



Obituary

Richard M. Baum, 1930–2017

Richard Myer Baum will not have been known personally to many of today's members, but readers of the *Journal* will be familiar with his writings upon diverse historical and planetary topics.

Richard was born in Chester on 1930 July 3, and spent all his life in the city. After World War II, and following National Service in the RAF, he considered pursuing a career as an artist, later recalling his Art College teacher's demoralising habit of neatly tearing into four pieces any pupil's work not considered up to standard. In the end Richard was content to pursue his obvious talent for drawing through a lifelong hobby in astronomy. His professional career was with the Post Office, running a local branch until it suffered the fate of closure in 1983.

Joining the BAA in 1947, Richard remembered several early post-War trips to meetings in London, when he encountered many famous personalities such as Robert Barker. He also recalled his delight in obtaining Percival Lowell's books for a small sum from the second-hand department in Foyles. His early observations were made with a 3-inch [76mm] refractor, and the superior 3-inch OG of Chester's Grosvenor Museum, and with small reflectors belonging to friends. As early as 1950 he started an astronomical section within the Chester Society for Natural Science, Literature and Art.

A turning point in his observational career came when he saw a 4½-inch (115mm) Wray refractor (later affectionately nicknamed 'Charlie') for sale by an amateur astronomer in Redhill, Surrey, and purchased it upon the recommendation of Dr W. H. Steavenson. This instrument would see five decades of continual use.

Richard's first formal contribution to the BAA was to the Lunar Section, when he began to map the limb regions under the direction of H. P. Wilkins. The Lunar Section Memoir of 1950 contains a paper and chart co-authored by Baum and a certain Patrick A. Moore, both men being in their twenties. And when the largest sunspot on record up to that time made its appearance in 1947, it was Baum's solar disk drawing that was chosen to illustrate a Solar Section report by F. J. Sellers.

The enormous influence of Lowell and his compelling prose was evident in Richard's earliest observations, which – limited by the aperture of his telescope – were devoted to study of the bright planets, and in particular Venus. His drawings of that planet showed typically Lowellian spoke-like markings that aroused the scepticism of the veteran Section Director Henry McEwen. Nevertheless, Richard's paper on the subject, translated into Spanish under the title 'Nuevas Observaciones del Planeta Venus', appeared in the periodical *Urania* in 1952. His early Mars work also displayed 'canals' similar to those depicted by Lowell.



Richard Baum with his beloved telescope, 'Charlie', in the garden of 25 Whitchurch Road, Chester. A 1980s photograph, courtesy of David Graham.

Richard joined the fledgling Association of Lunar & Planetary Observers (USA), and also contributed observational work to them. In the early 1950s some of its members claimed to have spotted the faint ring of Saturn exterior to ring A, which had first been reported in 1907. On a few fine nights in 1952 and 1953 Baum thought he had seen it too. This work was written up for the *Journal* the following year, although without illustrations. His review of the accompanying historical evidence is impressive even if the Saturn Section Director seemed unconvinced by the modern sightings. To see a 1955 drawing of the ring made through 'Charlie', one may turn to G. D. Roth's book *The Amateur Astronomer and his Telescope* (1963). Baum would return to this controversial topic fifty years later, when he published full details of his important 1950s correspondence with the Swiss astronomer Schaefer, an early observer of the phantom ring.

An apparently heated exchange about Venus can be found running through several issues of the ALPO's journal *The Strolling Astronomer* during 1955–'56, when Baum was criticised by Patrick Moore over the nature of the markings upon his Venus drawings. But the two remained on good terms, as the Editor, Walter Haas, was quickly asked to point out to readers.

