

## **21<sup>st</sup> ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE FLAMSTEED ASTRONOMY SOCIETY**

Held on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2020 at 7.15pm online via Zoom

1. **Present:** Andy Sawers (Chair) and approximately 76 members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society
2. **Apologies** were received from Brian Vallely, Colin Weightman, John Alderson, Matthew Scott and Paul Noakes.

### **3. Chair's welcome**

Andy welcomed everyone to the 21<sup>st</sup> annual general meeting of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society, and explained that this year the AGM was being held as a separate event rather than immediately before our first lecture of the season so that Members would not have to spend so much time at once viewing their screens.

### **4. RMG Director Paddy Rodgers**

Andy welcomed Royal Museums Greenwich director Paddy Rodgers to say a few words to the Members, explaining his vision for the Museum and for the Royal Observatory. Paddy became director of the Museum just over a year ago after serving 20 years as chief executive officer of Euronav. He has been a Patron of the Museum for many years and in 2017 he raised at least £16,000 for the Alt-Az building restoration and re-equipment for the AMAT – the Annie Maunder Astrographic telescope.

Paddy started by praising the video of Members of astrophotography shown before the start of the AGM. He said that in his time in the shipping industry, he'd known that deck officers on the ships consider the constellations their friends. They would become intimately attached to the night sky as one of the things that connect them to the sea. They are also required to find their position using a sextant to ensure their GPS equipment is accurate. So there is a very strong connection for seafaring people between the sea and the sky.

As for the start of his own interest in astronomy, he recalled seeing a Perseid meteor shower years ago with family and friends and everyone present wondering how it was that the peak of the shower was always on the same day every year. No one present understood that the Earth travels to the dust – it's not the dust that travels to the Earth.

Consequently, he said, his ambition for the Observatory is that as many visitors as possible should not be able to leave without understanding the astounding fact that the Earth is moving through space at 100,000 km/h – they should understand the mystery and marvel at the fortunate opportunity to be a human being alive on the Earth at this time. He said he hopes that, if we get the tone right as we deliver a message around science and history, it will make people more reflective and thoughtful about what it means to live on a habitable planet in a very fragile

environment – sharing and learning to live in a community and having a strong sense of shared identity, celebrating diversity.

He quoted Plato: “The unexamined life is not worth living.” That’s where I see history meeting science, he said: examining ourselves, understanding our identities, understanding our motivations helps us to face up to our challenges and to put our lives in a context that staves off or helps us avoid despair, supports wellbeing and nourishes the quality of the life that we lead.

He believes the Observatory, the NMM, the Cutty Sark and the Queen’s House all fit well under one organisation umbrella because they are all there to support one another in ensuring people have a really intimate and knowledgeable and enjoyable experience of learning, understanding and addressing issues that perplex and confuse them.

So there’s a real mission for us in bringing those things together and making sure we deliver them well, he said. We have to think about how we stimulate the debate to ensure that people are engaged by it. Once we do that you’ll quickly find that people do care.

He added, you do need to know your history to know where you’re coming from, as Bob Marley said, you need to know something about the universe and to understand majesty and wonder, you need to understand the oceans and the deeps – because all of these will make us broadminded enough to face the challenges that are coming. The challenges are coming.

For us at the Museum, bringing on a virtual museum and putting more access online and having an Observatory YouTube channel have all been important parts of getting as much material as we can out there for people to really enjoy. So there’s something for us to think about as we work towards the future. We are going to see a collapse in visitor numbers: we have to make our offer more interesting so that people have a greater understanding that there are many things to see and many reasons to come.

So it will be an intense programme of wanting to make sure that we do more programming, more events – meaning the opportunity to meet, to talk, to examine, to think, to explore, to have fun and use our imagination, to make it a more active place.

In the development of that kind of programme of interaction, he said, we will be looking forward to working in greater collaboration with the Flamsteed, who have provided such a strong relationship.

Without supporters like you, the Museum and the Observatory would be nothing and it is our ambition to bring in people who are casual visitors – somewhere in the Oort cloud of visitation – and draw them gradually into an orbit where they are patrons, friends and Members of the Museum. Our job is to make it interesting enough to pull people in. He added, he looks forward to working with you in that.

In about 2-3 weeks the Museum will have its ideas of its future strategy and direction of travel written up on some boards in the Observatory and he invited Flamsteed Members to engage with it. Have your opinions and express them freely. He closed by wishing us a very good AGM and he looks forward to seeing everyone soon.

Andy asked about plans for the 350th anniversary of the Observatory in 2025. Paddy said, the problem with that milestone is that it’s too far away to raise funds for or to actively work out

what you want, so there's a risk it hangs on the horizon of our vision. But Members would know from their past visits that the Observatory needs quite a lot of work done to it. ROG 350 as the Museum refers to it could be a problem rather than a celebration. So Paddy has proposed building a vision of what we want to look like in 2025 and to start raising funds now and building in stages in an agile manner towards a really invigorating vision of the Observatory.

