

The Society for the History of Astronomy
2022-23 Annual General Meeting & Autumn Conference.
Saturday, 21st October 2023, Birmingham & Midland Institute, Birmingham.

Despite very poor late October weather, which resulted in major disruption to road and rail travel, almost fifty society members, and their guests attend our first major face to face conference held this year. The day's events began with the all-important Society Annual General Meeting for 2022-23 which was presided over by the society Chair Gerard Gilligan, aided by General Secretary Mike Leggett. The review of a very successful SHA year and its activities, publications plus administration was discussed. Among the reports present were those of finance and membership, which indicated the society was in a good position following a year which continued to be disrupted by the pandemic, and effected by cancelled meetings and events by rail strikes. The AGM conclude with a the acceptance of the Council officers yearly reports and election of the new SHA Council for the year 2023-24 by society members. We therefore welcomed our new meetings Secretary/coordinator Mike Frost FRAS, who has join the SHA Council with many years of experience as Director of the BAA historical section. But we also welcome Ms Carolyn Kennett FRAS as the newly elected society chair.



Carolyn is a writer, researcher and astronomer who lives in Cornwall. She researches ancient communities and how they made connections to their skiescapes. She is a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and her books include Sites of Prehistoric Bodmin Moor (2022), Uranus and Neptune (2022), Celestial Stone Circles of West Cornwall (2018) and Neptune: From Grand Discovery to World Revealed (2021). She is a communicator of all things astronomical and runs her own walking tours and outreach business Archaeoastronomy Cornwall, while being a director of Mayes Creative, who delivers arts, science and heritage projects throughout Cornwall.

throughout Cornwall.



However as we welcomed Carolyn and Mike to their new posts, the Council and membership said a reluctant farewell to Gerard Gilligan who as society Chair is stepping down after five years but also in his acting capacity as meeting secretary. Gerard was presented with a gift and thank you cards, by treasurer Dr Geoff King FRAS, and Gerard was sent good wishes messages from members in attendance and those who could not travel to Birmingham. In thanking Gerard, Dr king reminded the meeting that Gerard had

become Chair at a difficult time for the society, and Gerard came to the SHA with many years of experience as secretary and later as President of Liverpool Astronomical Society, which was badly required at the time. He had steered the society through the problems and darkness associated with the covid pandemic, with hard work humility and charm.





Before the Annual General Meeting concluded for another year, the 2023 society awards were announced.

The Peter Hingley Award – the winner being Paul Haley for his significant and well received articles published over several years in the SHA Journal *Antiquarian Astronomer*.

The Roger Jones Award - the award going to Bill Barton, yet again for another year of outstanding and detailed contribution to the SHA survey, and this being the third occasion of the award going to Bill, he was gifted the model of the Greenwich Observatory “Onion dome”. (*Seen on the left – image thanks to Lilliput Lane*)

Finally The Madeline Cox award- the winner being Peter Rigby for his outstanding and widely praised article in the *SHA Bulletin* entitled;

“The Engineering History of the Orrery”

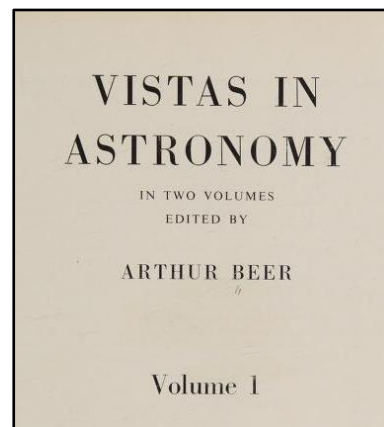
Sadly Paul and Peter were unable to attend the meeting in person to accept their awards, but Bill was later presented with his award, with our warmest congratulations.



With Carolyn now presiding over the main conference meeting, the first speaker was introduced. Jesse Garrison is a PhD candidate in the Department of Science and technology studies at the University College London. Jessie is primarily interested in the history of astronomy, and particularly nineteenth century solar research. His presentation focused on the extensive preparations for the GRO’s expedition to Sweden and Norway to view the 1851 total solar eclipse. An expedition spearheaded by the Astronomer Royal George Biddell Airy, which would be a roadmap for future nineteenth century astronomers. His excellent and very well researched presentation was followed by several questions from the delegates.