Richard's superbly detailed catalogue of the historical sightings of the Ashen

Light of Venus from 1643 to 1900 appeared in our *Journal* in 1957. Less controversial than it is today, the Ashen Light was another topic that attracted him, and given the number of frequent sightings during 1953–'57 it was then a topic of great current interest. As the years passed, many other stories about unresolved and unusual phenomena were attracted by Richard like moths to a lamp: lost comets, lost planets, lost rings, missing stars, and phantom satellites. A collection of such essays entitled *The Planets: Some Myths and Realities* was published in 1973 to much acclaim, and helped establish Richard as a writer and a serious historian. The book has stood the test of time exceedingly well.

Meanwhile, Richard had met his future wife Audrey in 1952. They married in 1956, and went on to have three children. Richard's observational work was naturally less prolific for some years, but with Venus still receiving priority. Richard's time was heavily occupied with astronomical work beyond our Association, particularly in the field of popularisation in the days when there were no UK astronomy magazines for beginners. He was instrumental in helping to establish the Junior Astronomical Society (now the SPA), and for some time acted as editor of its bulletin. With the help of Colin Reid and E. G. Williams he launched and edited a newsletter of his own, professionally printed locally, and simply entitled *Vega*, which ran to several dozen issues during the 1950s and attracted correspondents and authors from around the world.

In the late 1960s Richard, together with sev-



Comet West (1975a) viewed at dawn on 1976 March 2, with heavy frost and a clear, bright saffron sky. Three decades on, Richard wrote to one of the present authors: 'It was a wonderful morning. Not a cloud in sight, a wonderfully transparent sky after a hard white frost. Woke my usual time and dashed into garden and lo! there it was. All the family down in their night attire, straining to see the comet peeping just over the hedge... We even got out the step ladders! I've just rediscovered the rough watercolour I did that day. A fragment of time when all the world was sunny.'



eral other British amateurs, became involved in the Lunar International Observers Network (LION) organised by the Smithsonian Institute. Experienced observers around the world would monitor the lunar surface with the aim of correlating any changes they might see with observations made by the *Apollo* astronauts. The *Cheshire Observer* newspaper, hearing of Richard's involvement with this exciting project, and keen to present a local angle on the eagerly awaited lunar landing, ran a piece during the early summer of 1969 highlighting his activities. Such was the excitement generated by the article that Richard was contacted by several other keen amateur astronomers in the area who began to meet informally in the Baum home every Wednesday evening. By 1969 November, the group had increased in size and it was agreed that the time had come to put it on a more formal basis. Thus the first public meeting of the new Chester Astronomical Society was held in 1970 January and the Society continues to flourish to this day.

Richard joined the BAA Mercury & Venus Section Committee, serving throughout the enthusiastic directorship of J. Hedley Robinson. In 1973 November he was able to make a nice series of drawings of the egress of Mercury from its solar transit. His observational work now featured more and more strongly in the regular Section reports, while a particularly fine series of drawings of Venus passing through inferior conjunction appeared on the front cover of *The Strolling Astronomer*. Richard's association with the inner planets was known to the Council, and this would be important in connection with events soon to follow.

Council, anticipating the impending retirement of the Directors of the Mercury & Venus and Mars Sections, appointed Richard as Director of a new Terrestrial Planets Section in 1979, intending to stimulate new interest in the inner Solar System. Richard set about the task with enormous energy. A well-produced bulletin, the *Inner Planets Newsletter*, soon appeared upon the scene, and in those pre-desktop-publishing days stencils had to be accurately cut on the typewriter without a single mistake.

Richard undertook a truly prodigious amount of correspondence. Looking back upon thick folders of his letters, one finds lengthy tips on drawing the planets in colour, suggestions for project work, and anecdotes from his earlier astronomical life: always those letters were brim-

ming over with that infectious enthusiasm he had. Letters came so frequently that they often crossed in the post. On a visit to Chester one of the present authors expressed his admiration for a notebook page of Richard's superb watercolour drawings of Saturn. Richard simply obtained a pen-knife, cut out the page and presented it to him. On other occasions he posted books for him to keep, always generously dedicated and signed.

