

W. Henry Robinson: Popularising astronomy in Victorian Walsall and Birmingham

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William Henry Robinson was one of the most prominent citizens of Walsall, then part of Staffordshire, in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. An influential businessman, he managed to combine printing, publishing, editing a newspaper, writing books and poetry, maintaining a library and retail trading with founding the town's literary institute, and bringing the scientists, explorers, authors and cultural pursuits of the day to his home town. An amateur astronomer in his own right, Robinson was instrumental in setting up the BAA's Midland Branch.

William Henry Robinson is little known today among the people of Walsall, in the West Midlands, where he lived for most of his life, yet they have much to thank him for. If it were not for Robinson, we might not know nearly as much as we do about the history of the area, for it was he, and his father before him, who published many of the books, and one of the newspapers, that tell us so much about Walsall and many other parts of the borough. True to the tradition of his time, Robinson, who became a printer, publisher, journalist, author, historian, amateur astronomer and cyclist, spent many hours in the pursuit of knowledge, both for his own edification and for the benefit of others. He styled himself W. Henry Robinson, and so here I shall call him Henry, his personal preference.



Figure 1. W. Henry Robinson, *Walsall Red Book*, 1912 (Walsall Local History Centre)

Birth of a businessman

Henry's father, John Russell Robinson, brought him to Walsall, then in Staffordshire, from his home at The Hollies in Cannock, Staffordshire, after his birth in 1847.¹ J.R. Robinson founded a printing, publishing, stationery and retail business on The Bridge, Walsall, the headquarters of the Walsall Steam Printing Works and the original *Walsall Advertiser* newspaper, founded in 1857.² Following his education at Mr Jackson's Grammar School in Aldridge, Henry entered the family business.

After his father died in 1869, Henry took the helm of the business at the age of twenty-one, and made a great success of it, running and expanding the premises on The Bridge, at No.8, roughly where Milletts now stands. This fine Victorian emporium was not only a shop selling stationery, medicines and of course printing services – it was also the local Stamp Office, where government stamps were issued and official stamp duties were received, as well as issuing licences for guns, carriages, male servants, horses, armorial bearings and dogs!³



Figure 2. No.8, The Bridge, Walsall, c.1900 (Walsall LHC)

In addition, Mr Robinson's premises housed the Walsall Library & Philosophical Institution, established in 1801, which at one time was the only

library in the town, originally housed at St Matthew's Hall, now The Old Court House.⁴ While the Walsall Free Library was by now in operation, Robinson still maintained this original subscription library and took the majority of reviews, magazines and literary periodicals available. Above the shop were the offices of the *Walsall Advertiser*, of which Robinson was the editor and publisher.

It was as the printer and publisher of the *Walsall Red Book* directory that Robinson perhaps left his greatest legacy to his adopted town. This now rare series of books remains a rich source of information for both family and local historians, and is housed in the Local Studies Library at Walsall Local History Centre. The *Red Books* were launched in 1872, and over many years they were to become the indispensable guide to local events, a directory and a local 'Who's Who' par excellence.⁵

Marriage and residences

On 7 January 1874, at the age of twenty-seven, Henry married Lydie Agnes Elizabeth Schnabel, aged twenty-one, a young lady of German extraction. She was the daughter of Frederick Robert Michael Schnabel, a professor of languages, and they were both naturalised British citizens, hailing originally from Hamburg.⁶ At the time, Lydie was living in Birmingham Road, and Robinson on The Bridge, presumably 'over the shop'.⁷

The Robinson's fortunes were on the up, and business was obviously good, as by 1881 they had moved into a substantial residence in one of the most prosperous parts of Walsall.⁸ 'Offendene' was a fine, large Victorian detached house in its own grounds, situated on the corner of Princes Avenue and Sutton Road.⁹ Robinson was now well placed to socialise with the cream of Walsall society, and he made many useful connections which were later to benefit the town as well as his business. In 1894 the property was extended, as the lighter character of the brick shows in the only surviving photograph, to provide for servants quarters. Sadly, 'Offendene' was demolished in the late 1960s to make way for a small block of flats.



