

DAVID JAMES REGINALD EDNEY

David James Reginald Edney, who was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1905, died on 1964 October 29 at the age of 89 years. He was born on 1875 September 22 and entered the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, as a Computer in the Time Department on 1891 August 10, after receiving his education at the Boreman Foundation, that prolific recruiting ground for Observatory staff from the earliest days until 1930. In 1934 the Royal Hospital School, with which the Boreman Foundation was associated, moved from Greenwich to Holbrook, and the supply of "Boreman Boys" to the Observatory ceased. An examination of the records shows that in the ten years 1889 to 1899, of 40 boys recruited as Computers, 26 were Boremans, 2 from the Royal Hospital School, 10 from the Roan School and 2 from elsewhere. This proportion was evidently maintained for many years. The curriculum of the school had a decidedly nautical bent, so much emphasis being placed on Astronomy, Navigation, with the requisite Spherical Trigonometry, as to foster the impression that the school was intended exclusively to prepare boys for entry to that venerable institution at the top of the hill, almost within hailing distance across the greensward of Greenwich Park. The Computers were paid £3 per month, with an annual increment of 5 shillings per month. They were encouraged to qualify for observing certificates entitling them to participate in the scheduled observing "duties" at the telescopes. A certificate for a photographic instrument earned an additional emolument of 5 shillings per month and a certificate for the Transit Circle or the Altazimuth 10 shillings per month.

Edney qualified for two certificates, one for the 13-inch Astrographic Telescope and one for the Airy Transit Circle. For a duty scheduled, a computer received ninepence "clear or cloudy". If observations were actually made the payment was a shilling for the first hour and an extra sixpence for each additional hour, for the photographic telescopes. In the case of the Transit Circle the extra sixpence was awarded if 50 or more stars were observed in Right Ascension and Zenith Distance. Many were the artifices used to make up the numbers to the required 50 on those occasions when cloud interfered with the observations after 48 or so had been observed. An observation of the occultation of a star by the Moon earned a shilling.

The Computers were "Temporary" and had to leave the Observatory on reaching the age of 23 years, just when they were becoming extremely useful members of the staff. They carried an ever increasing load of the work of the Observatory and had become, in the words of the Astronomer

Royal, the backbone of the observational work. Towards the end of the eighteen hundreds the staff consisted of the Astronomer Royal, 1 Chief Assistant, 5 Assistants, 5 Second-Class Assistants and 24 Computers. Christie had been pressing for some years for a re-organisation of the staffing arrangements. He reported to the Board of Visitors in 1894, "In view of the serious effects of changes in the staff of observers on the continuity of the Greenwich series of observations, it is very important that due consideration should be given to the scientific requirements in the organization of the staff, and a sufficient number of trained observers should be appointed to carry on the systematic observations of the various classes which have to be undertaken at the Observatory. As the limited numbers of the permanent staff do not adequately provide for this, and, as the present mode of appointment by the Civil Service Commissioners under open competition, does not ensure that the candidates are qualified as observers, a modification of the existing scheme appears to be required to secure the continued activity of the Observatory". The reorganization was sanctioned with the appointment of a second Chief Assistant, and the 5 second-class Assistants were to be replaced by 8 Established Computers, 2 to be of Higher Grade.

Edney obtained one of these new posts by being promoted to Established Computer on 1896 May 21. This method of filling the vacancies on the permanent staff by competitive examination from the Temporary Computers was continued for many years until the mid-nineteen thirties, and for many years all Heads of Departments were ex-computers. Edney assisted Nash in the Magnetic and Meteorological Department until 1904, then under Bryant until 1915, when he spent two years at the Hydrographic Department of the Admiralty. On returning to the Observatory in 1917 he spent two years in the Time Department, his first love.

He took charge of the Secretariat as Secretary and Cashier on 1919 February 20, but retained an interest in the astronomical side of the Observatory's work by continuing to perform one duty per week with the 26-inch refractor. He had always hoped to return to the scientific work and when Bryant died in 1923 he made application to be allowed to take charge of the Magnetic and Meteorological Department. However it was not to be, and he continued as Secretary until his retirement on 1936 July 18, 17 years in all.

Throughout his life Edney was a keen sportsman, playing hockey for the Royal Observatory Hockey Club in its early years. He supported the Blackheath Rugby Football Club well into his eighties, being such an enthusiastic supporter that the club presented him with a complimentary season ticket in recognition of his devotion.