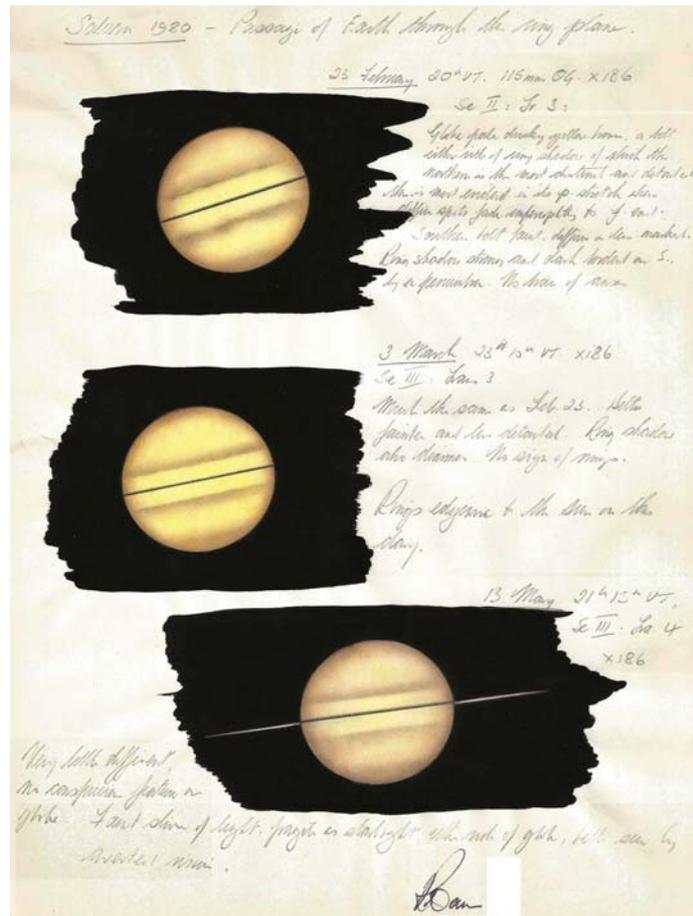
Richard's drawings were certainly widely admired, and upon hearing of his death the astronomer and artist William Hartmann commented: 'Richard Baum's telescopic drawings of the planets were some of the most beautifully rendered, and were among the sources that made me want to have a telescope and take up astronomy...'

In 1980 the first Terrestrial Planets Section meeting was held in Chester, and was unanimously judged to have been a great success. And all the speakers were invited home to a delicious supper cooked by Audrey at 25 Whitechurch Road. Further Section meetings would follow, and the first one resulted in a set of the contributed papers as a voluminous *Proceedings*.

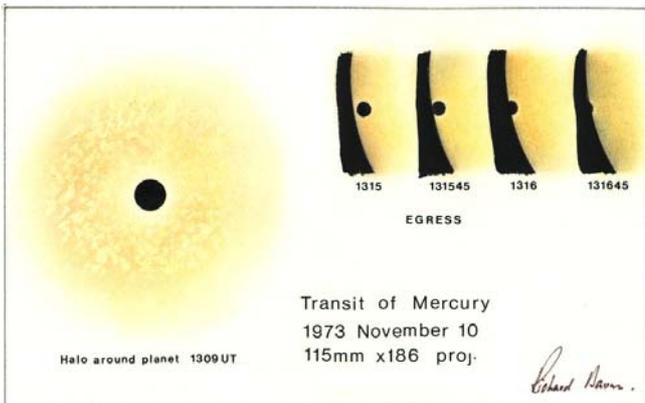
Richard had high ambitions for the new Section, and established a team of coordinators to cover the planets Mercury, Venus and Mars, with other coordinators for Analysis and Spacecraft Imaging. This proved a little too complex, and there was some friction between some of the personalities. But a greater level of interest had been promoted, and publications began to mount up. There was growing interest in minor planets too, so a subgroup headed by Andy Hollis was set up, later becoming a separate Section.