'Offendene', Sutton Road, Walsall, 1964
(Walsall LHC)

By the time of the 1881 Census, Robinson was a prosperous businessman listed as employing eleven men, three women, six boys and two girls.¹⁰ Henry

and Lydie's children were John, Ida and Agnes, and also residing at 'Offendene' were Lydie's sister Theresa (aged fourteen), a governess, a cook and a house servant. The couple eventually had three sons, six daughters (one of them being Margaret, who would become Henry's constant companion in old age) and ten grandchildren.¹¹

The Robinsons eventually moved, around 1904,¹² to The Lindens (now demolished) in Lichfield Road, and by 1909 the family was living at 63 Highgate Road.¹³ The change of house, possibly to raise funds for Henry's new offices and printing works at 133 Lichfield Street, which he had occupied by 1906,¹⁴ did not affect Henry's movement in the higher Walsall social circles. During my research I discovered a previously unknown photograph of him, at a garden party for the Canadian Trade Mission which visited the town in 1906, in a collection of prints from nitrate negatives by William 'Billy' Meikle, a local amateur photographer. The party was held at The Shrubbery, a short distance from 'Offendene' and the home of S.B. Wheway, JP.¹⁵



W. Henry Robinson (right) at The Shrubbery, photograph by W. Meikle, 1906. (Walsall LHC)

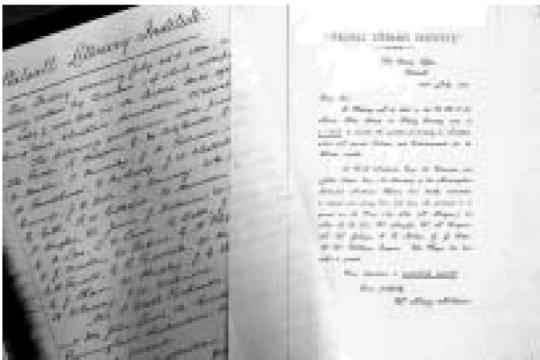


Robinson's premises at 133 Lichfield Street, Walsall, 1906 (Walsall Red Book, 1907, Walsall LHC)

The Walsall Literary Institute

Henry Robinson was not just a printer and publisher. He was also a self-taught author, journalist and editor. Under his leadership the original *Walsall Advertiser*, one of the three main local newspapers of the day, became a great success, and he published many books including seminal local history works such as those written by Frederick W. Willmore. The Advertiser Office, built in the 1840s, still survives opposite Walsall’s Central Library, now used by other businesses.

As well as publishing books by others, Henry wrote several of his own, both prose and poetry, some under the pseudonym of Maurice Grindon. Their contents reveal a man of both literary and philosophical bent, with a romantic and religious soul, who was also steeped in the practical and scientific reason of the age.¹⁶



The formation of Walsall Literary Institute (Acc 107/2, Walsall LHC)

One might well wonder how Robinson would have found the time to do anything other than run his multifarious businesses and raise his family, yet in the manner typical of his time he still managed both to relax with his hobbies and to turn his talents to the edification of the local populace.

In July 1884, with the support of friends and other local worthies and enthusiasts, he set out to found the Walsall Literary Institute.¹⁷ On the evening of 25 July, at a meeting in the YMCA Room in Freer Street, everyone from the local vicar and the Mayor of Walsall to the town’s businessmen and men of letters was present to propose the launch of the new institute, in conjunction with the Birmingham Suburban Institutes Union. It was perhaps inevitable that Henry Robinson would be elected as its first – and only – honorary secretary, and with the help of his friends he set to with a will to make it a tremendous success, which was to lead eventually to his other great passion – astronomy. Thanks to the hard work of Robinson, the Institute was to thrive over the years, lasting until 1911.¹⁸

Robinson was an early member of the Cyclists Touring Club,¹⁹ and thought nothing of trekking

fifty miles or more on his Beeston ‘Cripper’ tricycle. In between long distance tricycling runs around the UK with his great friend and mentor W.H. Duignan, a local solicitor, politician and historian,²⁰ some twenty years his senior, and sitting on the local Cottage Hospital Executive with Sister Dora (Dorothy Pattison), Walsall’s much-loved Victorian nursing pioneer,²¹ Henry Robinson was also a keen amateur astronomer and promoter of public interest in science.

