

13TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE FLAMSTEED ASTRONOMY SOCIETY

Held on Monday 1st October 2012 at 7.00 p.m. in the lecture theatre of the National Maritime Museum.

1. **Present:** Lin Potter (Chair) and 81 members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society
2. **Apologies** were received from Jane Bendall, Deborah McGarvey, Anthony Hooper, Chris Sutcliffe and James Turtle.
3. **Matters arising:** There were no matters arising from the minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Monday 10th October 2011.
4. **Chair's address:**

This year has again been an extremely busy, productive and exciting one for Flamsteed. We have welcomed back lots of old friends and have been introduced to new ones.

I would like to mention the fact that Veryan Wheeler has joined the Membership Department at the museum. Both Rachel and Tori are delighted to have an extra person to help them with their onerous daily duties!

We began the 2011/12 season with the John Griffiths memorial lecture. Prof Alan Willis, a colleague and close friend of John's, amused us with slides of their student life together. He followed this with a lecture on massive stars and superstar clusters.

Greg Syme-Rumsby followed our AGM in October with a lecture on timings. He began the lecture with the statement "we are all going to die – we do not know when but it is a certain fact of life!" He then proceeded to tell us about the likelihood of being hit by an asteroid!

Our dear friend, Dr Carl Murray, returned for the third time with a most interesting talk on the Cassini probe and Saturn's rings. There were fascinating slides to accompany his lecture. I think we all wait in anticipation for these and I know that we have been the first to view some of these wonderful images.

The Flamsteed Christmas party was held in the planetarium. Dr Darren Baskill enthralled us with a lecture on Extreme Astronomy. He also informed us that he was celebrating his 19th birthday that day. Of course he then added that he would be 19 years of age if he lived on Mars. I feel this is a useful fact for those of us who wish to remain youthful and truthful!

At the beginning of the year, we welcomed back Dr Robert Massey, who talked about the Transits of Venus. This was, of course, in anticipation of the one we were all looking

forward to seeing later in the year. I would just like to add here that we are hugely indebted to Robert, as he was instrumental in helping to found the Flamsteed in 1999.

In February, Dr Mark Sullivan presented a lecture about Cosmic Explosions, Dark Matter and the Fate of the Universe.

In March another old friend, Prof Nick Kanas, flew into London on his way home from Paris. His lecture was entitled the Psychology and Physiology of Space Travel in Humans.

April saw our very own Dr Marek Kukula, lecture on the theme 'From Egypt to Mars'. In May more old friends visited – Dr Stuart Clark and Dr Chris Lintott held a debate on dark matter – a superb evening of entertainment!

The last meeting of the season was a Jubilee party with members' talks by Mike Dryland, David Redfern and Ian McDowell. Sparkling wine was served to round off a sparkling event. A toast was proposed to Flamsteed, forthcoming Greenwich events, and of course the Olympics. Of course we all now know that the last two were a resounding success!

During the past year there have been many observing events and meetings. Mike Meynell reports:

“We ran successful stargazing events on Blackheath during the season, which were well attended by Flamsteed members and members of the public. Despite light pollution, we still managed to get some fabulous views of the planets, globular and open clusters and even some of the brighter galaxies and planetary nebula.

Cudham was less successful this year, as we were continually thwarted by bad weather. Most of our 'meteor-watch' sessions had to be called off, though we did manage to run a successful Perseids meteor watch in August when the clouds parted just after midnight and we were able to spot several very bright meteors.

Romney observing nights are always a delight and we are hugely indebted to Martin and Jane for allowing us access to their wonderful observatory. Several successful sessions were run this year, including an evening dedicated entirely to astrophotography, which proved to be a real treat. Views of the Milky Way from Romney are breath taking and it is wonderful to be able to see faint galaxies and nebula through the 14-inch Meade telescope, whilst listening to Martin's knowledgeable explanation of the objects on view.

A highlight of the year was the hugely successful BBC Stargazing Live events held at Woolwich and Charlton House. We had around 1,500 members of the public observe the Sun through solar telescopes in General Gordon Square in Woolwich on a bright sunny Saturday in January. At Charlton House a few days later, we were joined by the ROG astronomers in an all-ticketed affair that saw over 600 visitors at BBC London's flagship event. Visitors were able to observe the night sky through telescopes provided by many

willing Flamsteed volunteers, whilst, inside the house, Flamsteed volunteers ran telescope and astrophotography workshops.

