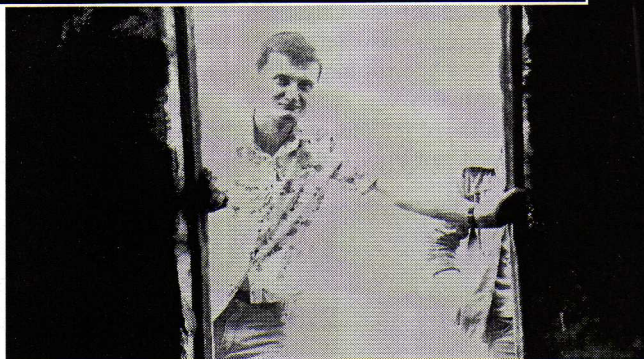


The Definitive History of the York Astronomical Society (so far)*

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⁾.

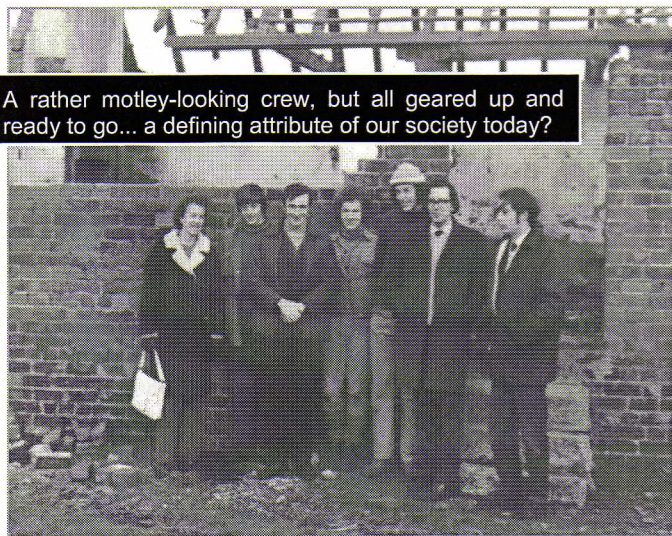
In 1920 February, Mr Scott, Hon. Curator of the York Museum Observatory presented a paper discussing the Observatory in York, and the following October the LAS undertook a journey by (steam...) train to York, to visit the factory of 'Messrs. Cooke and Sons for making of astronomical and other optical 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



School⁽⁸⁾ but it is not known if any record or results still exist, or even where it was sited.⁽⁹⁾ This telescope is now housed in the York Observatory, Museum Gardens. A look at their programme for 1969-70 shews they were affiliated to the BAA and the Yorkshire Philosophical Society. Holding meetings at the Railway Institute once a month, subjects covered at the time (as if you couldn't guess...) in 1969 September, included 'Why go to the Moon?', followed by (in 1969 October), a member's presentation: 'Practical Telescope Making' by Mr Malcolm Brown, and in 1970 March: 'Film Show'. They had a varied selection of meetings —if only once a month between September and May,⁽¹⁰⁾— and only four members on the committee: this would suggest to me at least, why the society folded. Two meetings a month plus extra dates in-between, and a large committee to spread the workload helps with a vibrant and successful group. Witness ours today...

In 1970-71 we see 48 members, but it must be realised that 26 of these are either members of two school groups (St Peter's School and The Mount School) plus family members. This list was sent to the Yorkshire Philosophical Society in 1970 November; perhaps they needed proof of a large group to be affiliated? Who knows? By 1971 May there were no nominations for Committee Members, and using the Bye-Laws, the Society dissolved itself in 1971 June.⁽¹¹⁾ From documents I have seen I read that this society styled itself as just 'York Astronomical Society', whereas ours styles itself as 'The York Astronomical Society'.

Hence this chapter — 'Paper Age', having only read about this society on paper documents.

Iron Age

Then 1972 dawned...

Apollo 16 had gone to the moon and Mr Trevor Wood who was interested in astronomy (and would later tell me he wanted to work at Vickers Instruments but ended up working with television) had looked around for a society to join. He found a group of people at Stamford Bridge; some worked at Derwent Plastics and met in a pub or Mr John Stephenson's garage. There was a teacher, Mr Roger Jackson, Mrs Judith Acton the secretary, and a group of students.

