

Notes from a Flamsteed Astronomy Society Committee Meeting held on 10th February 2016 at 7pm in Mycenae House, Blackheath

Present: Malcolm Porter (Chairman), Grey Liple (Vice Chairman), Mike Meynell (Vice Chairman), Christina Chester, Tej Dyal, Brian Evans, Clive Inglis, Asra Jilani, Nick Phillips and Rupert Smith

Apologies: Andy Sawers, Brian Blake, Lin Potter, Mike Dryland, Roger Geeson and Sumitra Sri Bhashyam

1. Matters arising from the committee meeting on 19th October 2015

Radio equipment installation

No progress has been made on the installation of VLF radio equipment in the alt-azimuth pavilion. Malcolm agreed to raise this with ROG General Manager Lance Bourne in the next meeting with the ROG.

IAU 'Name an Exosystem' competition

Results were announced just before Christmas. Unfortunately, our submission was not successful (and nor was the submission by the Royal Observatory Greenwich), but the committee agreed that our participation was worthwhile and was enjoyed by many people. The committee thanked Christina for all of her hard work in putting the proposal together.

Unused telescopes

No progress has been made on finding a use for the cupboard full of unused telescopes at the ROG. Malcolm agreed to raise this with Lance Bourne.

Visit to Florence

Time is now running very short to try to arrange a trip to Florence in June. As the tour operator that we had planned to use is no longer in business, there were some other options that were being explored. However, no significant progress seems to have been made to date. The committee agreed that, unless the museum is prepared to get involved in organizing the trip, we would have to postpone this trip until next season.

Volunteer in the membership office

A job specification has been created by the membership department at the museum (with the assistance of Mike Meynell) for a volunteer role to assist in Flamsteed administration. The museum are looking to appoint someone to this volunteer role in April 2016. Asra had expressed an interest in applying to perform this role, but she doesn't know her availability for April onwards at this moment in time.

Bookings at Flamsteed lectures

The new arrangements of issuing admission tickets on the door at Flamsteed lectures, in cases where the lecture is fully booked or close to fully booked, has worked well in reducing the number of

“walk-ups” (i.e. members who haven’t booked) turning up on the evening of the lecture. There is still an issue with the large number of “no-shows” (i.e. members who book but don’t turn up). Unfortunately, the museum has confirmed that their booking system does not allow members to cancel their attendance at a lecture. Alternatives to the museum booking system are being explored, but we are not yet ready to proceed with these ideas.

16th anniversary celebrations

At the Christmas lecture, Christina organised a celebration of the Flamsteed’s 16th birthday, with sweet bags and cakes. Andy also put together a video of images from the last 16 years, which was shown prior to the lecture. The committee agreed that the celebrations went very well, and thanked Christina and Andy for all of their work in making these arrangements.

2. Book signings at Flamsteed lectures

We had intended to offer a book-signing event at both the January and February lectures (Frank Close and Stuart Clark respectively). We have always been happy to accommodate lecturers who wish to sell a signed copy of their latest book. The only caveat has been that the museum shop was not selling the book concerned, as we didn’t want to deprive the museum of any income.

Just prior to the January lecture, we were informed that the museum policy had been changed, meaning that we could not offer a book signing to our members unless the book concerned was “approved” by the buying team at the museum, and ordered directly by the museum shop. The buying team at the museum would determine how many copies of the book to order. All sales of the book would have to go through the museum’s retail systems (meaning that the shop would have to be open).

The justification for this change in policy is that *“the museum’s commercial team need to manage all commercial sales made onsite to ensure trading standards are adhered to, and to make it clear to customers who is responsible for the sale, in case of any issues with the product”*. We have pointed out that it is perfectly clear to our members that they were buying the book directly from the lecturer and that the museum have no involvement whatsoever, but this has not (at the moment) resulted in a change in policy.

Because of this policy, it is practically impossible for us to offer book signings at future Flamsteed lectures. The museum seem likely to err on the side of caution when ordering books, meaning that we would probably run out of copies. There is significant increased administration, as we would be expected to liaise with publishers to find out the wholesale and retail cost of books. In addition, we would have to organise for the shop to be opened. Finally, it is highly likely that many of our lecturers would not be happy with these arrangements in any case, as they would be deprived of the opportunity of selling direct.

As a direct result of the change in policy, Stuart Clark decided to cancel his February lecture at the Flamsteed. Stuart had, not unreasonably, assumed that he would be able to sell signed books at the lecture, and has always sold large numbers of books in the past at the Flamsteed. However, he was offered work abroad on the day that the lecture was due to take place, but had been prepared to turn down this work because book sales are so strong at the Flamsteed, so it would still make coming worthwhile. The Flamsteed is pretty much the only astronomical society that he still visits. As

the arrangements have now changed, he has now decided to take up the work offer, and reluctantly decided to cancel his Flamsteed lecture.

Fortunately, we were able to persuade Francisco Diego to step in to cover the February lecture. The committee put on record its thanks to Francisco for helping out at such short notice. However, it seems unlikely that Stuart will return to the Flamsteed in the future if this policy is retained, and we will most likely have problems in attracting some other high-profile lecturers who would have offered book-signings in the past.

Several Flamsteed members had contacted the society to express their anger and disappointment at this policy decision. The committee could not understand the logic of the museum's decision, and agreed to raise the issue again with the museum.

Malcolm and Grey are meeting with the museum Head of Commerce, Karen Eden-Tuxford, and the Director of Enterprises, Richard Wilkinson, to discuss this matter further and hopefully come up with a solution.

