

## Another Victorian lady astronomer

*From the Director of the Historical Section*

In her informative article on Elizabeth Brown,<sup>1</sup> Mary Creese says she was probably the only female astronomer in the country at the time to have her own observatory. I would like to beg to disagree. The nineteenth century, especially during the late Victorian period, was to see a burgeoning interest in astronomy amongst the female sex.

One example was Mary Ashley, who was born in Shirehampton, Gloucestershire, about 1843 and who died on 1903 March 28 in Bath. What in particular attracted me to her was that she lived in 16 New King Street, just a few houses away from Herschel's home, 19 New King Street. Her father was the Revd John Ashley, DD, and she had at least one sister (Kate) and brother (John, who emigrated to New South Wales and may have died before November 1896). From the little information I have so far been able to obtain, she appears to have had an independent income. Her active interest in astronomy dates from the 1870s–1880s as surviving observing notebooks on the Moon and Jupiter would indicate. These and some other items came to the library of the BAA (although when is as yet unknown) where they still exist. That she seems to have been held in some regard can be seen in the notice to her in A. Rebière's *Les Femmes dans la Sciences* (1897, second edition, Paris). Her notebook drawings of Jupiter (1880 July 21–1883 March 15) were made using a 3/4-inch and 4-inch Wray refractor. The observations appear in line pencil and either crayon or pastel. Some drawings have an accompanying narrative, while some show the Great Red Spot and the major satellites.

The lunar notebooks consisted of at least seven volumes, the contents of which are as follows:

1. This volume is missing.
2. 1878 July 3–1879 May 6 3/4-inch
3. 1879 May 29–1880 Aug 30 3/4-inch; from 1880 February 14, the 4-inch.
4. 1880 Sep 17–1881 Dec 1 4-inch.  
Sketches said to be in separate volume, missing?
5. 1881 Dec 2–1882 Jul 24 mainly 4-inch; sometimes 3/4-inch.
6. 1883 Jul 26–1884 Oct 8 4-inch.  
Sketches correspond to vol.2 and part of vol.3.
7. 1884 Oct 9–1885 Feb 17 4-inch.  
Sketches in volume 3.

Correspondence from herself has appeared in the following issues of the *Selenographical Journal*: III (1880 May 9, on Hyginus N); IV (1881 September 23, on the cleft near Hyginus D); V (1882 February 18, a note in connection with Mr Hutchings' and Mr Neison's Letters of the Rill near Hyginus D) as well as a letter to *The Observatory*

magazine (1(6) 277) on an eclipse of the Moon. It is possible that she also communicated to other publications (e.g. the *English Mechanic*), but this has not yet been discovered. She was a member of the Selenographical Society and of the Liverpool Astronomical Society (1884). From this it can be seen that it is very probable that she had her own observatory, as there is no mention of her using that of someone else. Although the BAA received donations from her estate (principally from her library), she does not seem to have been a member, as her name is not on the roll of members for the period 1890–1903.

Very little is known of Mary Ashley's career after the mid-1880s, and she appears to have ceased active astronomical work

from this time. A copy of her (beautifully written) last will and testament mentions various members of her family, including her brother and sister, and a cousin, who acted as executor. I would greatly appreciate it if any reader who has information on the family could contact me, especially from New South Wales. I would be glad to provide what little information I have, including a copy of the will.

**Anthony Kinder**

16 Atkinson House, Catesby Street, London SE17 1QU.

- 1 Creese M., 'Elizabeth Brown, Solar Astronomer', *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, **108**(4), 193–197 (1998)

## More sources of artificial light

*From Mr James Abbott*

The Campaign for Dark Skies carries out excellent work in trying to ensure that light pollution is checked, but I fear that some sources of artificial light are increasing beyond our influence. During a meteor watch on the evening of Perseid maximum night, 1998 August 12/13, I took the opportunity to make a count of all light sources that caught my attention, in addition to meteors. I have a fairly dark site, with no local streetlights. In one hour between nightfall and moonrise, I observed a modest 16 meteors. But in addition to some satellites and the occasional brief intrusion of a security light, I also observed no fewer than 60 aircraft.

With air transport likely to treble on the 1990 level by the year 2010, our skies are going to be increasingly blighted by aircraft

lights, especially here in the southeast of England. Satellite launches continue apace. We already have 'glints' from the *Iridium* satellite system and there are proposals for lighting parts of the Earth in winter darkness using orbiting solar reflectors. Then there is the possibility of space advertising.

Taken together, I would suggest that whilst we may be able to make progress with more appropriate and sensitive modern fixed lighting installations in urban areas and along roads etc., economic pressures are leading to growth in non-ground-based sources of artificial light, and disturbance from these will unfortunately worsen.

**James Abbott**

1 Waterfall Cottages, Park Road, Rivenhall, Witham, Essex CM8 3PR

**Dr Patrick Moore, President. Members on 5 continents  
Publications & recordings re. the Herschel family.  
Free admission to Herschel House Museum. Newsletter.  
Public Lectures on astronomy/space**

**JOIN**

# Herschel

**The William Herschel Society,  
19, New King Street, Bath BA1 2BL U.K.  
where William Herschel discovered Uranus in 1781.  
Membership only £7.50 year UK, £10 overseas.  
Society tie with 7ft. Herschel telescope logo.  
Write or ring 01225 311342 for details.**