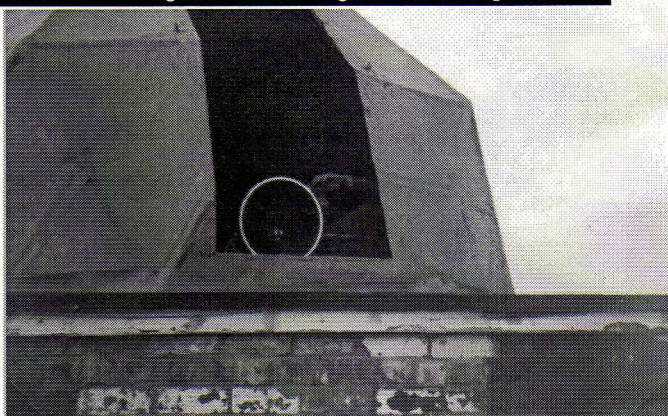
Formed in the summer of 1972^(10, 11) the society planned their course carefully. It was a two-pronged course — first and quickly, a meeting place central to York was found in The Railway Institute, Queen Street, York: two large rooms with open coal fires and large tables were on offer. These rooms, on the second floor, would be used from 1972 to 1977. The second prong of this course of action was to find a site for an observatory. The first site was near to Acaster Falls, to the south of York. A visit to the Salmon Fishing Lodge on the banks of the Ouse at Acaster Falls soon revealed structural problems and it being next to the river was liable to floods and fogs. This idea was soon abandoned. The second site was much better. On the edge of Acaster Aerodrome dating from WW2 was a hospital, long- since abandoned but part of which was a home, but on this site was a small brick building. It had very thick walls some three bricks thick. During the Second World War it was to be a small generating plant to supply electricity to the hospital. Mr Blain the owner was approached, and a reasonable rent was agreed.

Meanwhile, various other activities took place, a sponsored walk on the Lyke Wake Walk was undertaken and some jumble sales held to raise funds. A large raffle was also held. This money plus the subscriptions made a tidy sum — first year accounts for 1972 August to 1973 August shews £105.73½ raised, of which £55.37 was spent, not a bad return.

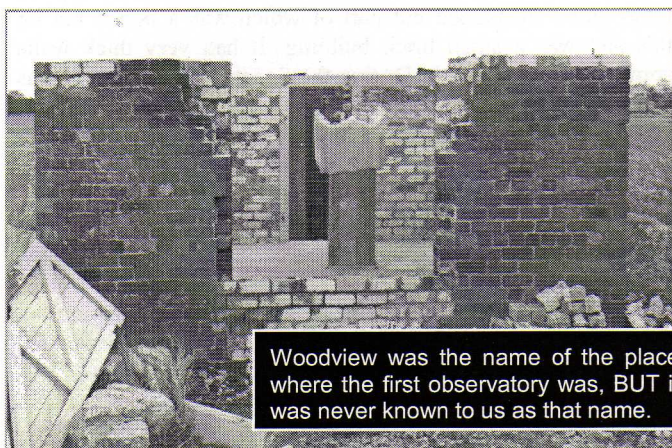
The Newsletter, as it was first called, was 'duplicated' on yellow paper: No. 2 for 1973 October discusses such topics as 'The York Astronomical Society has been in operation now for over a year. Although we have not succeeded in having an operational observatory, we have been far from inactive' as we have just seen. Topics discussed ranged from up and coming astronomical events like a transit of Mercury on 1973 November 10 and Comet Kohoutek. The AGM on the 1973 August 24th shews seven people were elected (I would like to add this was the very first meeting the likes of Mr Philip Hammond and Mr Martin Dawson attended. We joined straight away, I paid £1.00, but for some reason Phil paid only 50p, I'll have words with him some day...)

The telescope that the YAS was first planning was a 9-in reflector, the mirror for which was donated, and then refigured by Vickers Instruments for the price of £12.93. The tube for this project survived for years at the Observatory. This plan was soon abandoned when a 1917 George Calvor 12-in reflector was bought in 1973 December 28th for £57.00. It was some instrument and although it had no mount, it had a selection of eyepieces and a star-diagonal which perplexed every one!

The Calvor looking out of the fibre glass dome Roger made.



