

Notes from a Flamsteed Astronomy Society Committee Meeting held on Tuesday 3rd February 2015 in Mycenae House at 7.00pm

Present: Malcolm Porter (Chairman), Mike Meynell (Vice Chairman), Andy Sawers, Asra Jilani, Brian Blake, Christina Chester, Clive Inglis, Lin Potter, Nick Phillips, Roger Geeson and Rupert Smith

Apologies: Grey Liple (Vice Chairman), Mike Dryland, Sumitra Sri Bhashyam and Tej Dyal

1. Matters arising from the meeting held on 8th October 2014

Membership Renewals and the Booking System

There still appear to be issues with the new membership system and there are concerns that gaps in the process mean that the system is failing to renew memberships in a consistent and timely way. This has been raised with the Museum membership manager Chris Hill, and Mike M and Malcolm are working with him to determine how to resolve these issues.

Roles and responsibilities

The membership database is also continuing to generate erroneous membership data. It is a two-hour struggle to identify duplications and gaps in the data every month. Until these data issues are resolved by the Museum, Mike M continues to wrestle with the database rather than handing over to Clive as membership secretary.

Digital Strategy

There was a flurry of activity on the Flamsteed discussion forum when a separate section was set up for subcommittee members to discuss the Flamsteed's online and social media presence as well as other technology issues including the data needs of the Radio Astronomy Group. Work pressures in the run-up to Christmas and since have made it difficult for members to follow through but more work on this has been promised before the next Committee meeting.

2. New Museum Membership Rates

Malcolm and Mike M met with Simon Daniels and Chris Hill on Friday 30th January. The Museum will be announcing new membership rates around Easter, prompting a discussion on how the Flamsteed should respond by moving its membership fees in line with the likely Museum changes. Several points arose from this discussion:

- (a) Flamsteed Committee members regard the concessionary rate as an important component of our membership fee structure
- (b) It is important how the Flamsteed's financial surplus is managed. At present our surplus cannot exceed £10,000 under DCMS rules, and yet the Museum struggles to spend it on equipment for the benefit of RMG even when the Flamsteed recommends appropriate purchases.

- (c) The Flamsteed is still not able to extract from the Museum details about our own income and expenditure. It appears to be too difficult for the Museum's financial systems to be able to provide this information easily. No budget information has been made available to the Flamsteed by the Museum for about two years, despite repeated discussions. However, we have now been promised these figures within the next week or two.
- (d) Malcolm and Mike M will again raise with the Museum the point that the Flamsteed should have greater control over how it spends its own membership income. While surpluses are supposed to be spent for the benefit of the Museum (eg, purchases of telescopes that the Flamsteed may then borrow), they will
- (e) raise the possibility of Flamsteed income being used for the benefit of Flamsteed members directly, rather than for purchasing equipment for the Museum.
- (f) The Flamsteed's association with the Museum is regarded as very valuable. It allows us free use of RMG facilities for our meetings, such as the lecture room, the planetarium and the Great Equatorial Telescope, paying only for additional costs such as Museum staff overtime (as well as refreshments and speaker fees). The Flamsteed's connection with the Museum and ROG in particular is valuable when inviting the world's best astronomy speakers to deliver lectures.
- (g) Flamsteed membership is relatively expensive when compared to other local astronomical societies.
- (h) Any proposal to amend Flamsteed membership fees has to be agreed first by the Flamsteed Committee and then approved by the Membership Manager and Head of Development at the Museum.

A proposal on amending the Flamsteed membership fees was placed before the Committee and was agreed unanimously. The proposal will now be sent to the Membership Manager and Head of Development at the Museum for approval. A further meeting with the Museum is set for Friday 13th February.

3. Lecture programme for 2015-16

Even though the year has only just started, Brian has succeeded in confirming lecture dates for four speakers for the 2015-16 lecture season, including Dr Paul Abel who will talk about black holes and Professor David Rothery who will talk about the Mercury imaging mission, a month before the Mercury transit of the Sun. Brian has made contact with many more, with another excellent speaker line-up in prospect for next year.

A 'Members' talks' session will be slotted into the calendar this year, as the final lecture of the season.

There will also be a debate, possibly on the theme of whether space exploration should be human or robotic.

The Committee wanted to put on record its thanks for the work done by Brian to organise such an excellent programme.

The Committee also wanted to put on record its thanks to Christina for organising the speaker and lecture arrangements over the last few months.

4. Solar eclipse 20th March

The solar eclipse will be a major public and media event, with an 83% eclipse in the London area. It will start around 8.30am and finish around 10.40am.

The Museum has sorted out insurance issues and secured permission from Royal Parks for us to use the area in front of General Wolfe's statue for the public solar viewing event. When everything is signed and sealed we will be able to publicise this event. The Museum is involved with the International Year of Light programme.

The media are expected to be positioned around the Alt-Az Pavilion and the South Building. There was some discussion as to whether the space in front of Wolfe will be adequate if there are large crowds, however it was made clear that management of the crowds, the car parking and the media was the job of the Museum, not the Flamsteed.

5. VLF radio equipment installation at the Museum

The Flamsteed's radio astronomy equipment should be installed in the Alt-Az Pavilion by Easter. Final details will be discussed at an upcoming heritage telescope meeting attended by the Museum and some amendments need to be made to the facilities in the room (such as the installation of wifi and the removal of florescent lighting which interferes with the radio signal).

This will be the first time in many decades that astronomical data has been recorded at Greenwich.

