



# The British Astronomical Association Historical Section

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Newsletter No. 5

Autumn 2012

## From the Director

*Mike Frost, Director*

It was great to see many of you at the Section meeting at Soho House in May; thanks to everyone who contributed to making the day such a success. Lee Macdonald has written a comprehensive account for this newsletter and for the Journal.

We intend to hold our next section meeting as part of the Winchester Weekend, which takes place from the 5th to 7th April next year. Our Section meeting will take place on the Saturday afternoon. There will only be a limited number of places available for day visitors to the Section meeting alone, so I would encourage you to sign up for the whole weekend – it's great fun!

Our theme for Winchester will be 'Observational Astronomy: Ancient and Modern'. We are looking for three speakers, for talks of 45 to 60 minutes. If you would like to give a talk on any aspect of the history of observational astronomy or telescope making, please contact Lee or myself.

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For me, the highlight so far of 2012 has been the transit of Venus. You'll forgive me for crowing about this – but I saw it! I was in Mollington, to the north of Banbury, where I joined a group of friends from Rugby and District Astronomical Society. We camped overnight to be able to have a clear north-east facing horizon by dawn.

After sunrise, we stood and watched clouds for over an hour; but there was always hope, as a front was passing over Oxfordshire and there were a few breaks in the clouds. Even so, by 5:35, after third contact and with less than 15 minutes to go, prospects were beginning to fade. But one particular gap was headed in the right direction and at 5:38 AM, the Sun broke through and we got a few minutes' glimpse of Venus, clinging to the solar disk by its fingertips. You can see a picture of the projected Sun, with the tiniest nibble out of the edge, in the column facing; it was taken by Johanna Jarvis, the chair of RADAS.

I was tempted to travel abroad to see the transit; but in the end I decided to stay in Britain (instead I intend to visit Australia for November's total solar eclipse). One

reason why I stayed was that, for me, the transit has as much significance historically as it does as a spectacle. Jeremiah Horrocks, the first man to predict and then see a transit of Venus, is one of 'my' dead astronomers – and if 35 minutes of transit on a cloudy December day was good enough for Horrocks, 75 minutes of transit on a cloudy June morning would do for me!

We choose 'our' astronomers for study and research because we feel a connection to them. In the case of Jeremiah Horrocks, there are some strong bonds. Jeremiah Horrocks and I both grew up in Lancashire; we both studied at Emmanuel College in Cambridge. We both had (have) relatives in New England, I think, although research I am currently engaged in is changing my understanding of Horrocks's connections to the New World. Perhaps I will write about this in a future newsletter. I have also written in this newsletter about Horrocks's correspondents in the Midlands, who lived close to where I am now located in Rugby, and the extraordinary possibility (no stronger) that a third person besides Horrocks and William Crabtree might have seen that first observed transit in 1639.



**Above:** Venus 'clinging to the solar disk by its fingertips' at the end of the 2012 transit. Image by Jo Jarvis (Chair, Rugby & District AS).

I feel the strongest connections when I am in the places known to Horrocks: St Michael's church in Much Hoole, which I have visited several times (most

recently with the Society for the History of Astronomy on the Saturday after transit day this year); Carr House in Bretherton, just down the road; and Emmanuel College. And of course the biggest thrill of all was on the two occasions when I saw the disk of Venus on the face of the Sun. When, on 8th June 2004, I first saw Venus edging its way on to the solar disk, I imagined Jeremiah Horrocks looking over my shoulder. 'A most agreeable spectacle', he said – and I agreed with him.

\*

I will close by regretting the passing in June of Peter Hingley, just a few months before he was due to retire as Librarian of the Royal Astronomical Society, a post he held with distinction for many years. It's hard to overstate Peter's contribution to the study of astronomical history in Britain. Almost every paper on historical topics submitted to the Journal contains a note expressing gratitude to Peter for guiding their research in the RAS library; he was generous with his help and universally enthusiastic.

