



Mars Section

Percy Mayow Ryves and Mars

The 2018 perihelic opposition of Mars will not be good for UK observers, for the planet's declination will be more than 25° south. The opposition year 1922 was similar, making it the one of the worst observed in the history of the BAA. However Percy Mayow Ryves (Figure 1) took the optical parts of a $10\frac{1}{4}$ -inch (260mm) reflector to Tenerife, where from an elevation of around 7,700ft (2,350m), located upon dry volcanic ash and above the cumulus clouds, he was able to make good observations.¹

I observed Comet P/Halley² and Mars from Tenerife in 1986 with my 216mm reflector. The seeing could be quite unsteady upon the lower slopes of Mount Teide (Figure 2), just as Ryves found, but the sky was spectacularly transparent. P. M. Ryves (1881–1956), had a paternal uncle, E. W. D. Ryves,³ who was a keen amateur astronomer. Percy developed his astronomical interests while still at school in the 1890s,⁴ although throughout his life his main interest was not Mars, but variable stars.

When I took over as Mars coordinator in 1980, I acquired a large collection of unpublished past records. These included two little pocketbooks by Ryves, for 1922–1924. He wrote a summary of his work for Dr W. H. Steavenson, sent c/o the British Consulate in Santa Cruz de Tenerife on 1923 Jun 17, together with a map drawn in an ink wash. This map was never published, perhaps because its creator expressed doubts about its artistic merit, but as it seems a fair representation



Figure 1. Years ago I spotted P. M. Ryves in the key to an RAS group photo at Jodrell Bank: *Observatory*, 69, No. 851, Plate 3 (1949). It was possible to borrow the original glass negative from the son of the photographer (M. A. Ellison), and to make this enlargement.



Figure 2. The peak of Mount Teide, Tenerife, photographed during an early morning flight to La Palma, 1986 April 8. *Richard McKim*.

of his drawings we reproduce it in Figure 3. Notice the unusual inclined form of *Solis Lacus* (confirmed by E. C. Slipher's photographs) and the breadth of the great *Nepenthes* curve. There is also the unusually prominent *Amenthes*. Compared to the present, *Cerberus* bordering *Elysium* appears massively wide, but that was indeed how it looked then. Ryves made 59 sketches, June 18–August 8.

Many European observers completely missed this opposition on account of the low latitude, and the BAA file contains reports by only nine observers. In 1924 Ryves used the same mirror from Zaragoza, in mainland Spain. He also had the use of the 16-inch refractor at Madrid Observatory. In the BAA records for 1922 there is a Spanish postcard of a professional observatory: see Figure 4. Could this have been from Madrid in 1924?

In the course of my dust storm research I went through all these old records, and at last much use of them was made.⁵ Ryves sent accounts of his observations to contemporary newspapers, as Martin Mobberley's biography illustrates, and to Prof W. H. Pickering, who published six of the 1922 drawings in the now-defunct American journal *Popular Astronomy*.⁶ Many years later, in connection with 'flashes' observed from the planet's surface, two of Ryves' 1922 drawings appeared in my Section report for 2001.⁷

After 1924, the only evidence we have of further Mars work by Ryves is a very fine drawing for 1941 September 16, made at Headley Observatory, four miles from where he was then living.⁸ In early 1941 the observatory's creator, the Revd T. E. R. Phillips (1868–1942), retired to nearby Walton on the Hill, but he commuted over by bus in the evenings. Phillips' logbook⁹ reveals that on October 1 Ryves was again present to help to get the clock drive of the 18-inch reflector working, so he presumably looked at Mars with Phillips under the excellent conditions prevailing that night. In 1942 September Ryves became Director of the Mars Section until his death in 1956.

Ryves had been using the Headley instruments since the Spanish Civil War forced his return from Spain, but a more local sort of trouble was to follow. The BAA Council Minutes of 1944 July 26 reported: 'Following the arrival of a flying bomb in the Rectory garden at Headley, some anxiety was expressed as to the safety of the



Figure 3. Map of Mars in 1922 drawn in an ink wash. P. M. Ryves, BAA Mars Section Archives. (South is uppermost in Figures 3 and 6.)