The success of our astrophotography sessions over the last twelve months was particularly notable, with more and more interest in this subject no doubt being encouraged by the Astronomy Photographer of the Year competition run by the Royal Observatory Greenwich. We hope to focus much more on this topic in the coming year and exploit our excellent Flickr online photography group, which has been developed by Sumitra.

On 6 June we were extremely fortunate to catch a glimpse of the Transit of Venus during our event on Blackheath. Given that this was the last transit until the year 2117, the clouds, which greeted us on arrival at 4.30am, were somewhat disheartening. However, during the last few minutes of the transit, the clouds miraculously parted, giving the 140 participants surely the final chance to witness this event during their lifetimes. A truly wonderful morning. One of the participants, Chris Warren, won the 'Solar System' category of the 2012 Astronomy Photographer of the Year awards with an image taken during the Blackheath event.

Hare & Billet evenings run by Brian Evans have continued (even during the Olympics) and were always well attended. They prove to be a good forum for new members, or those who are thinking of joining the society, to meet other members in an informal social environment and we are very grateful to those members who regularly turn up to these evenings and make them such a success.

As many of you know, the Flamsteed website was upgraded to a new platform in June of this year and is core to our activities. The website has been well received and we are averaging around 100 'hits' per day, even during our quietest period of the year. We are hugely grateful to one of our former members, Mark Duwe, for helping in the design and build of the new site.

The success of the new website would not have been possible without the ceaseless work undertaken by Mike Dryland to keep the old one rich and entertaining. The content of that website, built up since 2004, is truly superb and provides a wonderful history of all of our activities over the past decade. Work will continue in bringing the remainder of the content over to the new design, though all of the old content is already available in the 'archive' section of the Flamsteed website.

Attendance at all of our events has been aided by our social media communication channels, which have grown gradually during the year. The SMS Text Messaging service was made a permanent fixture following a successful trial, and has proved to be of great use in communicating last minute changes of plan to members. We now have over 70 subscribers to this service, and intend to continue with the service in the long term. Twitter and Facebook have continued to grow in popularity. We are using these services to help us communicate events to members, and also to highlight items of interest to members, the wider astronomy community, and the general public.

The Solar Viewing team led by Grey Liplely has been extremely active, with some great feedback received from the general public. The Flamsteed society donated a new 90mm solar telescope to the museum this year, which has already provided us with some spectacular views of the Sun. Clearly, because of the Olympic and Paralympic activity in Greenwich Park over the summer, our activities on solar viewing had to be curtailed. However, the solar viewing programme has now restarted and will now continue on a regular basis.

A new development last season was the formation of a Flamsteed Radio Astronomy Group. Although we are still in the early stages of this group, we hope to make progress this season in using basic solar flare detectors and also using the satellite dish, which has been purchased by the museum, to try and interpret radiation emitted from the Sun.

Members of the Flamsteed were again able to use the 28-inch Great Equatorial telescope at the ROG on a regular basis. Our thanks to Tony Sizer who, as well as running the sessions using the telescope, was also able to give participants a planetarium show on the (all too frequent) evenings when weather conditions prevented use of the telescope.”

Lin continues: I would like to thank all the committee members for their help and support over the past year. Without such a dedicated team, Flamsteed would simply not survive. I would also like to thank the museum for their continued support. I'd also like to give a big thanks to Mike Dryland, who was now stepped down from the position of vice-chair. He has been invaluable to me in my role as chair of Flamsteed Astronomy Society. Thanks also go to Mike Meynell, who has taken over the position of vice-chair. This year he has proved himself to be a very worthy replacement.

We are heading steadily closer to the end of 2012. I'm sure that you have all heard about the end of the Mayan calendar and the doom-mongers predictions for the end of the world. I sincerely hope not. We have a very exciting program developing for 2012 and 2013.

Also, there is breaking news of a new comet, which has just been discovered. It may become very bright towards the end of next year. It is called Comet ISON and in November 2013 it could become as bright as the full Moon. That would be fantastic to see. However comets are notoriously unpredictable, as too is the end of the world!

Here's hoping for 2013!

5. Update on Membership Strategy (Mike Meynell and Malcolm Porter):

In response to a significant increase in our membership numbers in the past year, the Flamsteed committee tasked Mike Meynell and Malcolm Porter with negotiating a future strategy for the society with the Museum.