Peter was also an engaging and entertaining speaker on a wide variety of topics. In 2007 he delivered an excellent lecture to the Society for the History of Astronomy on resources for historical research, a lecture I was hoping to persuade him to give to the BAA one day; alas, this will not happen now. He was one of the founding members of the SHA and served on its Council and as its membership secretary for many years.

We will miss him sorely.

## Editorial

*Lee Macdonald, Deputy Director*

I hope you enjoy this Autumn 2012 issue of the BAA Historical Section Newsletter. The Section is becoming more active all the time: as reported below, our Section meeting in Birmingham was a great success and we are already making plans for next year's meeting at the BAA Winchester Weekend. This issue also contains several intriguing requests for information, which members may be able to help with. Remember that this is your newsletter and that articles as well as letters and information requests will be very welcome.

A brief word on my own movements. As some of you may know, I have recently been offered, and have accepted, a funded studentship from the University of Leeds to read for a PhD in History and Philosophy of Science. Specifically, I will be studying the history of Kew Observatory, a major centre for the study of Sun-Earth connections and meteorology, as well as the testing of instruments, but about which relatively little has been written. I look forward to telling Historical Section members about the results of my research in future newsletters and talks!

## BAA Historical Section Meeting – 5 May 2012

*Report by Lee Macdonald, Deputy Director*

The 2012 meeting of the Historical Section was held at Soho House in Birmingham, the former residence of eighteenth-century industrialist Matthew Boulton. Appropriately for such a venue, the theme of this year's meeting was 'Astronomy in the Industrial Age'.

The first speaker was Mike Maunder, whose talk was on 'The Early Days of Astrophotography'. Photography has a slightly longer history than might be thought, as Thomas Wedgwood, son of the Staffordshire potter and a member of the Lunar Society, carried out experiments with light-sensitive chemicals and in about 1805 produced a permanent photographic image of a leaf placed directly on top of a sheet of light-sensitised paper and exposed to sunlight. The first permanent photograph whose subject was not in contact with the light-sensitive surface was made in 1826 by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. Niépce died young and many of his ideas were later taken up by Louis Daguerre, who made a great fortune from his 'Daguerreotype' process but did not acknowledge Niépce's contributions, with the result that it is often Daguerre and not Niépce who is today credited as the real inventor of photography.

Revolutionary though they were, the early photographic methods required extremely long exposures, making them hopelessly impractical for photographing astronomical subjects, except the Sun and Moon. The first practical method for astrophotography was the wet collodion process, invented by Frederick Scott Archer and first exploited for astronomy by the printing magnate Warren De La Rue. De La Rue's photographs of the 1860 eclipse provided clinching evidence that prominences are part of the Sun and do not belong to the Moon, as some had previously supposed.

Another important, but nowadays little-known, early pioneer of photography was Mary Rosse, wife of Lord Rosse, the discoverer of spiral nebulae. Mary Rosse set up an elaborate darkroom at Birr Castle and it was thanks to her excellent photographs of her husband's 72-inch telescope that the recent restoration of the great instrument was possible.

Wet collodion was still very inconvenient for the very long exposures needed to record deep-sky objects. This problem was solved in the 1870s by William Abney, who invented the 'dry plate'. A key ingredient of the dry plate's chemical process was stale beer! Abney also invented infrared photography.

The second speaker was Mike Leggett, who gave a talk on 'Bryan Donkin FRS: Engineer, Industrialist, Astronomer'. Bryan Donkin was born in Northumberland in 1768, the son of a land agent and surveyor. His father was a friend of the industrialist

John Smeaton, who arranged an apprenticeship for him with the millwright John Hall in 1792. In 1803 Donkin founded his own company, Bryan Donkin & Co., which continues to this day. His nephew W F Donkin, became Savilian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford.

Donkin was instrumental in founding the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1818. He was also a founder member of the Royal Astronomical Society (initially known as the Astronomical Society of London) in 1820. He was an early member of the RAS Council and belonged to its prestigious Dining Club from 1823 to 1849. He was proposed for Fellowship of the Royal Society by figures of the calibre of George Airy, Francis Baily and Richard Sheepshanks, from personal knowledge.

