

### Obituary

## Alan Pennell Lenham, 1930–1996

The son of a GWR engine driver, Alan Lenham was born in December 1930 in the railway town of Swindon, and was to spend most of his life there. He enjoyed academic success at grammar school, where he was also introduced to cricket, his favourite

cloud' of 1956, and at the next opposition he made a superb drawing with the McDonald 82-inch of what would later be called the Mariner Valley region, described in the *Journal* (74, 128) and reproduced again here. Upon returning to England and the

RMCS in 1959, Lenham did little further observational work until the 1980s.

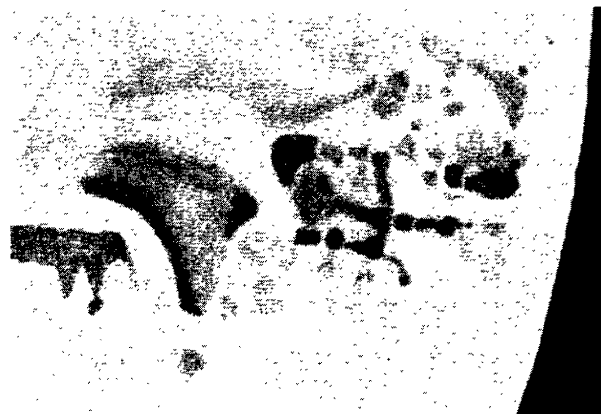
As a Senior Scientific Officer he carried out research into the optical constants of metals, and atmospheric transmission, publishing several papers in the *Journal of the Optical Society of America*. Alan Lenham was an experimental physicist of the old school; there was no antiseptic spaciousness to his lab.

Electronic amplifiers were usually constructed in tobacco tins with co-ax cables soldered on. All this reflected the immediate post-war technology and its extensive use of ex-service equipment: but it had the advantage that apparatus could be modified easily and cheaply. The results Alan obtained were always comprehensive, accurate and inexpensive. For many years he was the Trade Union representative for the scientific sector of the MoD in the Institute of Professional Civil Servants. The privatisation of the RMCS in 1984 initiated his early retirement.

Finding time on his hands, and using an odd-looking portable but functional 20cm reflector, he once more supported the BAA Mars and Saturn sections. His reports sometimes contained amusing (but always accurate) comments, one of which went something like: 'Mars: Seeing poor – low over fish and chip shop!' Clearly these comments pointed to a jovial character – and character by all accounts he was. The writer is sorry that he knew him only through his letters and phone calls. But astronomy was only one of Alan's interests. He was a devoted cricketer, described as a slow off-break spin bowler, and a prolific wicket taker. A past Chairman of Swindon Cricket Club, he wrote its official history in retirement. He was also interested in the history of the railways and of his own family. His father had been a pilot during World War One, and Alan also was interested in aviation.

Much of Alan's work remains unpublished, and it is sad that he did not live to learn how valuable his Mars observations have proven to the current writer in his martian dust storm catalogue. He died suddenly of a heart condition on 1996 August 18, having remained a lifelong bachelor. I thank John Gould for much background information that has enabled this short appreciation to be written.

**Richard McKim**



Solis Lacus and Sinus Meridiani, with Valles Marineris, drawn by Alan Lenham with the 82-inch reflector at the McDonald Observatory. 1958 November 2, 0600–0700 UT, magnification  $\times 900$ .

sport. Taking up astronomy during the war-time blackout, by the summer of 1946 Alan and his cousin John Gould had raised the £3 needed to buy a 200-year old four inch (10cm) Gregorian: their first serious telescope.

Alan joined the BAA in 1948, but was soon doing his National Service at the RAF radar station on Bulbarrow Hill, deep in the heart of the Dorset countryside. He visited the then Saturn Section Director Dr A. F. O'D. Alexander at his home in nearby Dorchester, and sent him frequent letters and sketches made with his 3 inch (7.5cm) reflector. The Mars Section Director praised his enthusiastic efforts with a small aperture, and Lenham also observed the Moon and Jupiter. Starting with a paper about the mapping of Mare Humorum, Lenham wrote several short papers about lunar topography. He was also interested in the question of long-term changes in planetary atmospheres (*Journal*, 64, 120, 122; 63, 39, 140, 143; 74, 203; 76, 186, 258). He also published in the *Irish Astronomical Journal*.

After demob he returned to work in the physics department of the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham. In 1956, however, he accepted the opportunity to work for Dr Gerald Kuiper (as a Research Assistant) at the Yerkes and McDonald Observatories: his notebooks show that he lost no chance to observe whichever planet was visible. He was an independent discoverer of the martian 'great yellow



The staff at the Yerkes Observatory circa 1957. Lenham is 5th from the right of the second row. In the front row can be recognised van Biesbroeck, Dollfus and Kuiper. Ewan Whitaker stands behind and to the right of Lenham.

## The BAA Winchester Weekend, 1996 March 29–31

The Winchester weekend reached its 30th year in 1996 and as usual had something for everyone. Not only was there a wide range of talks, displays and trade stands but Alan Dowdell had also laid on a naked-eye comet specially to mark his last year as organiser. (Not to be outdone Richard Flux has ordered an even brighter comet to mark his first year as organiser in 1997...)

