



## Obituary

# Melvyn Douglas Taylor (1947–2017)

Melvyn was born at home in Wakefield on 1947 September 6. His mother said he was a born astronomer, because he would only sleep for a couple of hours per night. His parents were very proud when he won a scholarship to Queen Elizabeth Grammar School where he excelled in science and art, having some of his paintings exhibited at Wakefield Art Gallery. He retained his interest in art, particularly the Impressionists, and he visited many galleries.

Aged 18 Melvyn joined Wakefield Council as a structural engineer and many of the fire station training towers across West Yorkshire were designed by him. He remained with the Council until his retirement after 40 years of service. He was very fond of explaining different concrete structures and pointing out the various types.

He had many interests, but his real love was astronomy, which started when he was 9 years old. He saw every episode of *The Sky at Night* from its beginning, sneaking downstairs to watch it long after his bedtime. He was so dedicated that his mother and sister learned to make coffee in the near dark so as not to ruin his night vision.

In his younger days he was a keen fisherman, sometimes night fishing with his uncle, which gave him the opportunity to log the occasional very bright meteor. He enjoyed watching the Six Nations Rugby Union coverage and a lifelong passion was 'cricket'; he was a member of Yorkshire County Cricket Club. He regularly attended matches at Headingley and would travel around Yorkshire to support his beloved team.

Melvyn was one of the UK's foremost variable star observers, making over 90,000 visual

magnitude estimates from his back garden, using the naked eye, binoculars and relatively small telescopes. He was prolific, also recording meteor activity throughout the year and observing the brighter comets. He submitted timings of almost 150 lunar occultations. He watched the sky for aurorae and NLC, and in the daytime he used his venerable 75mm refractor to record sunspot activity. The largest telescope he owned was a 20cm reflector, yet he preferred binoculars or a 10cm refractor for their portability. He once deliberated for 2 years over purchasing a new pair of binoculars. Melvyn used 35mm and medium-format film cameras to record meteors and a compact digital camera to record sunspots; he wasn't seduced by the electronic world of CCDs, webcams and DSLRs.

He spent many hours star-hopping to locate variable stars and this gave him an impressive knowledge of the night sky. When modern amateurs in a group watch were struggling to locate an object without the aid of their expensive computerised GoTo systems, Mel would come to the rescue and align the instrument directly on the target.

He had a friendly, outgoing manner and was a skilful mentor, particularly helpful to newcomers, giving them advice on what they could observe with minimal equipment, how to make useful observations and how to submit them to the appropriate body. He was a walking encyclopaedia when it came to discussing anything astronomical and enjoyed relating tales of notable characters in the astronomical community.

Melvyn was a member of Leeds Astronomical Society for over 50 years and served on its committee in several capacities, including a term as President. He edited its newsletter, in the early days creating the stencils on an old typewriter and running off copies on a duplicator in his garage. He wrote the monthly Sky Notes for many years. He joined the BAA in 1969 and contributed to its Variable Star Section in roles such as Binocular Secretary, Secretary and Assistant Director, and he was also very active in the BAA's Meteor Section, assisting in shower analyses, reports and papers.

In 1973 he was a founder member of West Yorkshire AS, Pontefract. In the 1970s he was Secretary of the Meteor Section of the Society for Popular Astronomy and produced the section's newsletter. He was a member of NVAESO, Isle of Man AS, AAVSO and IOTA-ES, attending a number of their annual ESOP meetings across Europe.

His draughtsman's skills were employed in producing finder charts for variable stars, novae, meteor showers and comets, and he was in de-



Photo: R. A. Marriott

mand when authors needed lightcurves for publication in papers. He wrote many articles for local and national astronomical journals, and publishers sent him books for review or would ask him to write a chapter.

He was a popular guest speaker at astronomical societies around the UK, giving innumerable talks on the subject of back garden astronomy, explaining what could be achieved from home without a large expensive telescope. He was a regular attendee and speaker at the Scottish Astronomy Group Weekends. On one occasion the Chairman introduced him as '...an honorary Scotsman...' Someone in the audience piped up 'You can only be Scots if you were born here!' This was all said in good fun of course, because Mel was so well-liked.

He made many good friends in the Leeds AS and they ventured into the Yorkshire Dales and further afield in search of dark skies, such as observing the return of comet 1P/Halley in 1986 from Tenerife. They observed the 1999 Leonid meteor storm from Cyprus. After midnight the meteors were coming thick and fast. Melvyn had his back to the radiant so they were flying over his head. The group were logging them as Leonids but he challenged this in his trademark Yorkshire tones – 'Know! [sic]. They're not coming from t' radiant! They're sporadics!'

Melvyn was a keen hill walker; he reached the summit of many peaks in the British Isles and completed several long-distance walks. One day in Italy whilst walking the Tour du Mont Blanc he demonstrated his linguistic skills by ordering four ice creams with the immortal words: 'Quattro Cornettos, please cock!' In Switzerland he reached the Hörnli Hut on the Matterhorn. He liked to visit prehistoric sites and travelled widely across the UK to locate ancient stone circles and standing stones. He would add a visit to a cathedral or a bridge to his travel plans, to take a professional interest in grand structures both old and new.

He enjoyed three successful solar eclipse trips, seeing the spectacular event from Baja California, Mexico in 1991, Zimbabwe in 2001 and the Libyan desert in 2006. On the latter, Mediterranean journey, the ship served as our floating hotel. On March 31 Mel invited us all to join him in one of the on-board bars to celebrate his retirement from Wakefield Council.

He received a number of awards from astronomical societies including the BAA's Merlin Medal and Gift in 2005. He was extremely proud to receive this accolade. In his acceptance speech, Melvyn said that his observations were made from Cross Lane Observatory. This wasn't a structure; it was just his back lawn.

Health problems restricted his mobility in recent years, although he observed the 2016 transit of Mercury from his garden and was able to monitor some of his favourite variables from his patio. He passed away at home on 2017 August 12, during the maximum of the Perseid meteor shower.

Melvyn will be greatly missed by his many friends throughout the UK and beyond.

(With thanks for contributions from Melvyn's family, Tracie Heywood, Colin Henshaw and Dave Gavine).

Alex Pratt



Receiving the BAA Merlin Medal in 2005