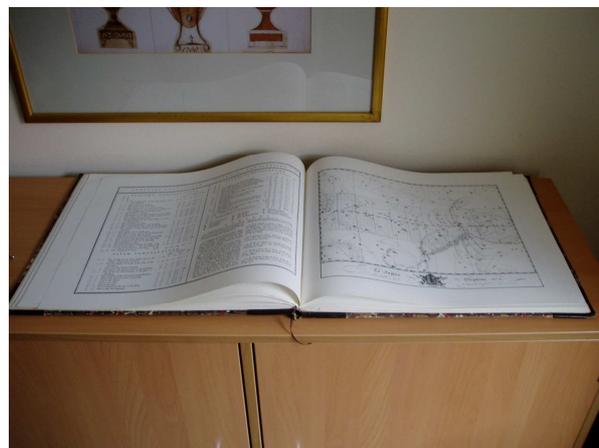
Historians vary in their assessment of Donkin's astronomical interests. He is best known to astronomers for his instrumentation: a 'dividing engine' for making accurate measuring circles on astronomical instruments and a 'spring level' for aligning transit instruments. From 1804 Donkin collaborated with famed telescope maker Edward Troughton, whose firm became Troughton & Simms in 1826. It is difficult to identify what Troughton instruments Donkin's company was involved with, but we do know that Troughton sub-contracted the making of accurate castings for instruments to specialist engineers, Donkin among them.

In 1807 Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne convinced the Royal Observatory's Board of Visitors of the need for better instruments. This led to the making of a mural circle for transit observations. Large parts of this were cast at Donkin's works at Bermondsey. The mural circle remained in use until 1850. Donkin also helped to make parts of the mount for James South's ill-fated 11 3/4-inch refractor, and he was involved with making 'difference engines', the programmable calculating machines designed by Charles Babbage.

During the lunch break, participants had the opportunity to go on a guided tour of Soho House. There was also an impressive display of exhibits contributed by John Armitage, Joe Jaworski, Bill Barton, Wayne Orchiston and Heather Harris, as well as a facsimile reproduction of the remarkable *Uranographia Britannica* star atlas by eighteenth-century astronomer John Bevis. The equally remarkable story of how this great work was forgotten and then rediscovered was the subject of the first of the afternoon lectures. This was presented by one of the discoverers, Kevin Kilburn of Manchester Astronomical Society, who brought along the facsimile version on show at the meeting.

In November 1997 Kevin Kilburn was trying to observe a lunar occultation of Saturn at Manchester AS's Godlee Observatory. Frustrated by cloud, Kevin went to the library below the observatory and found fellow Society members Tony Cross and Mike Oates reading an old star atlas that they had found in the

library. The title page showed that it was a rare book: an original set of bound plates from the unpublished *Uranographia Britannica*. Further research discovered that it was the best copy in existence in the world, with a value of about £30,000.



**Above:** Facsimile of John Bevis's *Uranographia Britannica* on display at the Historical Section meeting in Soho House. Image by Mike Frost.

John Bevis was born in Salisbury in 1695 and studied medicine at Oxford. A passionate and skilled amateur astronomer, Bevis compiled his great star atlas in about 1745-49. In 1748 it was proposed to publish the *Uranographia* by subscription, to which a number of notable figures signed up, among them the Astronomer Royal, James Bradley. But then, in 1750, tragedy struck when the publisher was declared bankrupt and the printing plates for the *Uranographia* were seized by the Courts of Chancery. The atlas was never published during Bevis's lifetime.

In 1785, Bevis's executor died and in his library were three copies of the *Uranographia*. The following year, copies made from this were sold cheaply under the title *Atlas Celeste*, with the author's name kept anonymous. It was one of these copies that was discovered in the Godlee Observatory library in 1997. The atlas is remarkably detailed, showing the positions of approximately 6,000 stars to magnitude 8 (well beyond the naked-eye limit), some past novae and supernovae and 8 nebulae. The atlas's description of Tycho's supernova of 1572 is accurate enough for modern astronomers to estimate it as having been a type IIp event.

