

Notes from a Flamsteed Astronomy Society Committee Meeting held on Wednesday 6th February 2019 at 7pm in Mycenae House, Blackheath

Present: Andy Sawers (chair), Christina Chester (vice-chair), Barry Cassels, Bobby Manoo, Clive Inglis, Helen Edwards, Malcolm Porter, Mike Meynell, Nick Phillips, Simon Hurst and Tej Dyal.

Apologies: Asra Jilani, Brian Blake, Grey Liple, Roger Geeson and Rupert Smith.

1. Matters arising from the committee meeting on Monday 8th October 2018

Car Sharing Arrangements

We attempted to use the Eventbrite plug-in application for making car sharing arrangements for a test event. Unfortunately, the application did not perform as expected and had data privacy, protection and retention issues. We have therefore reverted to the old process of matching people to cars manually and will keep an eye out for alternative solutions in the future.

Payment Cards

Andy reported that he had got a Revolut card, which was used to collect payments for the trip to the Science Museum in January. The system worked well, so the committee agreed to continue with this process for future trips.

Great Equatorial Viewing Events and the AMAT

Tours of the Annie Maunder Astrographic Telescope (AMAT) have been incorporated in the back-up program for Great Equatorial Viewing Events when the weather is too poor to observe using the telescope.

Feedback from members has been very positive so far, so we will continue with this program next season.

On one recent Great Equatorial Viewing Event, there was an issue with the alignment of the telescope. Tej raised this with the museum, and we have been assured that the alignment issues will be addressed. Mike believed that there may be an issue with the encoders on the mount and suggested that we contact the museum to determine if there is any specific equipment that may be required to resolve the problems, and/or if the Flamsteed can offer to get involved in any fundraising activities for the telescope. Tej agreed to raise this with Brendan Owens at the museum.

Choice of Pub for Lecture Events

The Yacht is working well as a venue to entertain our speaker prior to lecture events, so we will continue to use this venue for the foreseeable future.

History of Astronomy Group

Bobby reported that the meeting schedule for the remainder of the season had been finalised. Attendance at sessions so far this season has been very good.

Radio Astronomy Meeting

Clive reported that around 20 members had turned up to the recent meeting in the Endeavour Room at the Royal Observatory Greenwich. This turned into a workshop and was received well by those who attended. He is looking to arrange for a follow-up meeting soon.

The proposal to site radio astronomy equipment in the alt-azimuth pavilion has not been progressed by the museum due to the absence of key staff. Clive agreed to follow this up.

Practical Astronomy Group

Mike reported that there had been 3 workshops since the last committee meeting. The Introduction to Astrophotography and Robotic Telescope workshops were very well attended. The Telescope Workshop was poorly attended, probably because it was timetabled so close to Christmas. We would try to schedule it at a different time next season.

Trip to E-Eye

Trips to E-Eye had been publicised on two previous occasions with very little interest from the membership. In addition, feedback from the members' survey (see section 5) suggests a limited interest in trips of this type. Therefore, the committee decided to not organise overseas trips of this type in the future.

Science Museum Visit

Christina reported that the visit went very well, with 18 Flamsteed attendees.

2. Under-18s Update

Andy and Christina reported that they had recently attended a meeting with Chloe Shepherd (RMG Membership Manager) regarding membership categories for under-18s.

It has been agreed that there will be a new membership category so that we can easily identify these members. Potential "student" members will be eventually be able to join online (though presently they must call the membership office directly). The membership wording on the RMG website is in the process of being changed.

Any student member would have to be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian for events held off museum premises.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the museum and the society needs to be revised to reflect the new membership arrangements. Andy agreed to update the committee on this at the next meeting.

Andy raised the potential of performing outreach events at local schools. This would need to be agreed with Rob Edwards at the ROG. Andy agreed to raise this with him.

3. Members' Talks

Christina asked if the committee would support running a Members' Talks session this season. The committee agreed that we should send an email out to members to see who would be interested in giving a talk and determine from the response whether it was worthwhile going ahead with an event this year or deferring the event to next season.

4. Society Trips

The committee agreed that we should try to arrange a trip for the early summer period (May or June 2019). Jodrell Bank was the most likely candidate for a trip. Clive agreed to contact them to determine costs and potential dates for a trip.

It was possible to do the trip in a day with fast trains from London Euston to Macclesfield and a taxi from Macclesfield station to Jodrell Bank. The trip should be arranged for a weekend.