3. Update on SMASHfest

SMASHfest is an annual free festival, based at the Albany Theatre in Deptford, which features comedy shows, music, film, experiments and theatre, to explore science, technology, engineering and maths through the arts and design.

We were involved in the inaugural event last year, and have agreed with the SMASHfest organisers that we would be involved again this year. Our involvement will be on Friday 19th and Saturday 20th February (during the February half-term week), with a solar viewing session in the garden of the Albany Theatre from 12-3pm, followed by a lunar viewing session from 3-6pm (on Friday) and 8pm (on Saturday).

We have also managed to get hold of 15 Spectroscopes for people to make (but not take away) which should enable them to see the spectrum of fluorescent or energy saving lights. It is also possible to see Fraunhofer lines if you point the Spectroscope at a mildly overcast sky.

The committee thanked all those committee members who had agreed to volunteer to help out with the event: Brian Blake, Christina Chester, Clive Inglis, Grey Liple, Mike Meynell, Nick Phillips, Rupert Smith and Tej Dyal.

4. Under-18s at Flamsteed Lectures

The meeting with Lance Bourne to discuss the issue of attendance of under-18s at Flamsteed lecture, scheduled for 10 February, did not take place due to illness. The meeting has been rescheduled for a later date.

5. Upcoming events / trips

The trip to the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge on the evening of 8 March has been announced to members. Bookings have been slow so far, but we expect these to pick up over the next few weeks.

Rupert raised the idea of a trip to a site in Spain, which he has a relationship with as a hosting facility for telescopes. The site is about 90 minutes from Seville, is relatively new, and includes accommodation. The owners also have connections with local hotels. It is a dark sky location, and has a social area and classroom on site. There is some equipment for people to use on site, but the idea would be to bring your own equipment to use. The local town is very close, and there are several interesting areas to visit that are accessible by car. The site could accommodate 10 people (including couples) or 7 singles, with a trip most likely commencing on a Friday, with flights home on the following Monday.

Rupert showed a video of the site, and the committee agreed that it was a very good idea and was definitely worth pursuing. Rupert agreed to get some finalised costs and get a clear agenda of the plans for the weekend. Once these are known, we can send out a survey to Flamsteed members to see who is interested in attending.

Clive asked about the potential of a trip to Jodrell Bank. The committee agreed that it would be worthwhile pursuing this, so Clive agreed to contact Jeff Wagg at Jodrell Bank to see if something could be arranged. Christina agreed to provide Clive with contact details for Jeff.

Nick informed the committee that several public and society solar viewing events have been scheduled for the summer months. Rupert mentioned the International Solar Sunday event on 26 June 2016. Nick agreed that he would liaise with the museum to try and arrange a solar viewing event to coincide with this day.

6. Possible Spectroscopy special interest group

For some time, members of the committee have been discussing the idea of a Spectroscopy special interest group, most likely falling under the existing Observing and Imaging group. The Baader DADOS spectrograph has been donated by the Flamsteed to the museum, so it seems an ideal opportunity to start using this equipment at the museum. Brendan Owens at the ROG was keen for Flamsteed members to get involved in using the spectrograph. The spectrograph could only be used on museum grounds.

Rupert mentioned the idea of having Tom Field (website <http://www.rspec-astro.com>) doing a webinar for the Flamsteed on spectroscopy. Tom specialises in using a relatively inexpensive grating connected to a telescope to produce spectra of stars and planets, with analysis on a piece of software that he has written.

Mike M talked through some of the more advanced options, using products like CCDSPEC, the Baader DADOS spectrograph or some of the Shelyak products.

The committee agreed that this was a good idea, and Mike M agreed to raise this again in his next meeting with the ROG, so that we could take the idea forward.

Rupert agreed to come up with a plan of potential projects that members could get involved in, first involving relatively cheap diffraction gratings and then working up to more advanced spectrographs.

7. Plans for the transit of Mercury, 9th May 2016

The transit will be visible in its entirety from the UK (weather permitting!). On Monday 9 May, 2016, these are the timings of the eclipse from Greenwich:

- Exterior ingress: 11:12:23 UTC (12:12:23 BST)
- Interior ingress: 11:15:35 UTC (12:15:35 BST)
- Maximum: 14:56:17 UTC (15:56:17 BST)
- Interior egress: 18:37:21 UTC (19:37:21 BST)
- Exterior egress: 18:40:33 UTC (19:40:33 BST)

The duration of the transit is therefore nearly 7½ hours.

The Sun's altitude at the start of the eclipse is nearly 55 degrees. At maximum, it is 41 degrees high, and at the end of the eclipse 7 degrees. Azimuth ranges from 161 degrees in the south to 289 degrees in the west.

Mercury will be just 12 arc-seconds across, meaning that the transit of Mercury won't be visible without a telescope or other visual aid. Through a telescope it will be about the size of a medium-sized sunspot – gradually moving across the disc of the Sun.

Nick and Mike M will be meeting with the ROG on 23 February to discuss plans for an event at the ROG.

In preparation for the event, we have Professor David Rothery coming to the Flamsteed for our lecture on April 4th to talk about Mercury. David is currently working on the BepiColombo mission to Mercury, which is due to launch in 2017. David has set up a page on the ESA website, detailing the global events to view the transit. We will ask to have our event added once the details have been agreed with the ROG.

8. AOB

Tej raised an issue regarding the underuse of the Flamsteed forums. He encouraged people to get involved in the forum, as the discussions that have taken place there have proved to be very useful to those who have got involved.

The committee agreed that the forum would be promoted to members in society communications. Members should be invited to register on the forum and discuss any event that they have attended. Promotion on Twitter and Facebook should also be investigated.

There being no further business the meeting adjourned at 8.43pm.