First job on the observatory was to brick up part of a wall that was missing, then fill in the floor with rubble and concrete it over. The summers of 1974-75 saw lots of activity nearly every Sunday (not just second Saturdays like now...) One group led by Mr Roger Jackson built and created a multi-sided dome with fibre glass – some of which was recovered insulation from the pipes in the old buildings on the site. Another team led by Mr. Eric Toolan and Mr Steve Cooper worked on the observatory. After the floor was in place a concrete pillar was created underneath of which was a time capsule! Next job was to create a wooden roof upon which the dome and its steel track could be mounted. Although the Calvor was not installed straight away we did have a building looking like an observatory!

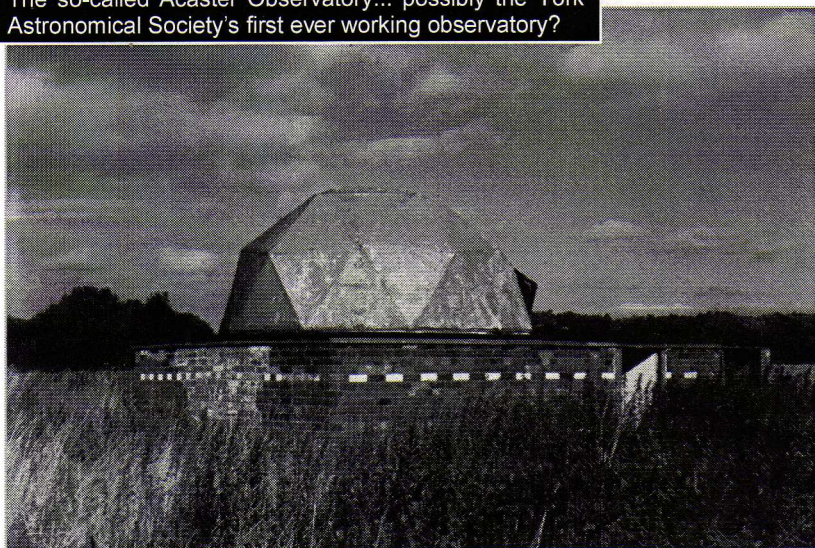


Woodview was the name of the place where the first observatory was, BUT it was never known to us as that name.

On the concrete pillar a steel mount was created, this was built by Mr Trevor Wood and Mr M. Manderfield during 1978 and once mounted we had an operational observatory! Although we had problems with people leaving and membership dropping, the younger element of the society enjoyed going to the observatory and using the old telescope. We would even camp out and be fortified by runs to the chip shop in Bishopthorpe and outsals at the pub in Appleton Roebuck! By 1986 we had to abandon the site: Mr Blain was poorly and decided to move away. We sold the Calvor in 1988 October 07 and made £350, again not a bad return on the £57 investment in 1973! We also sold the dome and made £10, this went to Barrow-in-Furness AS.⁽¹⁾

Hence this chapter — ‘Iron Age’, but perhaps ‘Fibreglass Age’ would be more appropriate...

The so-called Acaster Observatory... possibly the York Astronomical Society's first ever working observatory?