A potential trip to Herstmonceux was also discussed, though our previous trip was only 2 years ago. If the trip could be arranged along with a revisit to the Space Geodesy Facility (last visited in 2014), then it could be worthwhile. However, when Mike last contacted them, they had no funding to bring in staff at the weekend. Mike agreed to contact them again to see what might be possible.

Christina mentioned the new RMG exhibition on the Moon (to coincide with the Apollo 11 anniversary). She agreed to contact the museum to see if any “behind the scenes” tours for Flamsteed members could be arranged.

5. Members’ Survey

All members of the Flamsteed Astronomy Society were invited to take part in a survey to ascertain their views and opinions of the Flamsteed’s activities, to get a better understanding of members’ areas of interest and level of expertise in astronomy, and to encourage members to put forward specific criticisms and suggestions for improvement or new activities.

Andy reported on the results of the survey:

- 34% of the membership responded (128 responses in total).
- Overall, the feedback from members has been positive – in several cases, effusive with praise.
- 62% said that membership of the Flamsteed had met their expectations and 33% said it had exceeded them.
- Only a handful (5%) of respondents said that membership had failed to live up to expectations. Some of these had been members for several years!
- Most members also regard their RMG/Flamsteed membership as good value for money.
- 26% of members would be interested in volunteering to assist at Flamsteed events.
- 54% of members had no specialist knowledge or experience of astronomy. 38% describe themselves as avid / quite knowledgeable enthusiasts. 14% have a university qualification in physics, astronomy or space science. 4% have worked in physics, astronomy or space science.
- Only 16% of members own a telescope and use it often. 27% use it only a few times a year. 18% rarely use their telescope. 23% do not own a telescope but would like to get one. 16% do not own a telescope and do not wish to own one.

Further analysis of the survey is still ongoing. However, certain points were discussed in detail in the committee:

- The main reason for joining the Flamsteed was to hear talks by leading experts (88%) and to learn about astronomy (83%). 57% mentioned taking part in observing sessions.
- Lectures are far and away of most interest to members (average score of 5.41 out of 6, median 6 out of 6).

- History of Astronomy (average 4.18, median 4), Great Equatorial Telescope viewings (average 4.03, median 4), practical astronomy workshops (average 3.94, median 4) and Blackheath viewings (average 3.97, median 4) are also very popular.
- There is a strong bias towards informative visits / trips (e.g. Herstmonceux, CERN) (average 4.06, median 4) rather than overseas observing (average 3.18, median 3).
- The social / pub evenings score lowest (average 2.74, median 3). A change of venue was discussed, and the committee agreed to give this a try.

There have been some comments about improving our social media / communication with / among members. Andy agreed to follow-up these suggestions with the member(s) who raised them to discuss the ideas in further detail.

Some members have asked for some more “basic talks” on practical astronomy skills. It may be possible to organise a “Back to Basics” day with the British Astronomical Association. Andy agreed to follow this up with the BAA. In addition, there are people within the society who could organise an event of this type, if the BAA option is not feasible.

There have been some comments about helping members to set up their telescopes. The committee felt that this was best done at our observing events, so members who need help with their telescopes would be encouraged to turn up early for the Blackheath observing events. The Blackheath organisers would ensure that someone was on-site well before the start time of the main observing event in order to provide help to these members.

It was agreed that the overall survey results would be presented back to the membership at the next AGM in September. A summary of the results could also be uploaded to the Flamsteed website.

6. Any other business

a. Membership Levels

The committee noted that membership of the Flamsteed had increased to over 400 members for the first time, with overall membership numbers up by over 8% since this time last year. The society now has 403 members (390 active, 13 lapsed).

b. Sky This Month

Simon requested that two targets be listed in the monthly astrophotography challenge from now on.

c. Members Solar Viewing

Clive agreed to contact Nick Babbs with a view to setting up some Members Solar Viewing sessions during the summer period. These should start in May so that the Sun is best positioned to observe from the meridian courtyard in the early evening.

d. Chris Lintott

As Chris Lintott has recently completed his term as a trustee of the museum, and in the light of his regular support of the Flamsteed over the years, the committee agreed that we would offer him honorary membership of the society at his lecture on March 11th.

e. Telescope Gift

The society had been offered another gift of a telescope from a non-member. It is an entry-level telescope. The committee agreed to offer the telescope as a raffle prize to members.

f. Flamsteed Birthday

It was agreed that we would try to arrange a talk about John Flamsteed over the course of the 2019/20 season, as it will be the 300th anniversary of his death. This could be in either the main lecture programme or in the history group.

g. Lecture Planning

Andy, Christina, Clive, Helen and Mike agreed to meet within the next few weeks to discuss lecture planning for the 2019/20 season.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 9.04pm.