

Obituary

Roy Panther (1926–2016)

With the death of Roy Panther on 2016 October 6, active observers in the field of amateur astronomy lost one of their most dedicated searchers of the night sky. In fact Roy Panther was the last living observer in England to discover a comet visually. This rare success in visual observing shows how difficult it is to become successful in this field and it came as no surprise to learn that he had regularly exchanged notes over the years with the late George Alcock, who also dedicated much of his life to searching the heavens.

Roy Panther was born on 1926 August 15 in Northampton, and in later years became an apprenticed printer living in the village of Walgrave near Northampton, where he had resided for over 40 years at the time of his death.

He was elected to membership of the British Astronomical Association on 1946 June 26. At the time of his death he was an honorary member. He received the Merlin Medal in 1981, largely in recognition of his discovery of a comet on Christmas Day of 1980. Roy was somewhat of a recluse in Walgrave but did have contact with George Alcock during their team effort to observe the Perseid maximum of 1947, where during remarkably good observing weather they recorded 750 meteors.

Illustrating their wide range of target objects George and Roy both came close to detecting Comet 1955 VII Perrine–Mrkos whilst sweeping a neighbouring field a few degrees away. Ironically the comet is now labelled ‘18D’ as currently lost, but had a predicted perihelion date in 2017 February.

In 2013 May Denis Buczynski, conscious that

meetings with Roy were quite a rarity, persuaded him to attend a BAA Comet Section meeting in Northampton. In recognition of his amazing run of dedication to searching for comets, he received a standing ovation from the members present.

He was a regular visual observer and contributor to the comet column of *The Astronomer* magazine until fairly recently. Like those of George Alcock, his results were mainly based on magnitude estimates made using binoculars.

But for all the limited observing from this quiet man it was his discovery of Comet Panther (C/1980 Y2, 1980u) on Christmas Day of 1980 for which he will be best remembered. Roy reported he had begun comet sweeping on the evening of 1947 July 22 using a three-inch refractor with $\times 22$ magnification. Since that start he had tried a variety of instruments and spent an amazing 601 hours searching on 699 nights. During that time he commented in correspondence that he missed three new comets by only a few degrees of sky, but somehow found the impetus to continue his searching.

On 1980 December 25 he ventured out at 4.50 p.m. as he had done 33 years before. He considered trying for Comet Stephan–Oterma using a 0.20m f/4 reflector but deferred this attempt until later.

Comet sweeping started at 17:55 UT, beginning with F1 3 Vulpeculae. A distant mercury vapour street lamp troubled him but a sheet attached to two poles cured the problem so he could resume. Yet another interruption followed when strong gusts of wind began tearing at the sheet so Roy pushed the poles further into the ground. Messier 56 went by the field as sweeping continued but later what seemed like a dim version of M56 also appeared, arousing his suspicion of a ‘stranger’. Comparison with the field of the finder suggested it was a suspected comet, seen at 18:50UT.

Initially he passed details to Mike Hendrie so a picture could be taken to confirm the new object. He also summoned a taxi and wrote out on a scrap of paper details of the discovery and asked the driver to deliver it to myself as I had, in 1980 November, just moved to nearby Wellingborough but was still waiting connection of a telephone. I still have a distinct memory of the taxi driver ringing the doorbell and stressing he believed it was a very important message when he read it out to me. Perhaps the first time a comet discovery has been relayed in this way?

During my visits to Roy and to George Alcock they both said that searching for comets and novae was a vital pursuit which they believed was



Roy Panther (left) with Tom Boles in 2000 December. Photo by Martin Mobberley.

important to continue, despite the many professional surveys in progress. A fuller account of the 1980 discovery appeared in *The Astronomer* for 1981 January (Vol 17, No 201, p. 176).

Thanks to Martin Mobberley for producing George Alcock’s notes in searchable form to enable further details to be added.

Guy M. Hurst



Roy Panther received a standing ovation at the meeting of the Comet Section in Northampton on 2013 May 18. Photo by Dave Storey.



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