E Fox was the BAA's Jupiter Section Director from 1957 until 1988 (retiring from the post on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday) and Mr Alan Heath the Saturn Section Director 1964 to 1994. Graham moved on to Chesterfield Astronomical Society in about 1970-71 and then on to Mansfield and District (now Mansfield and Sutton) Astronomical Society. Graham and Alan hadn't seen each other for over 45 years yet instantly recognised one another and enjoyed catching up.

Another important guest at the BBQ was Professor Mike Merrifield who is head of the School of Physics &

Astronomy at The University of Nottingham; Mike officially opened the observatory in 2006 and is a past speaker and good friend of the Society. We have strong links with both universities in Nottingham and have several members from the faculty and from the undergraduate and postgraduate student bodies.

Our current president, John Hurst, had put together some boards with photographs taken during the construction of the observatory, which members and their guests could browse; the photographs have been collected over the years by long-time member Brian Griffin. Brian joined the Society in 1962 and honed his observing skills under the mentorship of Alan Heath and others; Brian (along with others) played a key role in the

planning and construction of the observatory in Cotgrave and has an archive of material on this which we hope to use when we write the history of this important part of our Society.



Figure 4: Current NAS President John Hurst, Graham Shepherd, Alan Heath, Image: James Dawson



Figure 5: A bit of solar observing during the proceedings; the observatory in the background. Image Barrie Chacksfield



The weather forecast for the day of our BBQ was good and a number of members brought along equipment for observing the sun, both in white light and in hydrogen alpha. This was a great opportunity to safely demonstrate the joys of solar observing to the non-astronomer guests who were present, and most were amazed that so much detail can be observed on our nearest star.

The highlight of the event was the cutting of the birthday cake.(Fig.6)A friend of the Society had decorated a cake in an astronomical theme and it was only fitting that Alan Heath cut the cake to much applause and celebration. The raffle was then drawn which raised over £100, money which has been spent on much needed new batteries for the observatory.

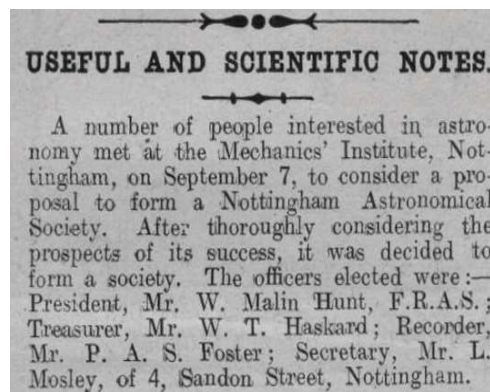


Figure 7: Extract from The English Mechanic, September 16, 1921. Extract courtesy of Eric Hutton



Figure 6 Alan Heath cutting the cake accompanied by John Hurst. Image Barrie Chacksfield.

During the president's toast to the Society he revealed that he'd discovered an entry in an old newspaper which talked about the formation of a Nottingham Astronomical Society in 1921; we've since found an entry about this in The English Mechanic<sup>5</sup>.(Fig.7) We know that incarnation of the Society didn't run continuously from 1921 to 1946, but it is still exciting to know that there was an organised interest in amateur astronomy in Nottingham dating back to 1921. This has given us another avenue to follow as part of our research into the history of the Society, and of amateur astronomy in Nottinghamshire. Should any reader have further information please do contact us.

Nottingham Astronomical Society's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday BBQ held on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> August 2016 was a huge success and enjoyed by all who attended. It was great for current and former members to converse and as always for non-astronomers to see a big telescope close up and to undertake some observing for the first time. The event brought old friends together and helped form new bonds between others. We look forward to the Society continuing to prosper and we are excited about a new avenue of research for us to follow up on.

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Nottingham Astronomical Society