The next talk was given by Stuart Williams on 'William Henry Robinson: From Red Books to the Red Planet'. William Henry Robinson was a noted publisher, editor and amateur astronomer who made major contributions to the already very active cultural life of Walsall, Staffordshire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Robinson was born in 1847, the son of a printer and newspaper owner. William took over the family business at the age of 21, after the death of his father.

His interest in astronomy was inspired by the appearance of Donati's comet in 1858. He was proposed as a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1899 and was a BAA member from 1896 to 1915. In 1901 he published a book, *Life in Other Worlds*, which considered the possibilities of extraterrestrial intelligence.

Robinson was a prime mover in the Walsall Literary Institute, founded in 1884. Literary institutes such as this flourished in many English provincial towns in the Victorian era and the Walsall one was highly successful. It brought to the town big names such as Charles Dickens and also Sir Robert Ball, an astronomer who is sometimes called 'the Victorian Patrick Moore' because of his many popular books and lectures on astronomy. Robinson himself had some important connections, among them Alfred Adolphus Cole, founder of the Walsall Science and Art Institute, the magnificent building for which survives today as Walsall College; and H L Aldis, a pioneer in the design of photographic lenses who designed a 360-degree submarine telescope.

After tea, Dr Allan Chapman of Wadham College, Oxford provided a 'grand finale' to the day with a talk bearing the title: 'James Nasmyth: Astronomer of Fire'. Dr Chapman began by remarking that James Nasmyth was in the tradition of Matthew Boulton, in whose former home this meeting was being held: an industrialist-turned-amateur astronomer.

Nasmyth's background was privileged, but his family still had to earn their money. His father was a professional landscape painter in Edinburgh and had many scientific friends, including the Scottish physicist David Brewster. Young James Nasmyth was educated at a grammar school in Edinburgh and then Edinburgh University. Nasmyth showed technical inclinations from a very early age and the Scottish university system encouraged this, because it was more scientifically-oriented than the English universities were at the time. From early on he also showed commercial instincts, selling model steam engines when at school. His imagination was fired by the idea of casting metal and with his parents' permission he was melting metal in his bedroom at the age of 12!

After graduation, Nasmyth served an apprenticeship from 1825 with the London engineering firm of Maudsley and Field. The autumn of 1830 saw the opening of the Liverpool-Manchester railway, the first ever passenger railway. Nasmyth was amazed by the new technology and noticed that at a place called Patrickcroft the railway, a river and a canal all intersected. He thought that this would be a good place to start an engineering works for building steam engines. This led to him building the 'Patrickcroft Foundries'. An important early customer was one Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who ordered from Patrickcroft twenty broad gauge locomotives for his Great Western Railway. The completed engines were brought by water from Patrickcroft to Liverpool, and

thence to Bristol, where they were put on the railway lines.

In 1839, Brunel built the steamship *SS Great Britain*, which needed a paddle shaft in order to operate. The need for a device which would hammer out the metal very quickly led to Nasmyth, along with a colleague, inventing the steam hammer, a device which made him a huge fortune.

Nasmyth had been interested in astronomy since his youth and now, having made his fortune, he was able to spend more time on this and also on telescope engineering. Rejecting the wooden tubes of the era in favour of precision metal parts, Nasmyth made himself a superb 13-inch Newtonian. Its 'Nasmyth' design involves a third mirror in the tube; this reflects the light out of the tube through the altitude trunnion, enabling the observer to look through the eyepiece without changing his or her own position, as would be the case with a conventional Newtonian, thus greatly enhancing the observer's comfort. Nasmyth's prototype model was driven by a railway locomotive with metal teeth.

The Moon had been a pet subject for Nasmyth since his boyhood and he became famous for making plaster models of features on the Moon and then photographing them to create realistic lunar landscapes.