6. SMASHfestUK festival

The Flamsteed will be involved in two days of this event, which is a youth-oriented programme designed to encourage young people to study STEM subjects. The concept of the programme is that an asteroid is heading towards Earth. 16th February is designated Discovery Day when the 'asteroid' is discovered. 18th February is designated Impact Day. Flamsteed will be organising stargazing events both nights at the Albany Theatre garden, Deptford. The Flamsteed won't be taking part in the 'post-apocalyptic' events later in the week. The ROG is also involved in supporting SMASHfestUK.

Several Flamsteed Committee members have kindly volunteered to assist on the two evenings and Andy will compile a 10-minute video of Flamsteed member photographs.

7. State of the NMM kitchen on Flamsteed lecture nights

Caroline Hussey-Bain at the NMM told Roger that complaints have been filed about the state of the NMM kitchens after Flamsteed nights. However, complaints of Flamsteed 'misdemeanours' have all been very vague, to the point where it is difficult to know what exactly is the complaint. In fact, Roger and Peter have often noted in the past that the kitchen is in an untidy state when they arrive, and so it seems likely that that is the cause of the problem. Photographic evidence will be secured as appropriate at future events along with more specifics about any future complaints.

8. Any other business

Shrewsbury Park

The suitability of Shrewsbury Park, Shooters Hill, as a viewing venue was discussed. A solar viewing event had been organised last summer but was cancelled on the day because of the threat of lightning. The Flamsteed has been asked by the Friends of Shrewsbury Park to organise an evening viewing there. It is a venue that is potentially darker than Blackheath. Rupert visited Shrewsbury Park very recently but found it partly waterlogged and therefore unsuitable. Clive said that there is another part of the park that will be unlikely to be waterlogged, so it was agreed that the site would be re-examined.

However, a second concern was that Kathy Smith, the chair of the Friends of Shrewsbury Park, had emailed to say that a risk assessment had to be completed and a council events licence applied for. An evening viewing had been planned for 20 February but this will not now proceed as there is not enough time to sort out these issues by then. This doesn't mean that we can't run an event at Shrewsbury Park, it just means that we have to perform a more careful assessment of risks now that concern about the ground conditions has been raised.

It is unclear whether the risk assessment and council licence are necessary for a daytime viewing.

Crayford Manor House Astronomical Society

Crayford Manor House is organising an event in Dartford to mark their new observatory opening following the forced relocation of the society. Unfortunately the event is planned for the same week as the SMASHfestUK event and so it would be too onerous to get involved in this as well, but the Flamsteed will certainly build on the link and goodwill with Crayford Manor.

Bookings for events

Mike M said that we now have Eventbrite embedded into the Flamsteed website for members to book themselves into certain Flamsteed events (ie, all events requiring bookings excluding lectures. Lecture bookings require the use of the Museum booking system as the Museum needs to control access to the National Maritime Museum). One problem is that the system is not able to determine

whether someone who makes a booking is actually a member of the Flamsteed, or if they have made a booking for themselves and a non-member friend. Checking against our membership list is a manual process. However, this is still a quicker process than maintaining separate booking lists per event and emailing members their booking details manually. It may be possible to implement more control over who could book via the website, but it was decided to see how the new system goes and review at a later date. Messages would be placed on all events warning those who book that they must be a Flamsteed member and that their booking will be cancelled if their name does not appear on our membership list.

Stargazing Live

Some last-minute planning on the BBC's part meant that a call went out for volunteers to take part in two programme segments. Four astronomy 'novices' are needed for a segment in which they will be taken away to a dark sky area – seven Flamsteed members volunteered. Fifteen audience members are required for a puppet show about eclipse myths – some 20 members volunteered. Flamsteed members always deliver, it was noted.

Under 18s

A problem arose in our December and January lectures when someone who was clearly under 18 was seen attending the event. While the minor was with a parent, the Flamsteed does not allow under 18s to be members. Apparently the Museum had mistakenly allowed the parent to take out parent-and-child membership of the Museum and of the Flamsteed. The Museum membership department have been asked to contact the member concerned to resolve this issue, which they have agreed to do.

Our memorandum of understanding with the Museum is clear that the Flamsteed does not admit members under the age of 18. This is for a variety of reasons, not least the required safeguarding policies, and also possible conflicts with the ROG educational programme, which is why a junior astronomy society has not been possible in the past.

The Committee recognises that a junior section in the Flamsteed would be a good idea, but we are not able to handle the necessary approvals and registers, without which the Flamsteed would be legally at major risk.

Malcolm and Mike M will raise this with Simon Daniels.

Exoworld system competition

Christina explained that the Flamsteed has an opportunity to name an exoplanet system in a competition being organised by the IAU. The first stage is to select which exoplanet systems will be put forward for naming. Christina is organising a Survey Monkey email to members in which they can select their favourites. She has compiled a long-list featuring visible and faint stars in the Northern

Hemisphere, complete with links to a website that gives details about each exoplanet system (eg, number of planets, size of planets, orbital period). The deadline for this phase is 15 February.

When the IAU completes a list of the 20 most popular systems, we will then have an opportunity to suggest a name for one of those systems. There are various rules as to what constitutes an acceptable name (eg, 16 characters in length or less, 'Pronounceable in some language', not the name of a living person, etc). Deadline TBC.

The final phase will see the public worldwide vote on their favourite names, with the winners being announced at the IAU General Assembly in Hawaii in August.

Christina will circulate details to the Committee and organise the poll of Flamsteed members.

Herstmonceux

Nicolas Christodoulou, the chairman of the Wealden Astronomical Society at Herstmonceux, wants to organise joint events with the Flamsteed: the idea is that we would go there some time in October and they will come to Greenwich for a viewing through the Great Equatorial Telescope on another date.

There being no other business the meeting closed at 9.05pm.