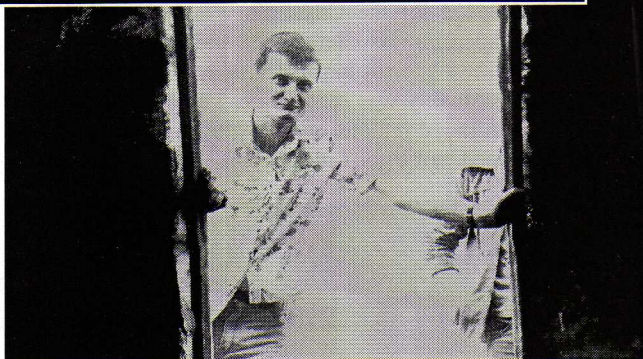


The Definitive History of the York Astronomical Society (so far)*

Part the First, as presented by Martin Dawson

*'The further back you look,
the further forward you are likely to see'*
Sir Winston Churchill

The author back in the days when he had hair — a more scary presence you'd be very hard-pressed to find...



In mid-2008 a number of YAS members discussed the history of our Society. In 2012, the Society will be 40 years old and it seems appropriate that in these years leading up to 2012 that perhaps some document should be prepared. I would say that having joined the YAS in 1973 August, that to just sit down and bash away at the keyboard would be an easy option. However, I have elected to refer to the YAS's *Algol Newsletter* (from 1979), letters, newspaper cuttings, committee meeting minutes, and the old accounts book. I have also searched through my own photograph albums, old diaries, letter files (nearly every letter I have received from 1973), newspaper cuttings, recordings from local radio, and material from the York library, and other societies. First, a little pre-history...

Prehistoric Age

During the 19th century there were two societies in York that taught and practised astronomy. The Yorkshire Philosophical Society and The Bootham School Astronomical Society⁽¹⁴⁾. The school society was only for pupils at Bootham School and is therefore outside our accounts here. The Philosophical Society covered other disciplines as well as astronomy, including geology, archaeology, and natural history, and again is outside our account as it's not purely astronomy.

Perhaps the first references to a Society or should I say people in York belonging to an astronomical society, can be found in copies of *'Journals and Transactions'* of the Leeds Astronomical Society from around the end of the 19th Century. I would reason they joined the Leeds Astronomical Society (LAS). as

there was no suitable society for members of the public in existence at the time.

In a letter to *Journals and Transactions*, Mr H. Fielden of Bootham, York writes "Sir, — Mercury was well seen here to-night (Monday), from 6.15pm to 7.25pm, when it became obscured by light clouds. It was by this time, of course, nearly set." — this part of his letter is dated Monday, 12th March, 1906. Mr Fielden was elected to the LAS in 1900 February⁽⁹⁾.

In 1920 February, Mr Scott, Hon. Curator of the York Museum Observatory presented a paper discussing the Observatory in York, and the following October the LAS undertook a journey by (steam...) train to York, to visit the factory of 'Messrs. Cooke and Sons for making of astronomical and other optical instruments'. Later that evening "...the party proceeded to the Museum, where Mr Scott, who is Hon. Curator, read a paper on 'Astronomical Instruments'. The party were going to undertake "...an opportunity of practical star-gazing, but time and weather did not permit".⁽⁴⁾ So here we have a guest speaker telling a society about an observatory and its instruments, and the society following up with a visit to the observatory. Not much has changed; the YAS did a similar exercise in 2009 January.

During the late 1950s the British Interplanetary Society had a Yorkshire Branch (amongst many others — the Southern Californian branch still exists today). The Yorkshire Branch of the BIS was based in Harrogate at Harlow Hill Tower and were building a dome on the top, to house a 6-inch reflector donated by Jodrell Bank. They were primarily interested in the new fangled space age and the satellite when first launched, and undertook observations that would be submitted to operation 'Moonwatch' — an international organisation that undertook the observation and recording of the early satellites.⁽¹³⁾ One of their activities was having meetings, and a couple of meetings were held in York House, Clifford Street, York. Alas, strong winds damaged the dome and it caught the telescope, not long after the branch folded.^(6, 11)

Hence this chapter — for obvious reasons — 'Prehistoric Age'.

Paper Age

From 1962 to 1971 there was a 'York Astronomical Society' — their inaugural meeting was held at The York Settlement, Holgate Hill on 1961 March 09.^(1,2,16) Later meetings were held at the Railway Institute, Queen Street (where incidentally the present society had their first meetings). A 4-in Cooke telescope was bought for 2 Guineas in 1962 April, from The Mount