Sir Robert Ball

It seems likely that Robinson’s astronomical interest developed at least partly as a result of his work with Walsall Literary Institute, for their programmes over the years were regularly populated with scientific, especially astronomical, lectures as well as presentations by such literary giants as Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker.²² Robinson enthusiastically brought the wonders of the universe and the scientific and literary talents of the day to Walsall, for the benefit of local people.



Sir Robert S. Ball at Walsall, 1898 (Programme of Walsall Literary Institute, Walsall LHC)

However, it was perhaps in introducing Robert Stawell Ball – the Victorian equivalent of Sir Patrick Moore – to the people of late-nineteenth-century Walsall that Henry Robinson made his greatest contribution to promoting public interest in science in the Midlands. Sir Robert, who had worked with the Earl of Rosse on the world’s largest telescope – the Leviathan of Parsonstown, now Birr – and had been Astronomer Royal for Ireland at Dunsink Observatory, was Lowndean Professor of Astronomy at the University of Cambridge and director of the observatory there. He

was to become a regular lecturer at the Walsall Literary Institute over many years, and appeared both at the Temperance Hall and at the Agricultural Hall, Darwall Street – later the Imperial Theatre, and now a public house of the same name.²³

Sir Robert was, by the time of his first appearance at Walsall in 1897, a phenomenally popular speaker and author. His son recorded that by 1884 he had delivered over 700 public lectures, and in 1885 his first and most successful book, *The Story of the Heavens*, was published to popular acclaim.²⁴

The parallel with Sir Patrick Moore here is striking, with the lecture hall and theatre being the Victorian and Edwardian equivalent of the television. If an astronomer were to popularise his science, it was in such venues, speaking to the public, that he would be found. So it was that Sir Robert came to Walsall on many occasions, and struck up a friendship with Henry Robinson, who in 1898, on behalf of the Committee, invited Sir Robert to become President of the Walsall Literary Institute.²⁵ He accepted, and his first lecture as President was ‘The lances of heaven’, given on 18 January 1899.²⁶

Sir Robert was a prolific writer, publishing several books (some with an impressive print run of more than 50,000 copies) each year based on his research and his lectures, with which he travelled the nation and the globe, as *Time and Tide – a Romance of the Moon*, a volume I acquired from a dealer in Australia, proves. It is based on the theory of tidal evolution on which he lectured to the London Institute on 19 and 26 November 1888. Interestingly, he gave a lecture of very similar title at the Walsall Literary Institute on 14 November 1888, ‘Time and tide – the romance of modern science’, which may have been a lecture along similar lines.²⁷

As time went on, through soirées, conversaciones, smoking-concerts and dances, lectures both literary and scientific, visits from explorers and diplomats, and outings aplenty, the Walsall Literary Institute grew remarkably, and must have been one of the most active in the land. As any club secretary will tell you, the amount of work involved in running any successful group is enormous, and the task often thankless. Yet in this regard Henry Robinson did not go unthanked, for on Wednesday 30 October 1895, at a lecture by Sir Robert Ball on ‘Recent discoveries in the Sun’, he received a just reward and timely recognition of his efforts, for the membership had since 1884 been upwards of 1,000 on the register, and the past year had been the Institute’s most successful yet, with 1,100 members, as is recorded by detailed reports of the evening in the local newspapers.²⁸

This event, appropriately, was made the occasion for a presentation by Mr G. Gill, JP to Mr Robinson of the substantial sum of 100 guineas from the

funds of the prosperous institute, ‘in recognition of the services gratuitously rendered by him’.²⁹

A subscription by the members had also raised £33 3s 6d, which had been used to purchase a telescope which, from the description given in a report on p. 5 of the *Walsall Advertiser* dated 2 November 1895, I believe to have been a traditional Victorian brass refractor of perhaps between 3 and 6 inches aperture. It had ‘a solid base, an equatorial mounting’ and what Sir Robert Ball described on the night as a ‘neat little finder’. The great man said that he looked ‘with some degree of envy, on that very beautiful telescope’ and that he ‘wished Mr. Robinson might have plenty of fine nights to use it, and that he might make some great discoveries by its means’. Mr Gill presented the telescope ‘in the hope that it would often serve to remind him of his many friends who wished him well, and that when gazing through it at the celestial bodies he might not be too unmindful of sublunary matters’. After an amusing speech of acceptance, Henry Robinson concluded with an invitation to the members to ‘come and look through the instrument, whenever convenient, but hoped that they would not all come at once’ – at which point the audience broke into spontaneous laughter and loud applause, which was followed by Sir Robert Ball’s lecture in his inimitable style.