In 1980 Richard's interest in the mythical planet Vulcan came to the attention of the producer of the television series *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, and one Saturday Richard was given special permission to close his Post Office for the day, and found himself being filmed walking through the streets of the French town of Orgères, speaking on camera about Lescaubault and the imperious Le Verrier who had come from Paris to interrogate him.

Richard always had a longterm aim of re-establishing strong separate Sec-



Saturn, showing the passage of the Earth through the ring-plane, 1980 February 23, March 3 and May 13, with the 115mm OG x186 amidst pencilled observational notes (south is uppermost).



Mercury in transit, 1973 November 10.



planet's bright cusp-caps in 1995 he related the work of their even earlier discoverer Franz von Paula Gruithuisen, and always in his lucid style. Many examples could be given.

By concentrating upon the history of observational astronomy, Richard found and filled a particular niche. Along the way he produced groundbreaking articles for the *BAA Journal* and other publications, ones that often set the record straight (for example, his 2007 paper with Ewen Whitaker on the *Mare Orientale*), rescued otherwise lost reputations (witness his 2011 treatment of the career of the American astronomer T. J. J. See), or shone light upon astronomy's more obscure and eccentric characters (for example, the German astronomer Peter Hansen in his 2015 paper 'Before Lunik').

He also wrote several more well-received books, including *In Search of Planet Vulcan* (1997, co-authored with Bill Sheehan) and his engaging account of observational curiosities, *The Haunted Observatory* (2007). He also contributed to the multi-author work that commemorated the life of the Rev T. W. Webb. The

regard in which he was held as a historian is confirmed by the fact that he was invited to contribute more entries to the *Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers* (2007/2014) than anyone else, apart from the editors.

The year 2005 was truly an 'annus horribilis' for Richard. Apart from the loss of close friends such as Harold Hill and Andy Hollis, Richard's beloved wife Audrey also passed away. Shortly afterwards the tube of his 4½-inch Wray was stolen. It is true to say that Richard was never the same afterwards. He still enthusiastically pursued his astronomical interests, encouraged by his friends and by his son Julian, but these were now more in the nature of a distraction from the pessimism that increasingly overcame him. He was sustained by regular visits from astronomical friends from both Britain and overseas, and his home became something of a place of pilgrimage for visiting astronomers.

Richard enjoyed robust good health until his final years, when a bout of pneumonia obliged him to be careful in future. He had the pleasure of being able to attend the BAA Autumn week-

end meeting in Chester – hosted by the local astronomical society that he had founded – in 2017 September, and was putting the final touches to what he had intended to be his final paper (on the subject of the Mountains of Venus) when a heart attack brought about the end quite suddenly on November 12.

Richard was an amateur astronomer and an independent scholar of the first magnitude. Entirely self-taught and without academic affiliations, he mastered the techniques of rigorous research and fully documented scientific writing. He insisted upon grounding his conclusions in the careful analysis of original sources, and over subsequent decades his work attracted international attention. In 1988 he received the BAA's Lydia Brown Award for Meritorious Service, and in 2006 its most prestigious award, the Walter Goodacre Medal. In 2005 he received the Walter H. Haas Award from the ALPO, while in 2003 the International Astronomical Union named minor planet 7966 Richardbaum in his honour. Recently Richard was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Chester in recognition of the distinction he had brought to the city. Unfortunately he died before the award could be conferred.

With Richard Baum's passing our Association has lost not just a great friend and loyal servant, but also another link in the chain binding us to the past and to a great age of visual observation. He will be missed enormously by all those who knew him, and who cherished his friendship.

Richard is survived by his three children, Julian, Adrian and Jacqueline, to whom we extend our sympathies. It must be a comfort to them that through his many and diverse writings, Richard's work will live on.

Alan Heath, Bill Leatherbarrow, Richard McKim & Jeremy Shears