A working party was formed with the museum consisting of:

- Chris Styles – Director of Communication and Visitor Experience
- Marek Kukula – Public Astronomer Royal Observatory Greenwich
- Rob Edwards – Head of Science Education Royal Observatory Greenwich
- Rosemary Gilbert – Head of Development
- Rachel Harrison – Membership Manager
- Mike Meynell – Flamsteed Astronomy Society
- Malcolm Porter – Flamsteed Astronomy Society

After a series of meetings with the museum a draft strategy was agreed by the Flamsteed committee on Wednesday 26 September. This strategy was now presented to the AGM to ascertain membership feedback.

Mike presented a brief history of the Society and restated the Society objectives: “to enhance the enjoyment and understanding of astronomy for its members, while supporting the programmes delivered by the Royal Observatory Greenwich and promoting the public profile of astronomy.”

The Flamsteed is unique amongst astronomy societies, both in the broad range of understanding, interests and skills of our members and the relationship we have with a national museum. No other society can offer such a range of unique facilities.

Benefits to members were discussed (both Flamsteed benefits and the benefits from being a member of the museum). The benefits to the museum were also discussed, including the provision of volunteers and providing a logical next step from the learning programme.

Results of the membership survey were then presented. A small majority of members were in favour of increased membership and against a membership cap. A large majority supported lecture bookings on a ‘first come, first served’ basis. A small majority supported televising lectures to an overflow area in the event of oversubscribed lectures.

Malcolm then discussed how the society could work together with the museum in the future. The museum have agreed that all lectures will continue in the NMM lecture hall, will remain free and that booking will be through the standard booking system, but with an improved user interface (the process for the acquisition of a new booking system has started). The museum will manage the entrance desk at lectures and the provision of catering at lectures.

Though society numbers continue to grow, the museum has no plans to actively promote Flamsteed membership. Equally, there are no plans to cap membership levels. Any growth should therefore be organic.

Malcolm discussed the possible addition of new special interest groups within the Society, in addition to solar and radio, which will help to add understanding and improve

socializing. There may also be ways of improving the Flamsteed offering through private or curator tours of exhibitions, etc.

We are undertaking a review of the financial benefits of the Flamsteed to RMG, so that we have a better understanding of income, costs and intangible benefits.

Malcolm then presented a view of what the society might look like in 2 years time:

- No cap on membership numbers, but unlikely to have significantly more members than today. On going monitoring of membership numbers with the Membership office.
- Bookings for lectures on a 'first come, first served' basis, with televising to an overflow area to allow for 'walk-ups' on the night.
- More interest specific groups to add understanding and improve socializing.
- More support and assistance from RMG and more support to RMG from the Flamsteed.
- More Flamsteed interaction with the public directly and through social media and increased involvement with the media. Dedicated media contact at RMG for all media enquiries and approaches.

Malcolm asked members present to give their considered view on this strategy so that we could seek formal agreement with the museum and amend the Memorandum of Understanding to reflect the agreed strategy.

Over the period of the history of the society, Jane Bendall, Eddie Yeadon, Lin Potter, Mike Dryland and all the committee members of the Society have made a tremendous effort to get us to where we are today. Without them, this society would not exist. We now have the opportunity of making this Society one of the strongest astronomical organisations in the country, due to our links with a world-class museum and observatory, which can only be good for our membership. Malcolm stated that we now stand at the 'end of the beginning'.

Questions from the audience were then taken and feedback requested via email:

- The current booking system is very cumbersome. Are there plans to deal with this?
 - The museum is working on replacing the booking system, but we must use the old system for the time being. Our concerns regarding the current booking system are shared by the museum, but a due process must be followed to replace the system, which will take time.
- Can we have a discussion with the museum regarding the use of lights in the courtyard at the Royal Observatory on viewing evenings?
 - Agreed. We will raise this with the museum.
- Would it be possible to record lectures and replay on the website?
 - We have discussed this in committee. It may be a possibility, but we may run into difficulties with intellectual property rights that could prevent this

from happening. We will continue to discuss this point and will provide an update when a conclusion is reached.