The BAA Midland Branch

Henry Robinson’s astronomical interests obviously waxed from this point, as in June 1896 he became a member of the British Astronomical Association, which membership he held until September 1915,³⁰ when it presumably lapsed, though he was still interested in astronomy (as I will show). Significantly, Robinson was also proposed as a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, on 8 December 1899,³¹ by his friends Sir Robert Ball and the Revd. John M. Bacon, plus Nevil Maskelyne, a descendant and namesake of the famous Astronomer Royal. Elected an FRAS on 9 February 1900, Robinson joined forces a year later with other like-minded friends, F.W. Nash and J.H. Reynolds, at a meeting held on 14 February 1901 in the library of the Birmingham Natural History & Philosophical Society, ‘for the purpose of considering a proposition to form a Midland Branch of the British Astronomical Association, with Birmingham as the centre.’ Robinson chaired the meeting, at which it was proposed to form a branch embracing the counties of Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire.³²

Surprisingly, Henry Robinson did not become the secretary of the new BAA Midland Branch, perhaps due to other commitments. He did however take up the position of vice-president,³³ and a letter dated 30 December 1901 sent to Robinson by his friend John

Bacon, suggests that once again Henry was a prime mover in this Midlands organisation, the clergyman referring to ‘proof of the flourishing existence of the Branch which, like all else you take in hand, is sure to go ahead.’³⁴

The proof to which he was referring was, in this case, a slim volume printed by Robinson following the last BAA Midland Branch meeting for 1901. The meeting took place on 12 December 1901, and the BAA Journal ‘Reports’ describe that evening’s presentation as being ‘devoted to a very able and philosophical treatise by Mr. W.H. Robinson, F.R.A.S., on the problem of life-conditions and possibilities from an astronomical standpoint’.³⁵ The title of this treatise was *Life in Other Worlds*, and fortunately for posterity Robinson printed and circulated a copy of his paper as a booklet at the request of the members of the Midland Branch.³⁶ This booklet, donated personally by Robinson, survives in the Local Studies Library at Walsall Local History Centre.



Life in Other Worlds (Walsall LHC)

Life in Other Worlds is an elegant look at how impossible it is to discover anything definite about the existence of life on our nearest neighbours in space by use of the telescope. It demonstrates that (at that time at least) we could only reason by analogy in comparison with the evolution of our own Earth. It pokes a little fun at the wilder excesses of both the English and American press in suggesting that there was life on Mars, and ends philosophically with some of Henry Robinson’s religious musings on the situation of humanity in the universe.

Robinson’s astronomical interests continued, especially in observing the planet Mars, as a report on his observations of the Red Planet given by him at the Midland Branch on 23 April 1902 shows,³⁷

but by the end of the 1902 season there were signs that the BAA Midland Branch was floundering.³⁸ Most of the meetings of the past session had been, with one or two notable exceptions, of an informal character, and by the end of the year the BAA Journal was reporting that the Branch Committee regretfully had to report ‘a general lack of astronomical interest in the Midlands, which makes it difficult to carry on the work of the branch successfully’.³⁹

As the Association’s own history, *BAA – the First 50 Years*, says, there is no record of any further report from the Midland Branch after the 1902/03 season. They concluded that ‘the difficulties were apparently insurmountable, and the Branch ceased its activities’.⁴⁰ There is no other evidence for the demise of the Branch – possibly if Mr Robinson had been secretary, the story might have been different, and it is possible that the public had other things on their mind, such as the Boer War and the rise of Germany in Europe.

The later years

In 1906 Henry Robinson relaunched *The Walsall Advertiser* under the control of a separate company: it began to be published by the Walsall Advertiser Co. Ltd, at 133 Lichfield Street.⁴¹ By 1908 he had moved home to 63 Highgate Road,⁴² and at the age of sixty-one was probably looking forward to a well-earned retirement in which to enjoy the then relatively dark, albeit gaslit, skies of the Walsall area. By 1911,⁴³ although still running his printing business, The Walsall Press, he had sold the *Walsall Red Book* franchise to his main competitors, T. Kirby & Sons, who continued to print the town directories until 1939. In 1911 the Walsall Literary Institute was disbanded after suffering a gradual fall in membership over a number of years.⁴⁴ In 1914, of course, the Great War broke out, and the following year the *Walsall Advertiser* ceased publication, perhaps a victim of the war.