In 1841 the Swiss geologist Louis Agassiz proposed that modern Switzerland had been carved by glaciers millions of years ago and Nasmyth wondered if a similar 'Ice Age' had happened in his native Scotland. He wondered if the Sun's output of heat might therefore be variable, and this led him to making a serious study of the Sun. Through observing the Sun at high magnification he discovered that the solar surface has a finely textured appearance – the solar granulation.

Mike Frost concluded the meeting by thanking all the speakers and our hosts at Soho House who had made the day such a success.

*A fuller version of this report is due to appear in a forthcoming issue of the BAA Journal.*

## **A W Roberts – A request for information**

*From Keith Snedegar*

'Dear Mike,

I'm working on a biography of Alexander William Roberts (1857-1938), a Scottish-South African variable star observer, and, I believe, a founder member of the BAA. Would any members of the Historical Section have a related interest? I'm really looking for someone who might be willing to peruse my manuscript and

provide some helpful comments, but I'd welcome any sort of exchange.

With hopeful regards,

Keith'

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## An Eclipse Photo from 1871 – A request for information

*From Paul Plumb*

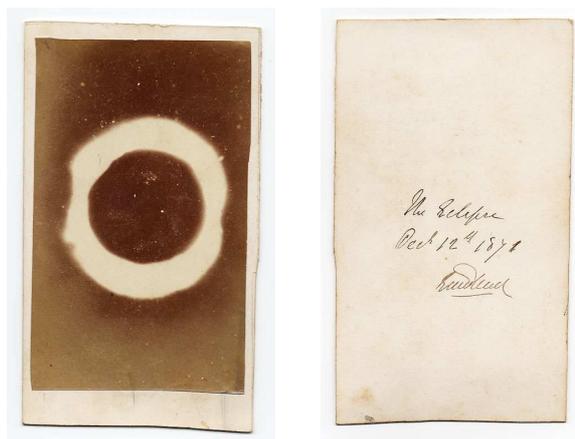
'Hello Mike,

I am a collector & part-time dealer in Victorian photographs. I have just acquired a carte de visite format photograph depicting a solar eclipse, which occurred [*sic*] on 12th December 1871. I know the first Daguerreotype photo of a solar eclipse was made in 1851, but can find no online references to the first cdv style picture. Since there is no photographer's logo or attribution, this is probably an early amateur effort taken somewhere along the eclipse track, most probably in India. I don't know if this image would have any scientific value or be of any historical significance per se, but I'd be grateful to hear your thoughts. As a collector of many years experience, I have never come across anything like it before, so I am quite sure it must be a rarity, at least! Many thanks for your time.

Kind regards,

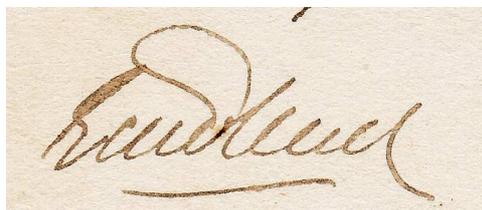
Paul Plumb'  
[man-of-kent@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:man-of-kent@tiscali.co.uk)

In subsequent correspondence with the Director, Paul tells us he has identified a possible candidate for the photographer. His name was William Henry Coaker, he was 27 in 1871 and he served with the Royal Engineers in India. Other serving officers in the Royal Engineers may also be candidates.



**Above:** Recto (left) and verso (right) sides of the 1871 eclipse photograph acquired by Paul Plumb.

**Below:** Close-up of the unidentified part of the inscription on the verso.



## O C Hastings – A Request for information

*From Peter Broughton*

'Dear Mike,

At the suggestion of Storm Dunlop, I'm contacting you and some others in the hope that one or more of you may be able to help me.

I'm writing a short article for the October Journal of the RASC about O.C. Hastings (1846 – 1912) who reportedly built the first astronomical observatory in British Columbia.

