

SHA Picnic 21st June 2024 – Rugby School

Every year, the Society for the History of Astronomy organises a summer picnic, at a site of historical importance. This year we went to Rugby School, Warwickshire, to see their Temple Observatory.

We met in the science block of the school. Nick Fisher, formerly head of science, welcomed us, and introduced us to two sixth-form students, William and Henry, who had been working in the school archives to research the story of the observatory. It was founded in 1870 by former pupil George Seabroke, with the assistance of schoolteacher Revd J.M. Wilson. Rugby School had been a pioneer in the teaching of science, under the headmastership of Frederick Temple, and wanted an observatory to give their pupils practical science skills.

We had two guests for the day – Peter Seabroke, George Seabroke's great-grandson, and George Seabroke the younger, his great- great- grandson. George the younger is a cosmologist at University College London, working with data from the Gaia satellite, and a few years ago was delighted to discover the career of his predecessor and namesake. The two Georges' research interests overlapped in the study of double stars. George showed us examples where Seabroke, at the Temple Observatory, had managed to identify double stars which couldn't be seen by Gaia (which is optimised for faint stars). George Jr also mentioned the telescope which had been in his family for five generations, since George Sr acquired it from Matthew Holbeche Bloxam, the local antiquarian who, among other things, wrote down the story of William Webb Ellis, the inventor of rugby football.

After a brief tour of the science department, we were ready for the main event – the visit to the Temple Observatory. This is located in the back garden of a private house (originally the observatory curator's house). The main telescope is an 8 ¼ inch Alvan Clark refractor, which originally belonged to Revd William Rutter Dawes, the great visual observer. The telescope has not seen too much use in recent years, in part because the eyepiece mounting is in a fragile state, although the consensus is that this is a superficial problem, easily fixed. We didn't get chance to examine the objective lens.

The dome seemed to be in good repair and could be moved by turning the handle. There were side rooms, which originally housed a transit telescope and a spectroscope, with which Seabroke undertook spectroscopic research with Norman Lockyer, amongst others. These instruments are long gone, making room for kitchen facilities and other modern conveniences.

After a happy half hour examining the Clark refractor, we posed for group photos outside the dome, then made our way back to the main campus of the school for our picnic. The weather was warm and sunny, so we could go with the outdoor option. So, we set up on an embankment overlooking the famous Close of Rugby School. This is the field on which rugby football was invented, 201 years ago, when Webb Ellis "picked up the ball and ran with it", as Matthew Holbeche Bloxam memorably wrote.

After lunch, we were joined by Rugby School archivist, Jenny Hunt. She showed us to the school museum, where we found out more about the origins of the school (founded by Lawrence Sheriff in 1567) and of rugby football and its brutal precursors. The final part of our program was a tour of the old school, with its Harry-Potteresque cloister, and the school chapel, a magnificent high church construction, featuring stained glass windows and memorials to old boys Lewis Carroll and Rupert Brooke, among many others. Next door is the commemorative chapel, a much more austere, contemplative building to honour the many Rugby old boys who died in the world wars.

That was the end of the formal program, and many of our attendees headed home. But a few remained, and I took them on a brief tour of the town outside the school gates. There's a statue of

William Webb Ellis, a large-scale model of the Webb Ellis trophy awarded to the winners of the rugby world cup, and a smaller-scale model of the women's trophy. I showed them the birthplace of Norman Lockyer, the man who named helium, just to the north of the school. And we visited several places connected to the Bloxam family – the house on Sheep St, now a Thai restaurant, which was owned by Richard Rouse Bloxam, father of Matthew Holbeche Bloxam and author of *Urania's Mirror*; the Guildhall, from which Matthew Holbeche Bloxam observed, and the solicitor's office in which George Seabroke was articulated to Matthew Holbeche Bloxam – two astronomical friends.

We had twenty attendees in total. Thanks to Nick Fisher and Jenny Hunt of Rugby School; also, David Lan, Ann Cleverly from the school staff, and the two students, Henry and Will, who lectured to us. Well done guys!

Mike Frost