



# Robert Edward Mizon MBE (1946–2023)

'Bob' Mizon – teacher, astronomer, and pioneering dark skies advocate – died on 2023 April 19.

Values shape our approach to life. For Bob Mizon, family came first, but his other motivations were concern for people's welfare and education, a love of nature, and a deep fascination for the night sky. These interests led to his becoming the UK's leading dark skies advocate for over three decades.

Robert Edward Mizon MBE FRAS, or Bob as everyone called him, was born on 1946 October 14. Born and growing up in Dagenham in the post-war years, he had a challenging childhood. His father Walter was employed in Becton gas works, a dangerous reserved occupation during the East-End Blitz. His mother May was a cleaner and home maker. Older sisters Jean and Marge completed the family.

Giving their children a good start in life was a high priority for the Mizon family. That included education, and Bob learnt to read at a notably early age. His father, with only rudimentary education himself, would point out words in the *Daily Herald* newspaper and read them aloud. So rather than learning to read via the A B Cs, Bob would recognise whole words and the underlying grammar of sentences. On entering infant school, he was in advance of the class of '48 rough little east-enders'. Discovering that Bob enjoyed helping friends to read, his teacher put him to work as an unpaid teaching assistant.

When not engaged in classes, Bob was instructed to tidy up the library. One day he discovered a misplaced book – the *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Astronomy*. The youngster became hooked on the 'wonders within!' Bob would spend his evenings learning the constellations and spotting meteors. In the 1950s, light pollution was not so much the problem as the deadly London smogs, which he often spoke of later in life. He would trace his love of the night sky and education to those early experiences, together, perhaps, with his aversion to pollution.

A sudden tragedy came to the Mizon family when Bob was only 7. His father was run down on a zebra crossing by a motorcyclist. We can only imagine the shock, pain and disruption caused. His mother had to take on three cleaning jobs to make ends meet. Bob could only do what he could for the family and concentrate on doing well at school. Ever since, he was very conscious of economy and avoiding waste. He would reuse paper and cardboard for example, and in more recent years had a stamp made which proclaimed 'CfDS reuses envelopes'.

Bob's post 11+ education started at East Ham Grammar School for Boys, now called the Langdon Academy, to the east of Dagenham. The Mizon family then moved to Shropshire, where Bob attended Adams Grammar School (Newport), gaining three A-levels in languages.

This performance won him a place at King's College London, reading French and German, graduating in 1969, and qualifying as a teacher in 1970.

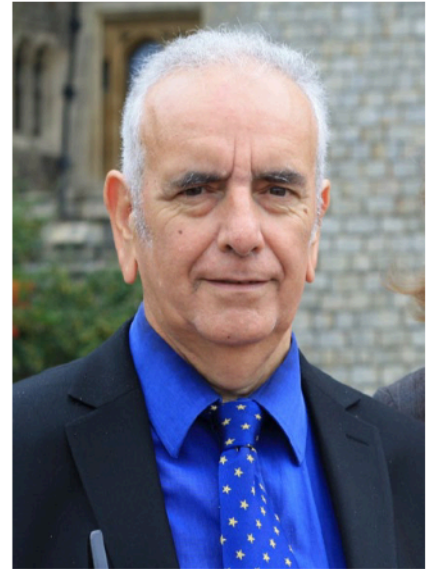
As part of his degree course, Bob taught English at a school in the south of France for a year. After a spell as a security guard, he accepted a post at Poole Grammar School for Boys in 1971. He had a happy 26-year career there teaching French and astronomy. Education was at the heart of much that Bob did. He was a well-loved and respected teacher and mentor, as attested by former pupils who attended his funeral over a quarter of a century after he had retired.

At Poole he ran the school's astronomy club, translated astronomy books from French, and became an active member of the Wessex Astronomical Society (WAS) and the BAA from 1992. We know little about his observations, but he would go into work early to have time to complete his logs from the previous night.

Bob's dedication to astronomy was how he met Pam: another teacher who liked to get into work early. Pam was then the only woman teacher at the all-boys school and the pair found they had much in common. The couple married in 1982 and set up home in Wimborne. Their children, Lydia, Elizabeth, and John grew up in their bungalow home.