He joined the British Astronomical Association in 1893, and apparently maintained his membership there for at least ten years. In November, 1902, Hastings sent three lantern slides to the BAA showing his observatory and the telescope with its attached spectroscope. In the accompanying letter he explained that the telescope had an objective lens 10.8 cm in diameter and 1.8 m focal and the grating in the spectroscope was ruled with 5600 lines per cm. The slides were shown at a meeting of the association on 28 January 1903. [Hastings proposed and elected to membership in the BAA (JBAA 3 (1893), 242 and 286). Hastings letter and presentation of slides to the BAA (JBAA 13 (1903), 157 and 170).]

I would very much like to know if the slides survive and if they could be scanned and published, especially

the one showing the telescope and attachments. ... In the unlikely event that there's anything further about Hastings' activity in the BAA (beyond what was published in the Journal) I would of course be delighted to learn about it.

Any assistance you can provide will be greatly appreciated,

With sincere thanks,

Peter Broughton  
(Toronto)

## And also...

David Smith of Highgate School (djs@highgate.demon.co.uk), is looking for any information on two people: David Thomas Smith (no relation), a painter and amateur astronomer in the second half of the twentieth century, who had an observatory on the top floor of his house in Eton Road, Primrose Hill; and Evan Gwyn Williams (1905-1940), a Welshman who was on the staff at Mount Wilson Observatory, California.

## Nathaniel Nye

Mike Frost

(All dates are old style)

I'd like to tell you about some research I've carried out over the last few years, investigating the possibility that, in addition to Jeremiah Horrocks and William Crabtree, there might have been a third observer of the 1639 transit of Venus. My starting point was the letter which Jeremiah Horrocks sent to William Crabtree in November 1639, alerting him to the possibility that there might be a transit of Venus at the next conjunction of the planet in December of that year.

*'If this letter should arrive sufficiently early, I beg you will apprise Mr. Foster of the conjunction [transit of Venus], as, in doing so, I am sure you would afford him the greatest pleasure.'*

When I first read this, I wondered who Mr. Foster might be. Was it possible that Crabtree had managed to pass on the alert to him? If Crabtree had sent the message on, had it arrived in time? If so, had Foster acted on it? And if so, had he seen anything?

Some research turned up some fascinating facts. 'Mr. Foster' turned out to be Samuel Foster (c.1600-1652), Gresham Professor of Astronomy, and I discovered that I was in a good position to research the life of Samuel Foster. Like Jeremiah Horrocks and myself, Foster was a graduate of Emmanuel College in Cambridge, and the college librarians and archivists

there were only too ready to help me with my researches. Moreover, during the 1630s Foster was living in the city of Coventry, which is just down the road from where I live today. Indeed, when I started my researches I was the chairman of the Coventry and Warwickshire Astronomical Society.

Samuel Foster was from a Midlands family, having siblings who lived in Coventry and Northampton (we're not sure where he was born). After he completed his studies he became an usher (assistant teacher) at the King Henry VIII Grammar School in Coventry and wrote treatises on surveying and Sun dialling. In 1636 he became Gresham Professor in London, but was forced to resign the post after six months because his Puritan beliefs put him at risk of Archbishop Laud's purges; he returned to Coventry. In December 1638 he made a detailed record of a lunar eclipse observed from New House, Coventry, in the company of his friends John Twysden and John Palmer, also accomplished astronomers.

On Archbishop Laud's demise Foster once again became Gresham Professor of Astronomy in 1641, remaining in the post for the rest of his life. He lectured extensively on Sun dialling and after his death a number of works were published detailing these lectures. The 1640s, of course, were the time of the English Civil War, but London and Gresham College remained relatively untouched by events elsewhere. Instead, Foster's rooms became a meeting place for men of science. At the end of the Civil War, these meetings continued in Oxford, where they became the starting point for the Royal Society. Alas, unlike many of his friends from London, Foster did not become a founder member of the Royal Society, because he died in 1652, in his early 50s.

