



Society
for the
History of Astronomy

Speakers and Presentations for the 2023 Conference

Saturday, 21st October

Order of Speakers & Presentations are Subject to Change.

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Mr Jesse Garrison is a PhD candidate in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at University College London. He is primarily interested in the history of astronomy, particularly nineteenth century solar research. His PhD thesis provisionally entitled “British solar eclipse expeditions during the long nineteenth century” explores the motivations and practicalities of astronomers travelling abroad to observe total solar eclipses. In this research he looks at how these expeditions evolved and adapted with changing attitudes around eclipse research, fluctuating government and organisational support, advancements in instrument design including new technologies such as photography and spectroscopy, as well as the shifting demographics of those conducting solar research. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Presentation : The British expedition to Northern Europe for the total solar eclipse of 1851

Summary of Presentation:

Reports of unusual phenomena visible only during total solar eclipses sparked huge interest among nineteenth century astronomers. The subsequent rise in eclipse expeditions, which often blurred the line between research and holiday, was aided by concurrent instrument advancements, improved global transport links, and unprecedented state support. The Greenwich Royal Observatory’s expedition to Northern Europe to view the eclipse of 1851 was the first large scale operation of its kind by British astronomers, although little scholarly attention has been paid to this event.

This talk focuses on the extensive preparations for this expedition, spearheaded by the Astronomer Royal George Airy, and observations of the eclipse in Sweden and Norway. In the months leading up to the eclipse, Airy worked with notable British and foreign astronomers to draft and distribute detailed observing instructions covering every known research question. After publication of this guide, Airy successfully approached the Admiralty to fund an expedition, emphasising the honour of the British government and his own expertise as an observer of the 1842 eclipse. The Admiralty, however, stopped short of providing a steamship which required Airy to coordinate a massive international diplomatic operation to arrange private transport and guarantee easy passage for astronomers around Northern Europe. British observers were spread around Sweden and Norway for the eclipse, with bad weather unfortunately spoiling the event for many. However, the organisational success of this endeavour would provide a roadmap for future expeditions throughout the century, but would also set high expectations, particularly around state support.



Mr Graham McLoughlin FRAS current Secretary of Preston and District Astronomical Society and member of the SHA, an amateur astronomer with interests in Astro imaging and researching history of Astronomy. His current day job working as a Driving instructor , he is a former Principal Prison Officer working for HM prison service, also former member of Bowland Pennine Mountain Rescue Team.

Presentation : Dr Arthur Beer Vistas in Astronomy

Summary of Presentation:

I'm going to share with you the life and work of German Astronomer Dr Arthur Beer from his birth in Bohemia , his military service during World War One , his student days at Leipzig, Vienna and Berlin where he gained his PHD in 1927. His Astronomical work in Germany until the Nazi Party came into power, with Jewish heritage he emigrated to England 1934 , he gained a position in Cambridge, founder editor of the Publication Vistas in Astronomy.



Mr Kevin L. Johnson FRAS is an amateur astronomer with an interest in historical observing technique and coordinates the SHA's Survey of Astronomy, an online project to document astronomy in Britain and Ireland. He has MSc in the History of Science and Technology from the University of London and from 1985 to 2015 he worked at the Science Museum, London, as curator and documentation officer. His current interests lie in a long-term project to research the development of British astronomy education through school observatories.

Presentation “The SHA’s Survey of Astronomy in the UK”

Summary of Presentation:

The scope of the talk will be to give the background to the origins of the survey and outline its aims and outputs with illustration of the resources available to the membership and the public. The survey will then be demonstrated to show its capabilities by live interaction with the website - . An example of one produced earlier will be held back in reserve should WiFi technology choose to fail us on the occasion. The talk will conclude with a call for the support of the membership to taking the survey forward.

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Mr Mike Frost FRAS, FIET is the director of the historical section of the British Astronomical Association (BAA). His day job is systems engineering in the steel industry, but astronomy has always been a central part of his life. He has an M.Sc in astronomy, is a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, a founder member of the Society for the History of Astronomy, and has been a BAA member for 28 years and a council member for 13 years. He enjoys travel to view astronomical events such as aurorae and meteor showers, but his absolute favourite spectacle will always be total solar eclipses.

Presentation: "Eclipse and Revelation"

Summary of Presentation:

I'd like to tell you about a collaborative project I have been involved with for the last few years. After the Great American Eclipse of 2017, Tom McLeish (Professor of Natural Philosophy at York University) and Henrike Lange (Associate Professor of Italian Studies and History of Art at the University of California Berkeley campus) decided to invite specialists from as many fields as possible to write, co-operatively, about solar eclipses. The finished work "Eclipse and Revelation", due out in January 2024 (OUP), has contributions from historians of several eras, art historians, a musicologist, meteorologist, animal behaviour expert, Dante scholar and a theologian. Tom McLeish is an old friend of mine, so he brought me on board as a science historian and eclipse chaser. Two other contributors will be well known to SHA members: Prof Jay Pasachoff, the renowned solar physicist and eclipse expert; and Dr Philipp Nothaft who spoke to the society about "Walcher of Malvern".

Working with so many experts in different fields was a rewarding experience; the whole is more than the sum of the parts. I hope to convey to you what an exhilarating project it has been.



Main Speaker and Presentation for the 2023 Autumn Conference

Dr Wolfgang Steinicke started his astronomical career with visual deep-sky observations. He studied astrophysics and mathematics in Germany. His astronomical interest later focused on non-stellar objects, their data and historical sources. Revised versions of the leading catalogues (Herschel, NGC/IC) were published. In 2008, he obtained a doctorate from Hamburg University with a dissertation on 19th-century deep-sky observations, which was published by Cambridge University Press in 2010 as *Observing and Cataloguing Nebulae and Star Clusters: From Herschel to Dreyer's New General Catalogue*. A comprehensive book on Herschel's observations appeared in 2021, titled *William Herschel – Discoverer of the Deep Sky*. Steinicke is a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, Director of the History of Astronomy Section of the German Vereinigung der Sternfreunde, committee member of the Webb Deep Sky Society, member of the Herschel Society, Bath, and works for international associations. He organizes astronomy meetings and gives lectures all over the world. Steinicke is the author of ten books and has published more than 300 scientific papers.

Summary of Presentation

Between 1783 and 1802, Herschel scanned the sky with an 18.7-inch reflector, performing 1112 sweeps. He not only discovered many nebulae, star clusters and double stars, but also carried out systematic star counts in the field of view, called ‘star gages’. Assuming that fainter stars must be further away, Herschel tried to determine the spatial distribution of the stars in the Milky Way – establishing stellar statistics. The resulting figure shows its shape for the first time. However, as is so often the case, myths and facts are mixed up here. It is interesting that in the star counts he also encountered ‘vacant places’, like the celebrated ‘hole in the sky’ in Scorpius. Herschel is thus also the discoverer of obscure objects, now call dark nebulae.



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