- Could we transfer to the Planetarium if the lecture theatre reaches capacity?
 - Unfortunately, the Planetarium has a smaller capacity than the lecture theatre. However, we have discussed the possibility, purely for very high profile lectures, of using an alternative lecture theatre. There is a lecture theatre at the University across the road that holds around 240 people. This would only be for ‘one-off’ special occasions due to the cost implications and our desire to remain connected to the museum.
- Though the museum are not ‘actively promoting’ Flamsteed membership, we still see leaflets advertising the Flamsteed around the museum. Why is this?
 - We believe that the museum should be making people aware of the existence of the Society. However, what they are not doing is having a campaign to mass recruit new members to the Society.

No more questions were raised. Further feedback was requested via email to the Flamsteed email address.

6. Election to the Committee:

Two nominations have been received:

Brian Blake was proposed by Brian Evans and seconded by Malcolm Porter;

Chris Mann was proposed by Lin Potter and seconded by Mike Meynell.

As there were no other nominations an election was deemed unnecessary and Brian Blake and Chris Mann were duly appointed as new committee members.

7. Activities for this Season (Grey Litley):

The spectacular Olympic Games witnessed over the summer undoubtedly had a huge effect on our activities and those of the Royal Observatory. Solar viewing along with many other events had to be curtailed with the office virtually under siege. However, reinstatement of the Royal Park is now underway and with the return of proper access to the ROG we can all look forward to an exciting year ahead.

A great deal has been going on behind the scenes and in response to an increasing membership we plan to hold many more activities to which you will be invited. I do hope you will take advantage of this added diversity and please, if anyone has any ideas for new initiatives or ways of improving existing ones, let us know...

So what do we have planned so far?

While further developing special interest groups such as **Solar Viewing**, the newly formed **Radio Astronomy Group** is an exciting addition with over 20 members. Our first Solar Viewing session this season took place on Saturday with over 400 visitors looking at the Sun using two telescopes. I've also booked a room at a local hostelry for a meeting of the Radio Astronomy Group next week.

I look forward to providing more detailed information about this and other aspects of the Society on a regular basis.

We also intend to increase the number of **Blackheath Viewing Events** and I urge you to attend at least one of these. Standing under a starlit sky reminds us that the images we see on the screen behind me are real and part of a vast and changing universe. It's also a good way to try out your scope or newest piece of kit.

Pub evenings are set to continue so, if you haven't been to one of these there will be ample opportunity. They are very relaxed and informal affairs with conversation drifting from astronomy to just about anything else and back again.

Focusing on the Royal Observatory for a moment, the **28 Inch Equatorial Telescope** is once more operational following extensive repairs to the dome. Some of you may be disappointed to hear that the roof doors no longer open and close with a frighteningly loud bang like that of a starting pistol at close range!

The dates on which we can observe the heavens using this historic refractor will be available shortly. We are also developing a much wider range of activities for those evenings when observing is impossible due to bad weather. I'll tell you more about this very soon.

For those who prefer to observe the night sky using more modern equipment, we've already had one very successful evening this season with Martin and Jane at their **Romney Observatory** and hope to offer more over the coming months. Views from the site are particularly good and we are very grateful to them both for their fantastic hospitality in holding these events.

We also hope to introduce a number of evenings devoted to **Astrophotography** in response to current interest. Awards for 'Astronomy Photographer of the Year' were announced a few weeks ago and winning entries can be viewed in the gallery leading to the newly equipped Harrison Planetarium. This is free to members and well worth a visit. In addition we hope to hold **Telescope Workshops** for those buying their first pair of binoculars and members about to purchase a telescope or investing in more advanced equipment. Dates for these and the Astro Photography evenings have yet to be confirmed. Finally, following the huge success of **Stargazing Live** last year, the BBC has again contacted us to ask if we can once more organise an event. To build upon the fantastic result achieved last year we hope to use Charlton House again to make this year even better while working closely with those at the Royal Observatory.

Your support and involvement is key to the success and enjoyment of this and all other Flamsteed activities. With many more ideas under discussion, this may well be our busiest year yet.

8. Any Other Business:

Lin Potter is standing down as chair of the society following the AGM. A presentation of flowers was made to Lin Potter by Grey Lipleby on behalf of the whole society to recognise her contribution as chair of the society over the past 9 years. Election of the chair and vice-chair positions will take place at the next Flamsteed committee meeting.

As there was no other business, Lin Potter closed the meeting.