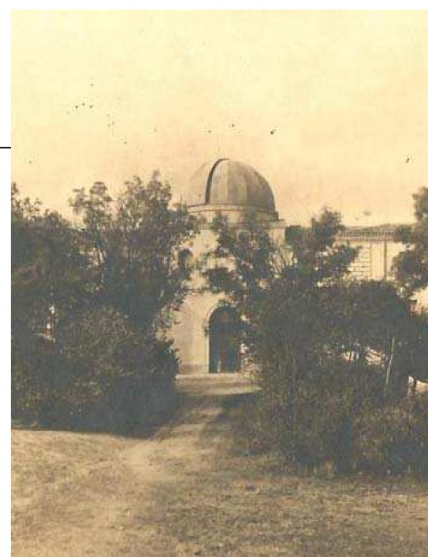


Figure 4. The anonymous Spanish observatory postcard. Can any reader identify it?

18" reflector.¹⁰ The telescopes had been stripped of their coverings by the fall of a flying bomb in the Rectory garden. Arriving at Headley only a day after the bomb, Dr R. L. Waterfield was able to arrange for the safety of the instruments (including his own 6-inch refractor also housed at Headley). Sadly, as he explained in a note in his logbook,¹¹ the Rectory had been largely demolished by the same bomb.

Council asked Ryves to pack the optics and store them in the cellar of the Vicarage of the Revd Rees Wright, but at the September Council when Ryves had made no progress with making a box, it was agreed that as the immediate danger was over, they could be left where they stood.¹⁰ The instruments were removed after the War, and with no handy observatory left, Ryves moved to London. His final years were spent in High Wycombe.

Ryves devoted much time to preparing BAA talks, and from 1952 onwards in editing and publishing a now unknown magazine entitled *Observation* (Figure 5).¹² Around 1950 he offered to edit the large volume of unpublished variable star material bequeathed to the RAS by A. Stanley Williams, but correspondence shows that he dropped the project when he realised it would be without payment.¹³ Ryves brought out a Mars *Memoir* for the favourable 1941 opposition,⁸ but the text was largely the work of Dr A. F. O'D. Alexander and the chart by A. W. Wilkinson. The manuscript had been delivered to Council on 1946 June 26 but it took five more years for Ryves to prepare all the illustrations and to get it into print, and some members of Council (including other Directors) became critical of his tendency to put things off.

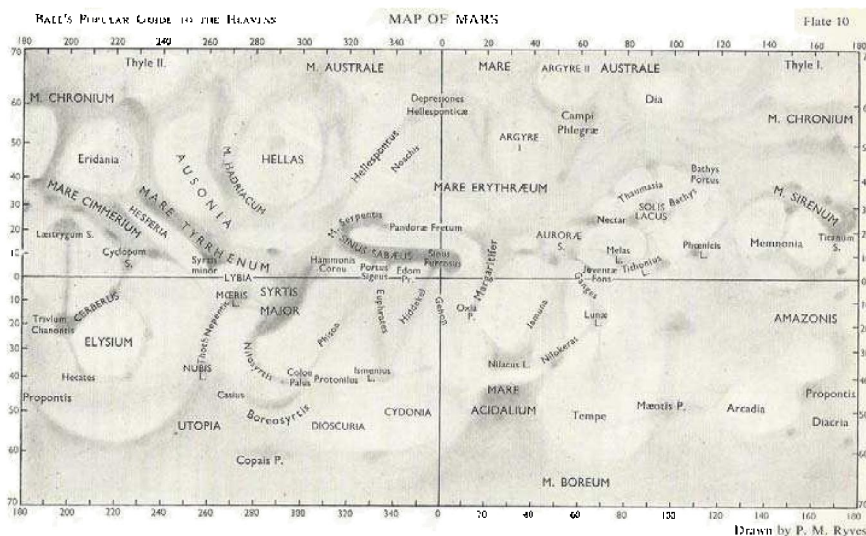
Ryves drew one more Mars map, which we show in Figure 6: actually a very fine general chart for the revised edition of Sir Robert Ball's *Atlas of Astronomy*.¹⁴

Percy Ryves was a prolific and highly successful observer, but history has judged him a poor administrator.

Richard McKim, Director

References

- 1 M. P. Mobberley, *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, **127**(2), 82–97 (2017). Ryves gave a description of his Tenerife visit in his very finely written history of the Mars Section in H. L. Kelly (*ed.*), 'The



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