

AN UNRECONSTRUCTED VISUAL OBSERVER, AN OBSERVER PROFILE

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I first became interested in astronomy at a very early age, late in the war, when we lived in Lancashire (only seven miles from Alston Hall, where the 2004 BAA meeting was held). The first astronomy book I can recall, was Ball's *Romance of the Heavens*. This was followed by other books from the library, culminating in Hutchinson's *Splendour of the Heavens*, which was a major stimulus. I can remember my dad buying me George Philip's *Signpost to the Stars*. Along with the usual comics I took *The Children's Newspaper*, which had excellent astronomical articles. At grammar school when I was 11 or 12, a teacher kindly loaned me his 3" refractor. This was on a pillar and claw stand, and, although wobbly, enabled me to observe the summer objects I had only read about, by getting up at 3 in the morning. My parents weren't too happy about this!

When we moved down to Leicester, for successive Christmas presents, I had a Broadhurst and Clarkson 2.25" refractor, and my own copy of *Splendour of the Heavens*. I spent many happy hours chasing Struve objects with the aid of the Cottam's star maps in the back of this book. I now consider this somewhat of an achievement, and it was certainly a very sound grounding in star-hopping. Have a look at these star maps sometime, if you are able. Who needs a *GoTo* facility? But at that time, I thought that variable stars could not possibly be interesting.

National Service, studying, girls, marriage, and a family then meant that astronomy had to take a back seat for about ten years. But as a surveyor in the Royal Artillery, with Suez threatening, two of us (both with astronomical interests) were speedily taught how to do star shots with a theodolite. We used Arcturus, and managed to pinpoint our position on Salisbury Plain to within 3 miles.

My interest was rekindled in 1964 or 5 (possibly stimulated by the nearby Barwell meteorite fall). After much heart-searching as to whether it was right to do this with a young family to look after, I approached the Midland Bank for a £200 loan (!), and got myself a Fullerscopes 8.5" Newtonian. I joined the BAA (although I'd been buying their Handbook for years), and started to observe everything in sight, sending off the results to the various observing sections. I also subscribed to *The Astronomer*, and sent my results there as well. I was on the BAA Council for two years in the early seventies.

In 1996, a number of moderately bright comets appeared, and I was so excited at my first sight of one of these, my first ever comet (Kilston, I think), that I decided to submit estimates of their brightness. How better to do this, but to practice on variable stars? But the practice became an obsession, and today I seldom observe anything else. To date, I have records of around 56,000 VS observations from 1966, but unfortunately, for eleven of these years I have no record. The real total may be more like 60,000.

But I'll never make 'the ton'. At 68, and going at my usual rate of 3000 in a good year, it will take me at least until I'm 81! Age and creeping light-pollution will win, I'm afraid. I shouldn't have wasted all those years on observing Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, meteors and various comets (only joking!).

I now observe with a 10" Newtonian, which I have had for well over 20 years, in a run-off clamshell-type shed which I built myself. I have been lucky enough to achieve most of my astronomical desires. I missed the Leonid storm, but have seen five total eclipses (all clear) some good comets, and a transit of Venus. Jeremiah Horrocks was a boyhood hero when I lived about 5 miles from Much Hoole.

I was a Chartered Civil Engineer, and took early retirement from Local Government in 1990. I was a founder member and am chairman of the Hinckley and District Astronomical Society, and was a founder member of the Leicester AS in 1952. Apart from astronomy, my other main interests are genealogy and classical music. I am a founder member of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, and I like real ale.



The picture above shows Mike, with his wife Barbara (left side of telescope), and some family friends, outside his observatory with 10" Newtonian and run-off shed, which he uses.