

A new mentoring scheme for the Variable Star Section

Help and guidance is now available for new variable star observers

by **Karen Holland**

Over the years, as an officer of the Variable Star Section, I have sometimes heard people say that ‘nothing is done to help beginners...’, or ‘everyone always talks about the hi-tech work...’. So when another officer of the Section expressed the same concern a year ago, we decided that we had to do something about this.

With this in mind, the Variable Star Section has set up its Mentor Scheme. Under this scheme, people who would like to have a go at variable star observing can be allocated a mentor, who will act as a friendly adviser throughout the early stages of learning. A number of experienced observers have offered to act as mentors; some will communicate by e-mail only, and some are willing to assist by sharing observing sessions with their protégé(e), as well as being in contact by e-mail. In either case, an effort will be made to link people with a mentor who is as local to them as possible, although in some cases this will not be so easy, until mentors are found in some of the more sparsely populated areas of the country.

It is intended that a mentor will provide support with all those little difficulties and questions that arise during the early stages of a variable star observing career. Most of these problems can be solved without assistance, of course, but they are often answered far more quickly by an experienced observer, who can pass on useful techniques and know-how. Even more important, a common fear amongst beginners is that they may not be estimating the star’s brightness correctly; this can often stop an observer from contributing the results to the Section’s valuable archive, and in doing so, both robs a future analyst of the data, and deprives the observer from contributing to a potentially important project.

One key way in which it is envisaged that a mentor might assist, is to observe a few of the same stars as the novice, to enable a comparison to be made between the mentor’s and the beginner’s estimation. In this way,

the new observer will start to gain confidence in his or her results, and is more likely to submit them to the Section’s archive; any problems encountered in making the estimation should be picked up and corrected at an early stage.

I, myself, benefited from an informal mentoring arrangement when I first started variable star observing, and I found it invaluable. My unofficial mentor, John Greaves, assisted initially by helping me to identify which work was essential to restore my BAA-loaned instrument to satisfactory use. He then went on simply to show me many nebulae and galaxies, and what a surprise this was! Having only seen Hubble images of such objects, I was ill-prepared for what I saw. I rapidly realised that simply gaining an idea of what to expect to see was a crucial experience in itself. Prior to this, I had spent many exhausting and disheartening evenings looking for nebulae that I could not hope to see from my light-polluted back garden, even though many were listed as being easy targets in the publications that I was consulting.

Next, John assisted by comparing my estimations with his; whilst we rarely obtained the same values, we were near enough to make me realise that I *could* accurately estimate brightnesses, and this gave me the confidence to start submitting my observations to the VS archives. As my telescope did not have a ‘go to’ facility, I had to learn to star-hop to the variables of interest, and John produced charts for me initially, as I had no facility to do so. Once I had obtained the software necessary to do this for myself, he offered guidance on how to select the optimum software settings in order to produce a chart that would be useful for my telescope. In short, my mentor passed on much useful knowledge, that I have no doubt I would have learnt eventually, but it would have taken so much longer. I do wonder how many people end by simply giving up, before they have even properly got started, because there are so many hoops to jump through just to get going!

I do not want give the impression that your future VS mentor will be able to assist you with all of the above. I believe my unofficial mentor was exceptionally generous with his

time and advice. Most VS mentors have busy working lives, and have a limited amount of free time; but if a VS mentor is simply able to confirm to you, that you are making good estimations, and if that encouragement leads you to start contributing your estimations to the database, then you will have become part of the VS team, and your work will start to be counted. One day, your estimations might be included in the data that form the basis of a scientific paper, in which case your observations should be acknowledged in the paper. In exceptional cases, contributors of data may even be listed as co-authors.

You might argue that all the above would be learnt in time anyway, and you’d be right; you might also argue that all this could be done with an e-mail group, and you would also probably be right; but I personally do not believe that there is any substitute for having a personal mentor, who takes an interest in your observing, guides your training, and who may become a future project partner and hopefully a lifelong friend. The personal touch adds a great deal to the learning experience. You will probably feel that you will never be able to repay your mentor for the assistance that is given you, but perhaps one day, you can do the same for someone else who is starting out.

It is expected that potential users of the scheme will be observers who already have access to some form of astronomical equipment; this need be no more than a good pair of binoculars for many bright variables, and this is an excellent way to start. Applicants should be able to identify major constellations, and should be confident in the basic use of their equipment. This scheme is ideal for members of Sections, other than the Variable Star Section, who would enjoy a new observing experience!

If you feel you would like to be allocated a VSS mentor, please contact me, and I will contact a volunteer to see if they are able to assist you. A central database of mentors and students is being kept, to try to ensure that no one person becomes overloaded.

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