

Notes from a Flamsteed Astronomy Society Committee Meeting held on Thursday 12th May 2016 at 7pm in Mycenae House, Blackheath

Present: Malcolm Porter (Chairman), Mike Meynell (Vice Chairman), Grey Liple (Vice Chairman), Andy Sawers, Christina Chester, Brian Evans, Roger Geeson, Clive Inglis, Asra Jilani, Nick Phillips, Rupert Smith and Sumitra Sri Bhashyam

Apologies: Lin Potter, Brian Blake, Mike Dryland and Tej Dyal

1. Matters arising from the committee meeting on Wednesday 10th February 2016

Alt-Az Building and radio astronomy equipment

Still no date has been set by the Museum for when it will be possible to make the Alt-Az Building ready to house the radio astronomy equipment. However, it was noted that the building was wifi-equipped for the transit of Mercury event, which augurs well. Another discussion with the museum on this topic is due to be held shortly.

Unused telescopes

It has still not been possible to arrange to view the collection of unused telescopes in the Museum's possession.

Membership office

A new volunteer, Tessa Mo, has recently started working in the Museum's membership office, specifically on Flamsteed matters. Mike Meynell will be meeting her soon to bring her up to speed on the issues that we have been dealing with.

Book signings

The new arrangements which have been put in place make it possible for guest lecturers to do book signings, but the books need to be ordered through the Museum and not brought by the lecturer. The impact that this arrangement will have on lecturers was highlighted by the fact that one lecturer signed up for the 2016-17 season has asked for a £200 fee in compensation for the loss of book-signing sales.

SmashFest

The second annual SmashFest, a science and art event for people aged 11-17 in which the Flamsteed took part last year and this, was again a considerable success. The age bracket of those who attended was somewhat younger than the target audience, however: teenagers were noticeable by their absence. However, the level of interest in what the Flamsteed put on was such that we would probably want to take part again next year, if asked.

Spectroscopy special interest group

There has, for some time, been discussion of setting up a spectroscopy special interest group. The Flamsteed donated a Baader DADOS spectrograph to the museum which ROG is happy for us to use. We have not yet made contact with Tom Field (<http://www.rspec-astro.com/>) but Rupert will attend to this.

Transit of Mercury

This was a great success, helped by the fact that the weather forecast was so wrong. The forecast suggested that we might perhaps get about half an hour of viewing before the clouds came over. On the day, we had clear skies from the start of the transit at 12.12 BST until around 14.30, and then we got another short viewing period after about half an hour of cloud cover. Almost 600 members of the public viewed the transit through the five telescopes we had on site and media coverage gave great publicity for the Flamsteed (see <http://flamsteed.info/forums/topic/transit-of-mercury/>). Sky News's video has been viewed some 50,000 times. Many thanks to all the Flamsteed volunteers who helped inform, entertain and manage the crowds.

2. Under 18s at Flamsteed lectures

Christina and Andy explained their findings with regard to the attendance of under-18s at Flamsteed lectures. At the moment, whether or not we consider this to be desirable, it is contrary to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Flamsteed and the Museum, so is currently not permitted. However, a number of people who are clearly under the age of 18 have attended Flamsteed lectures over recent months.

As far as child protection matters are concerned, it seems unequivocal that the Flamsteed is covered by virtue of the Museum's own child protection policy and the presence of suitable Museum staff at our lectures.

Going forward, the committee considered a number of policy options:

- Informally supporting the attendance of under-18s, with prior permission
- Creating a formal 'Flamsteed junior' membership or a 'Flamsteed family' membership
- Creating an entirely separately-constituted Junior Flamsteed Society

The committee also considered what age limit might be introduced, with two main alternatives suggested:

- Reduce membership age to 16/17, roughly analogous with A-level age
- Reduce membership age to 14/15, roughly analogous with GCSE age

Whether or not junior members would have all the right of full members was discussed.

The committee asked Andy and Christina to report back with some more details around the second policy option for the committee to discuss with a view to possibly putting a proposal to the membership for a vote at the next AGM.

3. No-shows

We have an on-going problem with a high level of no-shows at Flamsteed lectures – in some cases as high as 30%. The problem is that we make it clear that members must book to be sure of a place at the lectures. This creates a rush of bookings but it is then difficult or impossible to unbook an unneeded seat, especially on short notice.

This exhortation to book in advance arose out of a previous problem with walk-ups – people who come along without pre-booking, which could mean that we are not able to accommodate everyone who wishes to attend the lecture.

We will discuss with the Museum the committee's suggestion that we amend the booking system to allow up to 135 bookings to be made.

4. Shrewsbury Park

We have been asked to take part again in the Shrewsbury Park summer festival, at which the Flamsteed ran a stall last year. An email to the committee seeking volunteers generated a good response rate. A number of members are able to bring scopes for solar viewing and gazebos in case of inclement weather and we will also arrange for an album of Flamsteed astronomy photographs to be on display.

5. Mycenae House Sunday Extravaganza

The venue where we hold our committee meetings and some other Flamsteed events is planning a 'Sunday Extravaganza' on July 10 and has asked if the Flamsteed would like to take part. A 'Shrewsbury Park' style event – ie, solar scopes, photos, etc – received support from the committee.

6. Future visits

The committee discussed a number of options for possible future Flamsteed visits.

Unfortunately, we have been told by Jodrell Bank that it isn't able to organise any 'behind the scenes' trips which would have been of particular interest to Flamsteed members. Normal group bookings would be required instead. The distance to/from Jodrell Bank is such that it requires an overnight stay.

Spain is an option, though it would have to be in the cooler weather, such as September, if only because of the better seeing.

Florence remains an option though we have not progressed on that as yet. The Science History Museum, the planetarium and the observatory at Arcetri would be particularly interesting. Andy S will pursue this again with a view to a spring 2017 trip.

Cornwall and Paris were mentioned as possibilities.

7. Radio Astronomy

The Radio Astronomy Special Interest Group continues to make steady progress. There are about 8 or 9 members who have a regular ongoing interest in the subject, and there have been a number of workshops and a talk given last October.

8. Any other business

The next committee meeting, to be held before the Flamsteed AGM immediately before our September lecture, will have to consider what roles committee members would be interested in taking on, going forward. Malcolm has previously advised that he wishes to stand down as chairman at that point and so thought will have to be given to who the next chairman should be.

Our solar observation training event and lecture was a great success and resulted in us building a considerable army of volunteers for our public solar viewing events.

The meeting adjourned at 9.07pm