



Obituary

John Armitage (1945–2015)

John Armitage received his formative education in Huddersfield, and by his early teenage years he was running a meteorological station. He also developed an interest in astronomy, and joined the Association in 1959. At about that time the family moved to Halifax, and John soon made his mark when he featured in an article in a local newspaper in which he is quoted as saying that he was trying to generate interest in the Junior Astronomical Society (founded in 1952, and now the Society for Popular Astronomy) and was also attempting to form a new local society. After attending University College of Wales at Aberystwyth from 1965 until 1968, he trained as a teacher. His subsequent career in the teaching profession was short-lived, however, and by the mid-1970s, when he moved to Cannock, he had established himself as a freelance lecturer.

John's courses on astronomy, geology, and meteorology were designed specifically for adults. Initially they were based at Cannock Mining College and at other locations around the West Midlands, including Tamworth, Stafford and Erdington, and later they were augmented with courses at Birmingham University, Keele University, the Workers Educational Association, and other institutions. Many of these courses involved field events, including visits to the Spaceguard Centre at Knighton, the British Geological Survey at Keyworth, the National Stone Centre, the Severn Valley Railway, many quarries – and numerous public houses, as he had a penchant for real ale. (This latter pursuit eventually had to be curtailed due to doctor's orders, but he never gave up his search for the perfect pint.)

By 2004 John was considering expansion of the facilities that he could offer as part of his courses, and soon agreed arrangements to establish observatories, equipped with vintage instruments, at the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley – an open-air museum occupying several acres of grounds – and at the adult education college at Pendrell Hall, near Codsall, Staffordshire. Subsequently, two large reflectors by George Calver were placed on loan by the Association (organised by the writer as Curator of Instruments; see the *Journal*, vol. 119, p. 40). John then recruited two of his long-standing students: Joseph and Alec Jaworski. Both had a background in civil engineer-



ing, and it was they who designed and constructed the Romsey-type observatories and restored the telescopes with the help of a group of volunteers. In 2006 the observatory at Pendrell Hall was opened by Lembit Öpik, MP, and in 2007 the observatory at the Black Country Living Museum was opened by Professor John Dowell, FRS. Subsequently, use of the museum observatory was limited to the opening times of the entire facility, but the observatory at Pendrell Hall was an integral part of John's courses and was more accessible, and in 2007 it was the venue for the summer picnic of the Society for the History of Astronomy.

Unfortunately, by 2010, events conspired

against both sites. The new Director of the Black Country Living Museum decided that a Victorian observatory was not suitable for a Victorian open-air museum, and declared that it must be removed. John immediately began to investigate alternative sites, but although possibilities were presented, none were fulfilled, and everything was placed in storage. Soon afterwards, Staffordshire County Council was obliged to sell Pendrell Hall, as it was not generating sufficient income. With this second expulsion the instruments were removed and placed in storage, but the observatory building had to be abandoned. Undaunted, John established a small observatory at a primary school in Hednesford, followed by the installation of a prefabricated domed observatory at a technical college in Cannock. His publicity was, as usual, efficient and successful, and the second of these observatories was opened by Guy Consomagno, Director of the Vatican Observatory.

John Armitage was a bluff Yorkshireman who suffered neither fools nor authority gladly. He was adventurous, dedicated and tenacious, and he had a talent for envisaging grand plans and seeing them through to completion. It is unfortunate that the fate of some of his projects was beyond his control. Ultimately, his health also failed him, though it did not diminish his determination. His eyesight deteriorated, and a rapidly developing combination of diabetes, kidney disease, muscular disorders, and other ailments eventually overtook him. Although less well known in wider astronomical circles, he was a Member of the Association for fifty-six years.

John Armitage was born on January 1 1945 and died on October 5 2015.

R. A. Marriott



The observatory at the Black Country Living Museum, Dudley.