85 Highgate Road, Walsall, 2002
(Stuart Williams, FRAS)

In 1916, Robinson, now almost seventy, moved to his final address, 85 Highgate Road,⁴⁵ which today is split into two flats. He was still operating his business from home, presumably on a much smaller scale since he no longer advertised from the offices at 133 Lichfield Road, and it is probably around this time that his daughter Margaret moved in as his faithful companion in old age.⁴⁶

Both the astronomer and the journalist in Robinson were still active, however, and he tried to lift the spirits of his countrymen in a small way by penning both historical and astronomical articles for newspapers, such as ‘Astronomy – A respite for the times’,⁴⁷ Robinson’s personal copy of which is preserved in the Local Studies Library at Walsall Local History Centre. At this time – 25 June 1915 – he was still a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and wrote a column for the *Stamford Mercury*. He used his first column to express his anguish at the ‘greatest and most barbarous war the world has ever known’, and over several months offered the night sky as a small respite from the ‘rightly absorbing anxieties of the war’.

By 1916, Robinson was writing a similar column for his home town of Walsall.⁴⁸ As the first article, dated 21 October 1916, reveals, he was still a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and he continued to be well known in local circles as an astronomer, since he had been persuaded by ‘several townsmen’ to write a series of articles on astronomy. His old arch-rivals on the *Walsall Observer* newspaper kindly accepted his offer, and so in his twilight years he was able to occupy himself in astronomical writings. By 1920, it is probable that Henry Robinson was completely retired from the printing trade, as he had ceased advertising locally, and so came the end of an era in Walsall.



W. Henry Robinson, c.1920
(Walsall LHC)

Still occupied with astronomy and his other hobby of gardening as late as 1924, William Henry Robinson passed away, aged seventy-nine, early in the morning of Wednesday 17 February 1926.⁴⁹ His wife Lydie had died in 1901, and he was survived by his three sons, six daughters and ten grandchildren. His funeral took place on Saturday 20 February, the service at St Matthew’s being followed by cremation at Perry Barr and

interment at Rushall.

At the end, the *Walsall Observer*, his greatest competitor, had this to say of William Henry Robinson:

Born a journalist, as it were, the late Mr. Robinson’s biggest contribution was undoubtedly to the literary life of the town ... his pen was prolific and informative. ‘Til the Sun Grows Cold’ and ‘Kathleen O’Leovan’ are novels he produced, and he was the author of a volume of poems, some of which had real beauty and merit, but he will be remembered more for his occasional articles, many of which have appeared in the ‘Observer’ ... [A]stronomy and history were among the subjects on which he wrote, always with painstaking care and illuminating detail.⁵⁰

Some monuments to Robinson remain in Walsall: the family grave, at St Michael’s Church, Rushall, Walsall; the old Advertiser Offices at 133 Lichfield Street, now given over to other uses; and of course Robinson’s lasting literary legacy, including the *Walsall Red Books*, his many newspaper articles, and those few astronomical works that survive.

From what little information I have been able to find, William Henry Robinson – known to friends as Henry – stands out as a man to admire. He deserves to be recognised for his remarkable local contribution to history, to literature and to the public understanding of science, as well as for his business acumen. I do not doubt that, were he alive today, he would be just as active, and delighted with the giant strides that science has made since his own times. I am sure that he would even now be taking advantage of computers, robotic telescopes and the Internet to expand his knowledge and to inspire the people of his home town of Walsall, which despite his great success he never left. Yet he too lived in exciting times, and he made the most of them with the tools at hand, a keen mind, boundless enthusiasm and a formidable capacity for hard work.



THE LATE MR. W. H. ROBINSON.