The weekend's events started on Friday night with a talk by Bernard Abrams. A difficult assignment as people are tired after a week at work and travelling, but Bernard held everyone's attention with a dazzling array of astronomical photos. It was very much a personal journey through the subject giving examples from those people who had most influenced him, starting with Roger Pennell in the early 1970s. After the talk most people adjourned to the bar or went out to observe Comet Hyakutake which was still quite well up in the north-west. Although the college itself is very well lit (or should that be poorly lit?), it was possible to see the comet quite well and even image it (see for example <http://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~ipswich/hyakutake.html>).

The next day everyone was refreshed and after a college breakfast we all headed over to the lecture theatre. The first talk of the day was a joint effort by Ann Davies, David Boyd and Nicky Fleet of Newbury AS who described their efforts to bring astronomy to the general public and especially children. All of us in astronomical societies have a responsibility to promote and popularise our subject and Newbury have made a tremendous contribution in their area. The talk gave a fascinating insight into organising events for the public and how their particular projects have evolved over the years. If you are thinking of arranging such events for the first time then the Newbury group are the people to talk to; they have a wealth of practical experience you could benefit from.

After coffee Pam Spence gave a cookery lesson. Well OK, it was no ordinary cooking class. Pam explained that although the ingredients were simple, just gas and dust, the oven had to be very, very hot and the cooking time was billions of years. The end result, the solar system we live in, is a consequence of this amazing set of conditions and the story of how it was formed would be hard to believe if the evidence were not all around us.

At this point in my notes I have: bar ... lunch ... bar, which sums up the preparation for the afternoon's session, begun by Norman Walker. This started with a comparison of eye, film, CCDs etc for astronomical observation and described the types of work that could be done by amateurs and professionals alike. Areas covered included astrometry, photometry and spectroscopy,

all of which led on to an interesting and controversial theory to end with. It was argued that there is a close link between the orbital periods, and resonances, of the planets and the numbers of sunspots visible at any time. If this is the case could it not also work for other stars? If so then observing spot activity on other stars (not necessarily by direct imaging) could help detect planetary systems around those stars.

With this thought-provoking idea fresh in our minds we were let loose for the rest of the afternoon either to explore Winchester or wander around the displays and trade stands. The displays were of a very high standard and ranged from solar eclipse photos from India, through variable star observations and CCD images of galaxies, to up-to-the-minute photos of Hyakutake. Amongst the trade stands were Rosemary Naylor's excellent book stall, BAA and *The Astronomer* displays and information on the Campaign for Dark Skies, CfDS.

After looking round Winchester and bar ... dinner ... bar, it was back to the lecture theatre. John Wall started Saturday evening with some reminiscences of 30 years of Winchester, beginning in 1967 when 50 people attended paying just £4 10s each for the whole weekend. Then after a presentation by the President to Alan Dowdell to say thankyou for all his years as organiser, the main speaker for the evening, Iain Nicolson, was introduced to give the Alfred Curtis Memorial Lecture. The lecture presented our current understanding of the universe and cosmology and Dr Nicolson described some proposed experiments to look at the cosmic background radiation. By studying this radiation from the ground and from space it will be possible to pin down the value of Hubble's Constant and the density of the universe to high precision, eliminating all but a very few possible models for our universe. A fascinating lecture and the prospects of some dramatic breakthroughs in the next few years.

It was then a case of: bar ... comet ... bar, followed by spontaneous get-togethers in peoples' rooms and more celebrations of Alan's last Winchester as organiser.

Sunday mornings can be very hard work for those folks who stayed up too long on Saturday night but most people managed to get to the first talk on time. Once there it was Gordon Taylor's task to keep everyone awake which he did with a wide ranging talk. He described, amongst other things, observing geostationary satellites, micrometer techniques and astronomical software available from the BAA. After a welcome tea break David Strange finished off the scheduled talks by describing some of his work with CCDs and imaging as well as some results from the Hubble

Space Telescope and the European Southern Observatory.

The traditional group photo was taken just before lunch, at which point the organised weekend was over. However, most people stay for Sunday afternoon which is open to anyone to present their photos, travelogues and observations or report on projects they are involved with. The session was kicked off by John Wall who described an even bigger telescope than he did last year. John is now up to a 42-inch mirror and the telescopes are becoming so large that they will soon need to have red lights on them to warn aircraft! Mike Maunder followed with some stunning astrophotos taken with a relatively inexpensive Russian large format camera. Shots of the 1995 India solar eclipse and comet Hyakutake were breathtaking. Other speakers during the afternoon including Bob Mizon, Larry Linten, David Briggs and Roger Pickard, all with impressive results from their own work.

If I had to sum up Winchester in just one word, rather than 1100, I would say... inspiring. Experiencing other people's enthusiasm and seeing what is possible with amateur equipment always sends me away with new ideas and new projects in mind. If you have not been to a Winchester weekend, it's well worth experiencing it once and it may be the first of many visits. Although it's not £4 10s any more, it is still good value for the chance to see first hand what is going on now in amateur astronomy.

The next Winchester weekend is 1997 April 4–6: contact the BAA office for details.

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