Letters

Further memories of John Wall

From Mr Michael J. Gainsford

I was sorry to read of the death of John Wall (Obituary, June *Journal*) and thought that perhaps readers may be interested to know that the Crayford Manor group was not the only astronomical society with which he was associated.

In 1983 a few local enthusiasts formed the Hinckley & District Astronomical Society. Until its demise in 2009 (largely because of a lack of volunteers to run the group), it was a very successful society. Apart from the usual talks there were observing sessions, visits to sites of astronomical interest, and a monthly newsletter. Also we held a Christmas local inter-society quiz, barbecues, and an annual Leicestershire long alley skittles challenge match against the Leicester Society. I have to admit that although Leicester were better at quizzing, Hinckley were virtually unbeaten at skittles! But that is by the way.

John Wall in his Dartford garden with the 30-inch refractor he constructed. *Photos: Arthur Cockburn.*

I first saw John on a trip to Romania to view the 1999 total solar eclipse, to which he was travelling with his friend Nigel Curtis, from Coventry. I got to know Nigel but have to admit that I was unaware that his friend was *the* John Wall of telescope building and Crayford focusor fame.

Shortly after the eclipse Nigel joined the Hinckley society, and six months later in 2000 September John, together with Joyce Porritt, also joined. At last I realised who he was and that we had another astronomical luminary in the group. (One of our first members was Martin Barstow, later Prof Martin Barstow and former President of the RAS).

John and Nigel made the 17-mile journey from the far side of Coventry to our meetings, and I never found out if they were also members of the Coventry & Warwickshire AS, which was much nearer. HDAS had members from much further than this, including Tamworth and Lichfield.

John was an active member of HDAS, giving talks on his telescope making adventures and writing at least one humourous (and somewhat scatological) item for a Christmas edition of the *Newsletter*. A photograph of John and his 30-inch [760mm] refractor graced the front of the *Newsletter* of 2001 October. John also joined in the skittles, but in his hands the paths through the air of the wooden cheeses resembled near earth asteroids and presented more danger to spectators than the skittles themselves.

Although it is nearly nine years since I saw John, he will be missed.

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Axel Firsoff and Frank Hyde

From Mr Andrew Read

I wish to thank and congratulate Martin Mobberley on his two recent papers: *The strange world of V. Axel Firsoff* [*JBAA,* **128**(3)] and *Frank Wilsenham Hyde: Radio astronomer extraordinaire!* [*JBAA*, **128**(1)]. Mr Mobberley gives fascinating insights into two independent characters who supported their interests with their own resources, and pursued them with great determination.

In various ways the notable achievements of both Firsoff and Hyde seem to have been bought at not-insignificant personal cost. I was left deeply pondering the same question after reading both papers: what *primum movens extraordinarium* drove them to such single-minded accomplishment?

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Life on exoplanets – and nearer to home

From Mr John Fairweather

Recently, I attended the BAA & AAVSO Warwick conference on remote planets and variable stars.

One of the talks (by Prof Giovanna Tinetti) was about planetary atmospheres and how we might go about looking for life on exoplanets.

In this search, scientists are studying (through spectral signatures) the atmospheres of exoplanets and recent papers have speculated how life might have modified those atmospheres. From looking at the Earth we can see how human life has modified its atmosphere.

Further recent papers have also speculated that if the dinosaurs were the dominant life form on Earth for 180 million years, why didn't they evolve to at least the level of human intelligence and if they had done so, how would we recognise it? One indication might have been that the atmosphere would probably have been modified and so scientists have been looking for signs of this.

(One interesting example of dinosaur intelligence could be birds, which have evolved from dinosaurs. Crows have a fairly high level of intelligence, so could you say that this is an example of dinosaur intelligence?)

Of course, some dinosaur groups might not have fossilised and so, apart from a modified atmosphere, how else could we search for signs of them? Over a period of millions of years, the movement of Earth's geological structures would have destroyed any signs of dinosaurs' buildings or life. Of course, you could ask how much of human civilization would remain after a few million years – Would there be fossils of humans?

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