You can see that Foster was an interesting character and a man of some accomplishments. But did he see the 1639 transit of Venus? I have spent a lot of time reading through the records of Foster's observations, preserved after his death by his brother Walter and by his friend John Twysden. I have also read through the published works and observations of John Twysden and John Palmer. None of them mention the transit. Moreover, one of Foster's acquaintances at Gresham was John Wallis, also of Emmanuel College, who eventually published Horrocks's account of the transit. Surely Wallis, who knew both Horrocks and Foster, would have mentioned in his introduction that Foster or his friends had observed the 1639 transit, if they had actually done so.

That, you might think, would be the end of the story. But there was another figure, on the edge of Samuel Foster's circle, who just wouldn't go away.

When Samuel Foster, John Twysden and John Palmer observed the lunar eclipse from Coventry in December 1638, there was another astronomer living in the city. His name was Nathaniel Nye and he might even have attended the eclipse party at New House, although as

he was only around 15 years of age he would not have played a central role. Nye certainly observed the solar eclipse of July 1639, because he recorded accurate timings and magnitude from Coventry.

Nathaniel Nye is most famous for his 1652 manual, *The Art of Gunnery*, a hands-on guide to gunnery during the English Civil War, in which he describes himself as '*The Master Gunner of the City of Worcester*' and talks about gunnery experiments in Deritend, Birmingham, during the early days of the hostilities. *The Art of Gunnery* is much prized by military historians as a guide to what practical soldiering was like during this conflict.

From an astronomical point of view, of more interest are three almanacs which Nye wrote for the '*Fair and populous city of Bermicham* [Birmingham]' for the years of 1642, 1643 and 1645. Almanacs were popular publications during the 17th century, usually containing astronomical and calendrical information such as dates of new Moons, Easter and other moveable feasts, and practical information on topics such as husbandry. In the introduction to these almanacs Nye describes himself as a '*mathematical and astronomical practitioner of Coventry*'.

There is little of astronomical interest in the 1642 almanack, and the 1645 almanack is concerned mainly with the progress of the Civil War. Of far more interest is the 1643 almanack. This contains a section entitled '*Observations by me and others of my friends*'. Nye tells us that:-

*'Because those that hath astronomical tables may calculate the places of the Planets for these times ... it cannot be amisse to set down such observations which I have faithfully observed...'* [my emphasis]. There follow routine observations of Jupiter and the Moon, an accurate account of the solar eclipse of June 1639. And then...

*'1639 upon the 23 of Novem Venus came just under the Sun at 3 a'clock and 30 min; & continued upon the Sun half an hour the true place of the Sun; Venus were in [symbol for Sagittarius] 10 deg; and 19 min.'*

This is the transit of Venus!

So was Nathaniel Nye, at the age of only 16, another observer of the 1639 transit of Venus? I'd love to be able to tell you that he was, but there are problems. Most seriously, he got the date wrong! The transit occurred on November 24th, not the 23rd. The timings are suspicious at first glance, as Horrocks first noted Venus on the Sun at 3:15 PM – but remember that timings for both astronomers would be local, as there was no common time in England in 1639. Nonetheless, the description is curious; Nye implies that Venus was visible on the solar disk for only half an hour, but in fact the Sun set with Venus still in transit.

If Nye really had seen the transit, why did he wait until late 1642 before telling anyone about it? There are possible answers – perhaps the youthful Nye saw the 1639 transit but didn't realise what he had seen until 3 years later – but I suspect that the solution is more prosaic. I suspect that Nye never saw the transit, and is reproducing someone else's observations. After all, despite saying that the transit is amongst '*observations which I have faithfully observed*', he also tells us that the observations are by '*me and others of my friends*'. And perhaps Nye means 'friends' in the Facebook sense – not necessarily someone he ever met. It's my guess that Nathaniel Nye had got wind of Jeremiah Horrocks's unpublished transit observations and was trying to pass them off as his own.