Bob loved the night sky for its scientific discoveries, beauty, and remaining mysteries. He knew the subject to a level that few achieve. He was a committee member and former Chair of WAS and became a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society in the 1990s. Giving presentations on various astronomical topics was a routine activity and these were tailored to suit the audience, from knowledgeable astronomers to local community groups. He became known for being able to provide an instant talk if planned programmes went awry. When he died, there were over 300 PowerPoint presentations on his laptop, but these only covered the last ten years or so of his life. This equates to about 20 fresh presentations a year, which with repeats could mean 50 separate appearances, in addition to regular planetarium performances.

In 1996, Bob made the bold decision to leave teaching and become a self-employed planetarium presenter. His novel inflatable tent and projector (named the Mizar Travelling Planetarium, using wordplay on Bob's surname) were ideal for delivering shows to anywhere with a large clear room. He developed a network of schools as his main customers, but he would also visit local groups, holiday establishments and corporate events. If these events were for causes that he supported, then the shows would often be given for expenses only or for free. For many children, the planetarium was their first



exposure to the wonders of the Universe. Bob was delighted when later thanked by someone who attributed his presentation as leading to a fascination with astronomy and eventually a PhD. By the time he retired, he had shown the wonders of dark night skies to 150,000 children and adults all over Britain.

The greatest astronomical 'discovery' Bob made, of a comet on 1975 Aug 1, is best described from his observation log entry: 'Got very excited about it when I phoned the Greenwich Observatory and was told they had not yet been notified about it, only to discover on the 5th that I had been beaten to it by a Japanese astronomer called Kobayashi'. The accompanying sketch shows the comet in the same field of view as M106. Most of his other astronomical activities would be familiar to amateurs the world over: notching up a list of objects seen, making a few eclipse trips, undertaking photography with basic equipment from a home-built observatory, tracking comets, and taking part in stargazing events for the public.

Bob became well known locally as an astronomer and he occasionally had calls to comment on topical matters in local newspapers and radio. He also turned an interest in meteorites into an extra business by selling spare stock, sometimes donating a cut of the proceeds to campaign funds.

## Dark skies campaigning

Concerned members of the BAA set up the Committee for Dark Skies (CfDS) in 1989. Their aim was to work to reduce light pollution, ►





► particularly that caused by the then inefficient lamp designs emitting light directly upwards. This was a pioneering group, changing its name to Campaign in 1990 and joining forces with the USA-based International Dark-Sky Association (the IDA, now called DarkSky International). In the early days, CfDS described itself as a joint commission of the BAA and the IDA.

For Bob, it was the growth of street lighting in his hometown of Wimborne and a major new housing estate at Canford Heath, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, that pushed him to get involved. Being a teacher of astronomy, he was keen to protect natural darkness for the young and their future, but it was also his love for the natural environment that motivated him. Bob enjoyed birds and insects and created sanctuaries for them in his garden, long before it became widely known that artificial light is a threat to wildlife.

The first leader of the CfDS was Ron Arbour, but Ron's observation schedule and other commitments caused him to ask Bob to take over as Secretary/Coordinator. He continued with the campaign until his death: a total of 33 years of voluntary service.

Bob took charge of administering the campaign, enabling other dark-sky advocates to make their own contributions. This involved a great deal of sometimes tedious work: setting up meetings, producing minutes, organising finances, writing e-mails and letters (30 a week at one stage), and taking part in BAA Council meetings.

An important feature of CfDS was the local officer network, of nearly 140 people at one point, who acted as advocates in local communities. Bob coordinated the network, and with Graham Bryant, kept committee members, local officers and subscribers informed by producing over 60 editions of a dark-skies newsletter.

The BAA Good Lighting Award was introduced to encourage responsible actions to reduce light pollution. Bob was involved in candidate assessment, liaison with relevant people, and production of the certificate. He often made the presentations himself. Outstanding dark skies advocacy efforts were recognised by Bob and others with the presentation of The Joy Griffiths Award. His regular articles in the *Journal* kept BAA members informed of CfDS activities.

Bob was a born communicator. Often traveling great distances at night to talk to small groups of people, he was an early promoter of the phrase 'light pollution', and if you have heard of it then you can probably thank him.

One of the activities he most enjoyed was meeting the public while attending astronomical shows and other events. In addition to CfDS volunteers, Bob's wife Pam would sometimes take turns at the CfDS exhibition stand to allow others a break. A popular feature of the stand was the sale of books and miscellaneous astronomical items, including his meteorites. These were either donated by the BAA office and supporters or were bargains bought to sell at profit. The book display would often feature Bob's own works.

