

## HAROLD THOMSON

Harold Thomson was born on 1874 December 19 at Brinkley Rectory Cambridgeshire, where his father, Rev. F. D. Thomson, was Rector.

Thomson's father had formerly been 10th Wrangler and a Fellow of St. John's College Cambridge. He took a keen interest in many aspects of science and from their very early years he taught his children the elementary outlines of astronomy, geology and botany.

In 1882 A. C. D. Crommelin visited Brinkley for a course of coaching in mathematics by the Rector and, while there, he took a delight in interesting the children in all astronomical matters. Later he lent them his 3 inch refractor, with which Harold and his elder brother made observations of Jupiter and other objects of interest. This year also remained in Thomson's memory for the appearance of the great comet and for the preparations made at the rectory for observing the Transit of Venus, which was unfortunately obscured by cloud.

When Harold was 14 years of age, the Thomsons moved to Barrow-on-Soar near Loughborough and he became a pupil at Loughborough Grammar School, where he was educated on the classical side.

At the age of 17 he was apprenticed to Messrs. George Clark, Marine Engine Builders, at Sunderland. In spite of the long hours of working, which were from 6 a.m. until 5 p.m., he found the time and the energy to attend evening classes on four nights a week for the study of technical subjects. After some years in the shops and the drawing office he went to sea as a junior engineer in the employ of a Melbourne shipping company, with whom he remained until he had obtained his Chief Engineer's Certificate, when he left the sea to become assistant manager to a firm of ship repairers, who employed him principally in the supervision of repair contracts on Naval vessels stationed in Australian waters.

In 1902, at the request of his old firm, he returned to Sunderland and remained with them until 1906, when he was appointed Engineer Superintendent to the well known Naval Shipbuilders, Messrs. Armstrong Whitworth, of Newcastle on Tyne.

After twenty years with this firm, with whom he became a Local Director and Manager of various Engineering Departments, he was appointed General Manager of the Whitehead Torpedo Company at Weymouth, where he remained for eight years. Then in 1935, he joined the firm of Hitchins, Jervis and Partners, Consulting Engineers of Westminster, in which he became a partner.

During his business career he visited many foreign countries and in 1947-8-9 he was again in Australia in connection with the design and construction of paper mills at Ballarat and in Tasmania. On such occasions he would avail himself of the opportunities presented of visiting local observatories.

He was a member of the Institute of Naval Architects and the Institute of Mechanical Engineers. While in the north he served on the Council of the North East Coast Institute of Engineers and Shipbuilders, of which body he was Vice President.

Thomson averred that he had inherited none of his father's ability in mathematics and indeed the mathematical aspects of astronomy made little appeal to him. The writer remembers his complete failure in the early 1920's to arouse Thomson's interest in the new ideas connected with the theory of relativity. It was the practical side which fascinated him and in which he was to achieve distinction as a planetary and variable star observer; all the same, he would surely never have attained the status he did in the engineering world, had he not acquired, perhaps at those early evening classes, a pretty good practical knowledge of what is known today in academic circles as 'Math for Science'!

When attending a course of University Extension Lectures in Sunderland, he met Rev. T. E. R. Phillips and this was the beginning of a very close friendship that lasted until Phillips' death in 1942. At Sunderland too he was able to do some observational work, mainly on Jupiter, at the observatory of Mr W. C. Sparkes and he also had occasional access to Mr Allison's 12 inch refractor at Roker.

At Newcastle he was able to erect his own observatory, which was equipped originally with an 8½ inch reflector. Later he installed a 12½ inch reflector, which was lent to him by the late W. H. Waterfield, and it was with this instrument that the bulk of his observational work was done. In 1920 the site of his observatory was required for other purposes; the observatory had to be dismantled and the telescope was returned to its owner. This unfortunately proved to be the end of his days as a practical observer; for thereafter it was beyond the power of any of his friends to persuade him to undertake the task of setting up another observatory.

A notable contribution to variable star astronomy was his compilation for the Variable Star Section of a Memoir on Nova Geminorum 1912, which incorporated his own observations, including those he made visually of the spectrum down to about tenth magnitude. He was a co-discoverer of Nova Aquilae on 1918 June 8 and he has described this as the most exciting night of his astronomical career. He made a series of observations of its magnitude and spectrum and he took the subject of Novae as the theme of his first Presidential Address to the Association.

From 1917 to 1922 he was Director of the Mars Section and was responsible for the publication of two Memoirs, dealing with the apparitions of 1917-18 and 1919-20. He also served for some time on the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society. Thomson was President of the Association from 1918 to 1920 and was for some years Honorary Director of the Durham University Observatory. For his services to astronomy the University conferred on him the honorary degree of M.Sc. With regard to his other recreations it may be mentioned that in his active days Thomson was an enthusiastic lawn-tennis player. In 1901 he married Miss Ethel M. Gleadowe, of Sydney, N.S.W., by whom he had first a daughter and then a son. Mrs Thomson died in 1907.

Harold Thomson passed away on 1962 August 26. He is survived by his two children.

B.M.P.