Above - Jesse Garrison delivers his lecture to SHA delegates. (Image Gerard Gilligan)

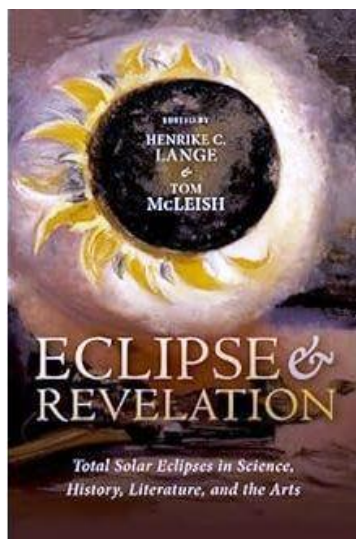
Our next speak was Mr Graham McLoughlin FRAS current Secretary of Preston and District Astronomical Society and member of the SHA, an amateur astronomer with interests in Astro imaging and researching history of Astronomy. Graham had very kindly stepped into the day’s program when the original speaker had to cancel their attendance. Graham share with the audience 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 immigrated to England 1934, he gained a position in Cambridge, founder editor of the Publication *Vistas in Astronomy*. Graham was later able to place on display the Beer personal papers, letters and other documents that had he collected during his extensive research. Graham then field several questions from the conference audience before our mid-point break. (*Front Cover of Volume 1 “Vistas in Astronomy” – Google Images*)





Following the lunch break, which again the society has to thank the staff of the meeting venue BMI cafeteria for keeping delegates well fed and watered once again!, the next speaker is well known to the meeting. Bill Barton FRAS is a founder member of the SHA, and is also the assistance director of the BAA historical section. Once again Bill had to take over the speaker spot original planned for Kevin Johnson, who was recovering from illness. But Bill yet again saved the day with the story of Devon born *Roger Landon (1825 – 1894) ‘the station astronomer’*. Landon worked nights as a railway switchman, later being promoted to stationmaster at Silverton. A self-taught amateur astronomer, he soon constructed his own telescope, including the optics. Over the following years he constructed another 3 telescopes and his own observatory, and

became one of the most respected astronomers in Britain, developing his own method for photographing the moon and the transit of Venus. (*Bill Barton delivers the third presentation of the day – image Gerard Gilligan*)



Carolyn next welcomed Mike Frost FRAS and invited him to deliver his presentation. Mike has been the director of the historical section of the British Astronomical Association (BAA). He joins the council of the SHA with many years of experience both as an astronomer and historian, a founder member of the SHA. He is much travelled and his absolute love is chasing total solar eclipses. His presentation was a detailed account of a collaborative seven year project over the past few years. Mike detailed a new publication entitled “Eclipse and Revelation”, due for publication early in 2024, in which invited specialists from as many fields as possible to write, co-operatively about solar eclipses. Mike mapped out each chapter of the forthcoming book, with contributions from historians in several eras, e.g. art historians, musicologist, meteorologist, and many more. During the Q&A session that followed, Mike clearly conveyed the exhilarating project it has been.

Image - cover design for “Eclipse and Revelations” with thanks from OUP

Following a short break for tea/coffee and afternoon cake, during which many members took the opportunity to visit the SHA Sir Robert Ball library, located in the BMI building, the conference delegates were treated to a welcome address to the meeting by the SHA President, Dr Allan Chapman. Dr Chapman has never missed an October meeting and AGM until this year. But Allan is still recovering from several health issues, and his mobility is not as robust as it once was. Hence reluctantly he remained in at home, but had recorded a short video address to the conference. With thanks also to members John Chuter and John Fathers who had facilitated the recording several weeks before. Despite his enforced absence, the SHA members clearly appreciated that Allan was still able to take part in the meetings proceedings. (Image – with thanks to Gerard Gilligan)



Our main speaker and presentation which conclude the Conference, was by the distinguished Germany and world renowned astronomer and historian Dr Wolfgang Steinicke. He has a very special interest in the Brother and Sister team, William and Caroline Herschel. Wolfgang is the author of ten books and has published more than 300 scientific articles and papers. His presentation was a detailed study of the twenty year period in which William Herschel, aided by Carolyn conducted scans of the night sky with his 18.7-inch reflector, performing over 1,000 sweeps. During his systematic star counts between 1783 to 1802, he not only discovered many nebulae, star clusters and double stars, but also fainter stars which Herschel assumed were further away. He tried to determine the spatial distribution of stars in the Milky Way, and showing what this indicated to him to be its shape. In his star counts he noted what he called 'vacant places' like the 'hole in the sky' in Scorpius, and thus Dr Steinicke speculated that Herschel had discovered obscure objects now called dark nebulae. Following several questions Carolyn Kennett, SHA Chair conclude the meeting, wishing delegates and guests a safe, trouble free journey home. With the invitation to attend the SHA 2024 Spring Conference, again at the BMI, Birmingham on Saturday, April 20th. This meeting will have the theme "Astronomers Royal".

Earlier Dr Steinicke had announce the newly translated, English edition of the 1961 addition of *'William Herschel Life and Work'* by the German author and librarian Gunther Buttmann who died in April 2023. Dr Steinicke was aided in this project by the author's son, Bernhard , and also for check the English text, the SHA librarian James Dawson. Sales of the new book took place during the meeting, with delegates purchasing all available copies.



Speakers for the SHA 2023 autumn conference. (image – Gerard Gilligan)

From L to R ; Jesse Garrison, Mike Frost, Dr Wolfgang Steinicke, Bill Barton and Graham Mcloughlin.