The idea is that when the anniversary day comes he would like to have a great party celebrating what's been achieved and developed between 2020 and 2025 rather than surprising everybody with what's revealed. He said, we want to make sure there are some real wow moments in there and three or four big facts that can't be avoided and a million others that are available to learn.

Andy thanked Paddy for his inspiring words at this difficult time. The main business of the AGM then proceeded.

5. There were no matters arising from the **minutes of the AGM** held on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2019 and they were taken as read via a 'show of hands' on Zoom.

## **6. Chair's report on the 2019-2020 season**

### **The first half of 2019-2020**

Andy explained that, as of last year's AGM, a lot of work had been completed on matters such as the reduction in the age of Flamsteed membership from 18 to 16 – so as to be able to inspire A-level students by giving them the opportunity to hear some of the leading scientists in astronomy. The Memorandum of Understanding had been updated and signed by the Flamsteed and the RMG. And a survey of Members yielded very positive feedback. Hence, a year ago, 2019-2020 looked as though it was going to be a relatively easy year.

One highlight was the Flamsteed's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary birthday event, including a Flamsteed birthday cake and talks by founders Jane Bendall, Eddie Yeadon and Lin Potter (hosted by Grey Lipley) about the early days of the Society. RMG senior curator Louise Devoy and other experts spoke about the life and work of John Flamsteed.

Between September last year and March 9<sup>th</sup> this year, the Flamsteed organised and ran:

- 7 Lectures – Thanks to Helen Edwards for identifying and booking the speakers and to Grey Lipley for doing most of the lecture hosting
- 6 social evenings – Thanks to Brian Evans for organising those
- 2 history of astronomy talks – Thanks to Bobby Manoo for leading the history programme
- 2 workshops – one on astrophotography and one on radio astronomy, with thanks to Mike Meynell and Clive Inglis respectively
- 2 tours of the RMG's excellent Moon exhibition – thanks to Louise Devoy for being so generous with her time in guiding Members around the exhibition
- 2 viewings on Blackheath (out of a proposed 6, because of weather) – Thanks to Mike Meynell, Tej Dyal, Rupert Smith and others for taking part

- None of our 5 proposed Romney viewings could proceed because of weather, but nonetheless thanks to Martin and Jane Male for making their home and observatory available to Members, and to Helen Edwards and Nick Phillips for organising the events.
- 8 viewings with the Great Equatorial Telescope, although viewing was only possible on 3 occasions, but Planetarium shows and/or a tour of the AMAT were available as back-up Plan B. Thanks to Tej Dyal, assisted by Simon Hurst, Barry Cassels, Poly Philippou, and Alain Durand.

The Flamsteed was also involved in three outreach events. In November, we had a solar telescope set up at RMG to show the public the transit of Mercury. That was led by Tej Dyal, with Poly Philippou, Simon Hurst and Nick Phillips assisting.

In October the Flamsteed took part in New Scientist Live at the Excel Centre. Many thanks to the British Astronomical Association and Janice McClean for again inviting the Flamsteed to take part.

At the Flamsteed's Christmas raffle, held on the evening of our December lecture, the Society raised £321 to buy astronomy and other science books for Charlton Park Academy, a secondary school for children with complex special needs. In March we delivered a large number of books and had a great afternoon talking to the children about space. They all appeared to love the talks and workshops we did, which included an inflatable universe and a sand tray showing how craters are made on the Moon. Simon Hurst played the lead role, with Tej Dyal, Malcolm Porter and Andy Sawers helping answer all children's many questions.

### **The second half of 2019-2020**

The second half of the 2019-2020 year was completely different. Andy noted that in the six months since our last talk at the National Maritime Museum lecture theatre, so many weird and bizarre words and practices had become part of everyday life. It has been a very worrying time for everyone – worrying about the health of friends and family, and worrying about jobs and businesses. Andy offered deepest condolences to Members who had suffered loss.

But the night skies have proved uplifting and heartening. Many people will have gazed at the Moon, Venus and the Pleiades in March, noctilucent clouds in the summer, Jupiter and Saturn more recently and Mars is now capturing people's attention. Many will have seen the Perseids meteor shower and the comet C/2020 F3 Neowise.

As for the Flamsteed, Andy recalled our lecture on the evening of Monday March 9<sup>th</sup>, when we joked about 'elbow-bumping' with our guest lecturer. At that talk, Andy told Members that Mike Meynell had pointed out a few days before that some universities were cancelling overseas travel for their academics, and that that might affect the Flamsteed's ability to book speakers if the policy were to spread to other institutions.

