



Eric ‘Americo’ Watkins (1956–2025)

A friend and colleague to many in the BAA, Eric Watkins died on 2025 May 29.

Eric was born on 1956 July 9 to his Italian mother, Paulina, in the village of Angle, Pembrokeshire, where he lived until he was five. The family then moved to Essex, first settling in Silver End and then in Braintree. He had four younger siblings: Ceinwen, Dennis, Nina and David. During his childhood and teenage years, Eric frequently travelled to Italy with his family. He regularly made his many nephews and nieces laugh and smile, passing on his curiosity by making learning seem like an adventure, and guiding them on their career paths.

Eric’s longest-standing friend was David Harris, whom he met after arriving at primary school; Russell Ketley and David Stradwick soon followed. The four remained close friends for the rest of his life.

His interest in science was sparked around 1965 whilst he was a Cub Scout, when a speaker from a nearby American airbase handed him a Geiger counter. He proceeded to test everyone’s wristwatches and was thrilled to discover a ‘radioactive’ Timex watch, its hands illuminated by a radium compound. Much later, during his time in the police, he would encounter a dusty piece of machinery at Southend-on-Sea police station that no-one could identify; Eric quickly recognised it was a Geiger counter!

By the age of 13, Eric showed an interest in astronomy, and he was elected a member of the British Astronomical Association on 1970 February 25. He obtained eight O-levels at secondary school, followed by A-levels in mathematics and physics at Braintree College. His physics teacher, David Brierley, became a lifelong friend; both shared an interest in astrophysics, with Eric developing a particular fascination with observational astronomy that became central to his life. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society on 1980 September 5.

Eric joined the police force in 1978, in a job that was often tough and occasionally dangerous – a testament to his bravery. One dramatic incident involved being first on the scene when a light aircraft crashed onto a main arterial road. On another occasion, a gun was pointed at Eric and the trigger pulled – thankfully, the weapon did not fire. Eric was medically retired from the police in 1992 and went on to pursue several other jobs and activities, including helping to care for the museum in Braintree, about which he was very knowledgeable. Some exhibits related to military veterans, and he knew a great deal about the First World War and trench warfare. He was also a terrific swimmer. His dog, Bella, was a faithful companion for many years.

Despite his failing kidneys, Eric retained a great sense of humour and was full of funny stories. Whilst in Broomfield Hospital in

2003, in the lead-up to a kidney transplant, he befriended a fellow patient; the two remained pals thereafter. On his 50th birthday, he was ‘kidnapped’ by several friends and taken to northern France and Belgium to tour notable First World War sites. Although he was unwell during the trip and his companions were anxious, he thankfully completed it without taking a turn for the worse.

Eric’s childhood hobby of staying out to observe the stars, sometimes all night, blossomed into a keen enthusiasm for observing, and he gained many friends in the process, including Mark Large, Ian King, Nik Szymanek, Les Brand, Malcolm Merrington, Paul Gordon, Wayne Hawley, John Atkinson and James Collett. In 2002, Eric embarked on a part-time PhD at the University of Hertfordshire, working with Nial Tanvir on the characterisation of Cepheid variable stars – important tools used to estimate distances to other galaxies. His research progressed well and led to collaborations with several other UK and international researchers. He enjoyed the day-to-day activity of research, whilst also appreciating the broader cosmological endeavour to which he was contributing, and he became a popular member of the astronomy group. Regrettably, he had to abandon this PhD as his kidney condition deteriorated, though not before some of his results were incorporated into an important peer-reviewed paper.

Following a kidney transplant and a return to better health, Eric sought to resume active research. He first became involved in studying asteroids in 2010, contributing observations to the BAA’s Asteroids & Remote Planets Section, and he continued this pursuit for the rest of his life. He began participating in Section meetings in 2012 and was a regular attendee at BAA-organised meetings until the arrival of COVID-19.

In 2014, Eric enrolled at Cardiff University to study for a PhD under the supervision of Prof. Paul Roche. His project involved observing outbursting objects known as centaurs – asteroids between the orbits of Jupiter and Neptune which sometimes exhibit cometary characteristics. One of his favoured targets, C/2013 C2 (Tenagra), underwent an outburst in 2015 February. Unfortunately, changes to the astronomy department prevented him from completing his degree as an external student. He did, however, undertake postgraduate studies at the University of Hertfordshire.

A significant achievement came in 2016 March, when Eric obtained an International Astronomical Union Minor Planet Center code for his own observatory. The code, ‘K01’, was assigned to Astrognosis, Bradwell, UK. The observatory’s name suggests he wanted to gain



insight into spiritual mysteries through his interest in astronomy.

Since 2015, his ‘professional’ name, Americo Watkins, has appeared as a co-author on nine published scientific papers. In addition to his work on asteroids and comets, he joined the Altair Group, a team of amateur astronomers researching eclipsing binary stars in search of evidence for planets. Whenever a comet underwent a sudden brightness outburst, Eric was among the first to capture images, primarily using telescopes through the Faulkes Telescope Project, as well as several instruments in his own backyard observatory.

Sadly, his health prevented him from completing his latest construction project, and the astronomical community will miss his contributions as an active observer. His legacy will endure, with ‘Americo Watkins’ appearing as co-author on several scientific papers on asteroids and comets still to be published.

In 2009, Eric met his wife, Galina, who had come to England on a sabbatical. She held a PhD in History and intended to pursue research. They married in 2011, sharing many interests, including history, music, art, dogs and swimming. Eric’s other hobbies included playing the piano, painting, playing bridge, horse riding and learning Italian. He felt strongly about defending and supporting those who were hurt or treated unfairly.

He was called ‘Dad’ by Galina’s daughter, Ekaterina Pavlova – the only father she had ever known. Eric always called her Katrin and was very proud of her achievements: completing her first degree at King’s College London, her Master’s degree at Oxford University, and from 2019 to 2023, pursuing a PhD in Music at St Edmund’s College, Cambridge.

Eric was also very supportive of his parents. After his father’s death in 2009, he became his mother’s primary point of contact whenever she needed assistance. Sadly, she passed away in early 2025, a loss that was a great blow to him. His health declined, and after several falls he was hospitalised. He died on 2025 May 29 – too soon to witness ‘his comet’, C/2013 C2, outburst a second time far from the Sun just four months later. 🍷

Richard Miles