This is still of some interest. Jeremiah Horrocks's observations, written up as *Venus in Sole Visa* during 1640, went unpublished for twenty years because of Horrocks's sudden death in January 1641. So Nye's garbled account is the earliest known published record of a transit of Venus. *Venus in Sole Visa* circulated widely in the north of England and beyond during the 1640s. Eventually a copy ended up in the hands of Johannes Hevelius in Danzig, Poland, who appended it to his own account of a transit of Mercury in 1660. When this account reached the Royal Society in London, *Venus in Sole Visa* was then published in English for the first time. In the introduction to this work, John Wallis, who had known Horrocks as a student, says:-

*'I cannot help being displeased that this valuable observation, purchasable by no money, elegantly described, and prepared for the press, should have laid hid for two-and-twenty year.'*

This might be taken as an admission that Horrocks's work had almost been lost to science, but Nye's almanack allows a different interpretation. I think rather that Horrocks's observations were in fact well known to astronomers across England, and that Wallis was simply apologising for their tardy publication. It might have taken twenty years to publish Horrocks's transit observations, but for most of that time, Nye's almanack suggests, they were common knowledge on the streets of Birmingham!

[This article is based on the following papers:](#)

'Some transit tales from history', M. A. Frost, *J. Br. Astron. Assoc.*, 115, 3, pp. 132-137 (June 2005)

'Samuel Foster and His Circle', M. A. Frost, *The Antiquarian Astronomer*, Vol. 3, pp. 31-48 (Dec 2006)

'John Twysden and John Palmer: Two Northamptonshire Astronomers', M. A. Frost, *The Antiquarian Astronomer*, Vol. 4, pp. 41-55 (Jan 2008)

## SHA Autumn Conference 2012

The 2012 Autumn Conference of the Society for the History of Astronomy will be held on Saturday 27 October at the Birmingham & Midland Institute, Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS. The meeting is open to non-members of the SHA. A summary of the programme is as follows:-

- 09:30 Registration
- 10:00 Welcome and Introduction
- 10:05 Kevin Kilburn:  
Jeremiah Horrocks's non-observation of the Venus Transit in 1639 from Carr House
- 10:40 Stuart Williams:  
Some Walsall Astronomers in History
- 11:30 Gerard Gilligan:  
The Bidston Observatory in Merseyside – A History
- 12:30 Lunch
- 13:30 2012 Annual General Meeting
- 14:45 Anthony Kinder:  
BAA Roll of Members Project
- 15:20 Afternoon refreshments
- 15:40 Allan Chapman:  
Hevelius: Grand Amateur and Master Brewer
- 16:40 Concluding remarks
- 16:45 Close

Admission costs £10 per person; booking in advance would be appreciated. Please send your cheque, made payable to 'Society for the History of Astronomy', to the SHA Treasurer:-

Dr Roger Hutchins  
1D Fox Furlong  
Littlemore  
Oxford  
OX4 4XD

Alternatively, please e-mail Roger Hutchins at [roger.hutchins@magd.oxon.org](mailto:roger.hutchins@magd.oxon.org) to register and then pay on the day.

For updates, please check the SHA website:  
<http://www.shastro.org.uk>.

## Further dates for your diary

### 24-29 September 2012 [SEAC 2012: Ancient Cosmologies and Modern Prophets](#)

Annual meeting of the Société Européenne pour l'Astronomie dans la Culture (SEAC). Held in Ljubljana, Slovenia. See: <http://seac2012.zrc-sazu.si>.

### 28 September – 2 October 2012 [The 21st Convention of the Antique Telescope Society](#)

at the Hamburg Observatory, Germany, followed by a tour of German observatories. See: <http://www.webari.com/oldscope/atpages/conventn.htm>

**5 November 2012** SHA Library Open Day, Birmingham & Midland Institute, Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS. The SHA Library will be open from 11:00am to 3:30pm.

**5-7 April 2013** BAA Historical Section meeting, Sparsholt College, near Winchester, Hampshire – part of BAA Winchester Weekend. Further details to be announced.