At the time, the UK government was only talking about cancelling 'big crowd' events. But within the week, the Committee had reviewed the situation and the risks, and secured support from RMG for our plan of action. We emailed Members of our decision to cancel all viewing events because of the risk of contamination of telescope equipment, cancel the social events, reschedule a history of astronomy talk, and cancel planned visits to La Palma and to the UCL

Observatory. But we also undertook to find a way to take our lectures online, with the promise that we would ensure that it was as easy to use as possible.

Less than two weeks after that last lecture, the Committee ran a Zoom trial and then another one with Members invited to take part. Feedback was overwhelmingly supportive. Within days of that trial we ran our first online event – a screening of an excellent British-made documentary about Apollo 13. Four weeks after our last lecture theatre talk, our April lecture took place on the scheduled date, using Zoom, and was a terrific success.

Mike Meynell and Bobby Manoo were particularly key in finding the right technology solution, but everyone on the Committee played a role in helping to do trial runs and providing feedback suggestions and advice. Andy thanked everyone involved for helping us move so quickly and thanked the Members for all their support and feedback and for so eagerly embracing this way of doing things.

Because our usual summertime programme of solar viewing events had to be cancelled, we ran a summer programme of talks instead. Between March and September, the Flamsteed has run 24 events:

- 6 main lectures
- 3 excellent sessions on the Introduction to Astronomy – huge thanks are due to Bobby Manoo for the enormous effort in putting together and presenting an excellent series of talks
- 1 astrophotography workshop, hosted by Mike Meynell
- 3 History of Astronomy talks
- 1 documentary screening
- 3 videos of astronomy news and what's in the night sky
- 3 social evenings – including a much appreciated 'beer with an astronomer' – in fact, 2 astronomers – thanks to Emily Drabek-Maunder and Greg Brown from ROG for taking part.
- 4 newsletters – technically not events but they contained information about books and other online events that might be of interest during lockdown.

Andy noted that the plan for a pub quiz didn't get the necessary level of interest, unfortunately. It wasn't clear whether the problem was unfortunate timing as lovely summer evenings returned while lockdown eased a bit, or if the prospect of a quiz might have scared people off. The quiz was designed to be a fun event filled with interesting trivia rather than a technical test so we may try again later in the year.

### **Social media**

Andy said that the discussion forum on the Flamsteed website had been retired because of a lack of postings. It had a great flurry of interest some years ago but traffic had died off almost entirely. The rest of the website is still in place, especially the Events calendar. Meanwhile, the Flamsteed is still active on Facebook and especially on Twitter and Andy encouraged anyone who uses those social media to follow the Flamsteed.

## Membership and finances

Andy noted that our membership continues to grow. At the most recent count, numbers were up to 415 from 401 at the time of last year's AGM. New Members were joining even during lockdown, with three new Members joining on one day last week.

<b>Membership</b>	<b>Sept 2019</b>	<b>Aug 2020</b>
Single	129	128
Concession	123	131
Joint	114	134
Honorary	12	13
Student/Young adult	3	4
<i>Total</i>	<i>381</i>	<i>410</i>
Lapsed	20	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>415</b>

*Lapsed Members are those who have yet to renew their membership: they are given three months in which to do so*

<b>Membership</b>	<b>Total</b>
2015	325
2016	339
2017	356
2018	379
2019	401
2020	415

The picture on the financials was somewhat unclear because of the Museum's decision to extend membership terms because of the shutdown between mid-March and mid-July when the Cutty Sark reopened, but there had been a significant saving because of not having the costs from using the Lecture theatre, nor the speaker travel or hospitality costs. The version of Zoom that the Flamsteed needs is not cheap, but it certainly is less expensive than using the Museum facilities. The net effect remained positive in terms of the Flamsteed's contribution to RMG finances which, like every other museum and cultural organisation, are under extreme pressure.

Membership fees were recently increased by the Museum for new Members, but for a period of time to come existing Members will be able to renew at their most recent rate, as a token of thanks from the Museum.

### Plans for 2020-21

Andy said that it was totally unclear when we might be able to return to Greenwich, so the Flamsteed is working on the basis that everything we do will be online only. Even an eventual return to the lecture theatre will certainly mean social distancing, which significantly reduces the capacity of the lecture theatre.

There are many advantages to being online, Andy noted:

- It is safer from a coronavirus point of view
- No travelling is involved, so it saves Members time

- We record our events so Members can watch them later if they aren't able to join us on the night, or to watch them again if they wish
- We can accommodate everyone who wants to attend, whereas with regular events the number of no-shows can prevent others from being able to attend
- Some of our online events have been getting attendance figures up to double the physical capacity at the facilities we use
- And no one now ever complains about the temperature of the air conditioning being too hot or too cold

Feedback from Members made it clear that there is a real desire, therefore, that even when we can return to Greenwich we continue to have an online presence. Andy said that we will have to wait until we can get back into Greenwich before we know what the Museum's broadband capacity is, which would determine whether we can stream live from the venue or if we will have to record an event and upload it.