‘The Late Mr. W.H. Robinson’, *Walsall Red Book*, 1926
(Walsall LHC)

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Notes and references

All sources quoted in the notes are at Walsall Local History Centre, Essex Street, Walsall, West Midlands, WS2 7AS; tel: 01922 721305, website: <http://www.walsall.gov.uk/localhistorycentre>. The Centre is the archives service and local studies library for Walsall Metropolitan Borough.

Of general interest, in relation to the history of the BAA Midland Branch: *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* Vol. **11**, pp. 239–240, 271, 311, 383; Vol. **12**, pp. 17–18, 116, 163, 237, 357; Vol. **13**, pp. 109, 160–161, 268.

- Obituary of W.H. Robinson, *Walsall Observer*, 20 February 1926, p. 9.
- The original *Walsall Advertiser* newspaper was established by J.R. Robinson in 1857 (*Walsall Red Book*, 1907, p. xxxix), but no copies are known to have survived. It changed its title to the *Walsall Advertiser & Newspaper* with the issue of 22 November 1862, with which issue it broadened its content to include more news and comment. W.H. Robinson became editor and publisher of the newspaper in April 1869 following the death of his father, J.R. Robinson, on 8 April (*Walsall Advertiser*, 10 April 1869, p. 4), and first appeared in the editorial column in the issue of 1 May 1869. In 1906, W.H. Robinson relaunched *The Walsall Advertiser* under the control of a separate company, The Walsall Advertiser Co. Ltd, at 133 Lichfield Street. The newspaper ceased publication in December 1915.
- Walsall Red Book* 1872, p. 23.
- Ibid.*, p. 26.
- The *Walsall Red Books* were published from 1872 to 1939, from 1911 under the imprint of T. Kirby & Sons.
- Marriage Register of St Matthew's Parish Church, Walsall, 7 January 1874.
- 1871 Census for Walsall.
- 1881 Census for Walsall.
- Ordnance Survey maps, County Series Sheet 63.11, 1887, 1:2500.
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- Walsall Red Book*, 1905, p. 123.
- Ibid.*, 1909, p. 155.
- Ibid.*, 1907, p. 40.
- Meikle Collections, Accessions 63 and 195.
- Various volumes in the Local Studies Library and Pamphlet Collection, especially *Man Immortal* by W.H. Robinson, FRAS. (The Walsall Press, 1902); *Kathleen O'Leovan* by 'Maurice Grindon' (pseudonym of W.H. Robinson) (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., London, 1896).
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- Walsall Observer*, p. 6; *Walsall Advertiser*, p. 5; reports of Walsall Literary Institute meeting, published 2 November 1895.
- Walsall Advertiser*, 2 November 1895, p. 5.
- Letter from Miss P.M. Barber, Assistant Secretary, British Astronomical Association, dated 25 March 1996, plus photocopy of *Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, **6**, 400, 455, both in Accession 985 (original at the British Astronomical Association library).
- Proposal for Fellowship of the Royal Astronomical Society of W.H. Robinson (photocopy in Accession 985, original at the Library of the Royal Astronomical Society). Proposed 8 December 1899, elected 9 February 1900.
- Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, **11**, 186–187 (Photocopy in Accession 985, originals at the British Astronomical Association library).
- Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, **12**, 163.
- Autograph Letter Book of W.H. Robinson, 1888–1902, Accession 160.
- Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, **12**, 163.
- 'Life in other worlds', paper read by W.H. Robinson to the BAA Midland Branch at Birmingham, 12 December 1901.
- BAA – The First 50 Years*, pp. 64–65.
- Journal of the British Astronomical Association*, **13**, 381.
- Ibid.*
- BAA – The First 50 Years*, pp. 64–65.
- Walsall Red Book*, 1907, p. 133.
- Ibid.*, p. 155.
- Ibid.*, 1912.
- Obituary of W.H. Robinson; Minutes of Walsall Literary Institute, Accession 107/2.
- Obituary of W.H. Robinson; *Walsall Red Book*, 1917, p. 483.

46. Obituary of W.H. Robinson.
47. ‘Astronomy: A respite for the times’. Collected newspaper articles by W.H. Robinson, FRAS, from the *Stamford Mercury*, 1915.
48. ‘Astronomy’. Collected newspaper articles by W.H. Robinson, FRAS, from the *Walsall Observer*, 1916.
49. Obituary of W.H. Robinson.
50. Ibid.