Bob had considerable creative writing and editing skills and over the years contributed to uncountable leaflets, web pages, and media posts, as well as writing dozens of articles for magazines and yearbooks. He routinely wrote campaigning letters to the editors of local and national newspapers, and even satirical observations to *Private Eye*. Many a politician received a letter from Bob. This creativity extended to the making of a video for YouTube.

In the autumn of 2001, Bob's book *Light Pollution: Responses and Remedies* (Springer) was the first by a single author on this subject, intended for the non-specialist. Information for urban astronomers featured in a 50-page guide to deep-sky objects. A much-revised 2nd edition in came in 2012. His third book, *Finding a Million Star Hotel*, was published in 2016, dealing with the emergence of astro-tourism and including a substantial section on what to look at in the night sky. Bob was also known for the annual *Stargazer's Almanac*, starting contributions in 2001, and later writing the whole text.

These communication skills were vital when dealing with local, national, and international leaders. Whenever opportunities arrived, Bob would meet politicians and civil servants to try and influence policy. In the mid-1990s, CfDS coordinated with other European societies to lobby the European Parliament (Bob provided translation services and delivered the petition to Brussels). In 2003, the CfDS was active in supporting the UK parliamentary Science and Technology Select Committee's work on light pollution. This led in spring 2004 to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister issuing a policy directive for the new planning guidance (PPS23) intended to ensure that local authorities considered light pollution in planning decisions. In 2006 October, Bob even had the opportunity to discuss lighting with Queen Elizabeth, giving pointers on lighting improvements for Buckingham Palace.

He returned to Westminster on many occasions, including with the undersigned in 2018 when responding to the 25 Year Environment Plan. More recently, Bob was one of the instigators of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Dark Skies, which signalled a very hopeful change in attitudes from government. His involvement also led to the creation of the UK Dark Skies Partnership.

At the local level, Bob was involved in initiatives to gain Dark Sky Reserve status for the many National Landscapes and Parks in the UK. He often joined the teams of trained volunteers who would make the required photometric Sky Quality Meter readings at places mapped across the region concerned. In 2011 November, Exmoor, with Bob's help, became the first International Dark Sky Reserve in Europe. He returned each year thereafter to conduct a residential astronomy course as part of the Dark Skies Festival. He was also highly active with the South Downs National Park and Cranborne Chase AONB dark skies certifications.

Bob attended many conferences, such as the 14th European Conference (1997, addressed by Bob in the French language), and organised many more. In 2003 and 2006, the CfDS



Bob Mizon manning the CfDS stand. (Courtesy of Pam Mizon)

organised the European Dark Skies Symposium in Reading and Portsmouth. His presentations at the Institution of Lighting Professionals' annual conference had lasting impacts, and lighting professionals are now some of the greatest advocates for responsible lighting. In 2014, Bob took the CfDS exhibition stand to the Local Government Association conference, and he was organising a return to this event when he died.

Bob had suffered from progressive kidney failure since his 20s and needed dialysis from 2009 onwards. Never accepting any curtailment of his activities, he would take his self-dialysis equipment to wherever he was. He eventually received a transplant in 2014, for which he often expressed deep gratitude. Early in 2023, ill health caused Bob to cease his planetarium shows, but he continued to advocate for responsible outdoor lighting, taking the CfDS exhibition stand to the BAA's Winchester Weekend only the week before his death on April 19.

The IDA awarded Bob its prestigious Galileo Award in 2006, and the David L. Crawford Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016. Formal recognition in the UK came in the 2010 Birthday Honours, with the award of an MBE, 'for voluntary services to astronomy and the environment'.

Following his death, the Eurodark2024 Conference in Holland was dedicated to Bob and his long-term fellow campaigner Wim Schmidt. And his old friends in the Wessex Astronomical Society now organise a prestigious lecture each year named in his honour.

Bob donated thousands of hours each year to astronomical and environmental causes, constituting a lifetime of voluntary service, with exceptional support from his wife and family. He was respected for his profound knowledge, while his kindness, sincerity and sense of humour made him well liked by a large network of contacts, nationally and internationally. We have much to learn from Bob's stoic humility and from his determination to never give up the struggle. 🌌

**Howard Lawrence**  
Acting Coordinator, Commission for Dark Skies