We will also use Zoom to enable us to do things we wouldn't otherwise be able to do, for example, booking speakers for whom distance and travel is difficult or too expensive. Because of the lack of capacity constraints and the attendance figures, the History of Astronomy talks will remain online for this season.

### **Thanks...**

There were many people Andy wanted to thank for their contribution to the work of the Flamsteed over the past year:

- Everyone on the Committee, remembering that Committee members are all volunteers, fitting in their responsibilities with busy work and family lives.
- The Museum membership department: Chloe Shepherd, Sarah Foster and Harry Maybrick
- Lance Bourne at the Observatory
- RMG Development director Kate Seeckts who has been very supportive of the Flamsteed's plans throughout the last six months of turmoil
- The ROG astronomers, in particular Emily Drabek-Maunders and Greg Brown as well as their assistant Mikaela Webb
- Louise Devoy, senior curator who has been an enthusiastic contributor to our work through the guided tours and her Christmas lecture on John Flamsteed
- Martin and Jane Male who generously make their home and observatory available for Members' viewing events
- Brian Evans for hosting our social evenings
- Sue and Bob Yates for assisting Roger Geeson with the refreshments
- Janice McClean for inviting the Flamsteed to join the BAA stand at New Scientist Live
- And above all, thanks to all our Members, whose support for our work and emails have been really encouraging and have spurred the Committee on.

### **Questions**

One Member asked if we had any plans to replace the discussion forum. Andy and Mike replied that while the forum was quite old technology, there had appeared to be very little interest in

using anything newer and easier, so we would continue to use Facebook and Twitter unless there was any sign of a desire for something else.

Another Member asked if we could return to having viewing events on Blackheath albeit socially distanced, but Andy and Mike replied that, sadly, that wasn't possible because of the need to wipe down equipment after it's touched by viewers adjusting eye-pieces, etc. However, we are looking at doing an online version of night sky viewing, but we need the nights to get a bit darker before we can do proper trials.

## 7. Election of committee members and office holders

This is the whole of the committee membership, including both elected and co-opted members, there being little practical difference between the two.

Barry Cassels	Simon Hurst	Poly Philippou
Adrian Challinor	Clive Inglis	Nick Phillips
Christina Chester	Asra Jilani	Malcolm Porter
Tej Dyal	Grey Liple	Andy Sawers
Helen Edwards	Bobby Manoo	Rupert Smith
Roger Geeson	Mike Meynell	

Andy said he was very sorry to announce that Christina Chester is standing down as a co-opted member. She has served on the committee in a variety of rolls and as vice chair was a great support to Andy.

In the elected positions, Brian Blake sadly stood down last October because of ongoing health issues that made it difficult for him to contribute in the way that he would like. Brian served for many years on the committee and was sadly missed.

Rupert Smith has decided not to put himself forward for re-election after serving for seven years. Andy noted that Rupert is a telescope and imaging guru and the committee would miss his expertise. Fortunately, Rupert has agreed to assist with workshops as and when his busy work and family commitments permit.

Barry Cassels has served for a few years as a co-opted member and has been particularly active in supporting our Great Equatorial and solar viewing events, and he has agreed to put himself forward for election.

Poly Philippou has served as a co-opted member for a year and has been an active contributor, helping with the speaker and visits programme and in taking the burden of updating our website off of Mike Meynell. She, too, has agreed to stand for election.

For the election process, Andy handed over to the Secretary of the Committee, Mike Meynell. This is the roster of Committee members who are up for election (in blue) or re-election, as the case may be.

<a href="#">Barry Cassels</a>	Clive Inglis	<a href="#">Poly Philippou</a>
Tej Dyal	Grey Liplely	Nick Phillips
Helen Edwards	Bobby Manoo	Malcolm Porter
Simon Hurst	Mike Meynell	Andy Sawers

The election of the Committee members was proposed by Christina Chester and seconded by Roger Kidley and the motion was passed with 66 votes in favour.

The re-election of Helen Edwards as vice chair was proposed by Robin Gilbert and seconded by Gurinder Lall and was passed with 70 votes in favour.

The re-election of Andy Sawers as chair was proposed by Jessica Kempner and seconded by Bill O'Brien and was passed with 71 votes in favour.

Andy thanked Members for their support for all the committee members.

## **8. Any other business**

There was one question asking if we had any plans for an online radio astronomy workshop and Andy said that he would take that suggestion to the Committee.

There being no other business, Andy brought the AGM to a close and introduced a video of astronomical highlights prepared by Malcolm Porter and Mike Meynell.