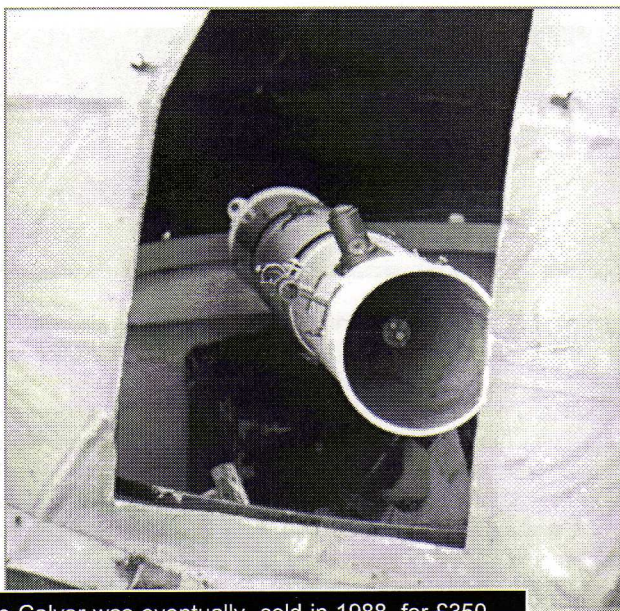
Cardboard Age

The next phase of the YAS really overlapped the previous. Mr Trevor Wood managed to secure a grant from York Council to build a 10-in Dobsonian. It's size was dictated by the load carrying area of a Ford Escort Mk.3 Estate that Trevor used for his work. A large cardboard tube was held at one end in a box that in turn rested on Teflon bearings of another box (Rocker Box). This was a very simple design and was very quickly built. 1982 March 07 sees £107.80 paid for the optics and 1982 June 01 another £18.46 for the wood. I do believe the cardboard tube was free! It's interesting to note that we were still supporting and maintaining the Observatory in the early 1980s while embarking on the Dobsonian project. Shame NASA can't overlap their manned space programmes, we at YAS would never be without access to large telescopes from 1977 to the present day and into the future. I say telescopes because as soon as the Mk1 was built the Mk2 was started – the Mk1 also won the first telescope-making competition at the Amateur Astronomy Centre Star Party in 1984 Easter and we as a society had two 10-in reflectors plus a 12-in Calvor in an observatory at the same time during the mid-1980s. ‘Not bad eh?’ as some would say, we were also busy in other quarters. The Newsletter became ‘Algol’ with issue 17 for 1979 Christmas, Halley's Comet was in the skies, and trips and visits to other societies were under taken: Croyden AS's 21st Anniversary, Manchester AS's 75th Anniversary Celebrations, and the Federation of Astronomical Society events at Coventry. Also Boston Astronomers', Bristol, Cleethorpes, Scarborough, Leeds, Harrogate, Huddersfield and West Yorkshire AS's were all visited; either to attend their events or give lectures – sometimes quizzes with these groups were also undertaken. We made a lot of friends and have still kept in touch with them to this day.

Hence this chapter — the ‘Cardboard Age’ for obvious reasons.

Concrete Age

In late-1977 we had to move from The Railway Institute, it was closed for a short period and underwent major renovation. We started having meetings at the Folk Hall in New Earswick and although the rooms were nice they were a bit small and some members stopped coming because of transport problems. Professor Michael Woolfson, our Hon. President at the time was approached and he arranged a room to be provided in the Physics Block at York University. Nearby was Goodricke College, and after a few years we had meetings there. This seemed appropriate with it being named after a York Astronomer. The beauty of meeting at the York University was the rent, it was free! From 1978 to 1999 we paid no rent whatsoever, certainly a handsome record that this society will never better. While at the University, we discovered to the south of the campus an old abandoned concrete shed. It was made of concrete slabs and was used for housing equipment for experiments by students at the Physics Department. It was situated on land that was recovered from the soil removed when the University Lake was created in the early 1960s. Next to it was the University's first observatory (now that is another story...). In the concrete hut we housed the 10-in Dobsonians and a few of us would use them after meetings. We had created



The Calvor was eventually sold in 1988, for £350 — a tidy profit indeed, way back then...

(built...)
two concrete

pads so that the telescopes would stay level. This was a very useful system, having a meeting, followed by a short walk to our little observatory. It was during the early 1980s that the YAS had TWO observatories, although the university site was good, it did suffer from light pollution, so having the Acaster site — which had excellent dark skies — was a good adjunct. This did not last for long unfortunately and when we gave up the Acaster site (1986) we also gave up the University site as the University's observatory suffered some vandalism and we reasoned it would only be a matter of time before we had our concrete hut damaged and it's contents. But while there, we did observe a solar eclipse and a lunar eclipse, plus hosted numerous observation sessions, and had a Star Party for a party of school children.

Hence — the 'Concrete Age', for obvious reasons.

— References and notes

With due thanks to Alex Bardy for this rendering of his idea of a title. With a long story such as this, references are important. Memories fade, perhaps not as quickly as late 1970s photographs, but they fade nonetheless, and although the documentation is available, it's perhaps not readily accessible, so the following should aid the historian of the future to gain access easier.

1. Conversation held between 'Red' Ken (of Holgate Settlement), Mr Tony O'Conner (one-time secretary of 'old' YAS, Vickers Instruments and Bio-Rad Micrommeasurements), and Martin Dawson.

2. Publicity handout — photocopy provided by Mr Phil Shepherdson, YAS.

3. *Brief History and Specification of Cooke 4½" Clock Driven Equatorial Telescope*, Mr Tony O'Conner 1981 August 05.

4. *Journal and Transactions of the Leeds Astronomical Society* Nos. 27-28 for the year 1919-20, pgs 45-46.

5. *Journal and Transactions of the Leeds Astronomical Society* No. 14 for the year 1906, pg 164.

6. Discussions between Mr Stu Lowther (Glass Shop, Vickers Instruments, and Bio-Rad Micrommeasurements) and Martin Dawson, 1977-80 and 1990-92.

7. Programme 1969-70, York Astronomical Society. Source: Mr Trevor Wood, YAS.

8. Copy of letter from Mount School Bursar to Mr Metcalfe, (YAS). Source: Mr Martin Lunn, YAS.

9. Copy of letter to all members from Mr J. Coulson, announcing the dissolution of York Astronomical Society, 1971 May 12. Source: Mr Martin Lunn, YAS.

10. *The Yorkshire Evening Press* 'Judith Joins Star-Gazers', an un-dated cutting shewing Mrs Judith Acton, first secretary of the YAS.

11. *Astronomy Now* magazine, 1992 May, pg 15. One of the UK's best astronomy magazines.

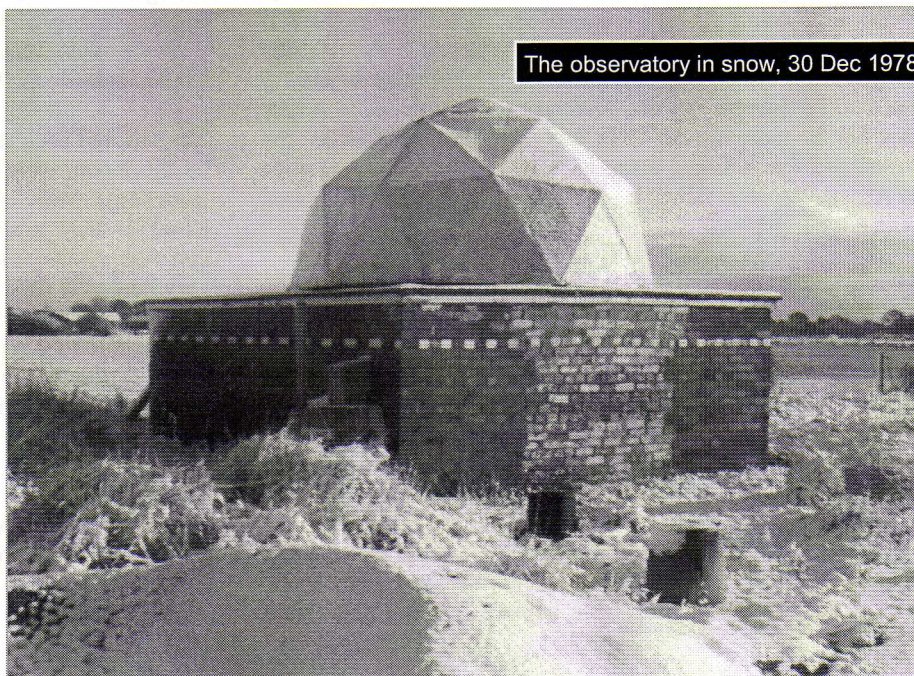
12. *Scan* 5, 1975 July, pg 27. Scan was a short-lived A5 duplicated magazine given free to societies during the mid-1970s.

13. *Spaceflight*, Vol 1, No. 4, July 1957, pg 143 and Vol 1, No. 6, 1958 January, pg 224. *Spaceflight* is the magazine of the British Interplanetary Society.

14. YAS Meeting No. 793 for 2009 January: 'The Bootham School Observatory' presented by David Robinson.

15. *Yearbook of Astronomy* edited by Patrick Moore: the 'old' YAS is mentioned in the 1968, 1969, 1970 editions. Author has not seen sight of 1971 and 1972, but the next reference is to the present YAS in 1975 onwards.

16. *Algol* 71, 2007 June, pg 22. I have found Mr Metcalfe's article from the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, it dates from Friday 1961 March 10, hence the first meeting of the 'old' YAS was the previous evening.



The observatory in snow, 30 Dec 1978.