



Terry Platt (1946–2025)

A pioneering astrophotographer and founder of Starlight Xpress, Terry Platt played a key role in bringing CCD imaging technology to amateur astronomy.

Terry Platt died on 2025 June 17 following a sudden, short illness. Terry's firm, Starlight Xpress, was set up in 1990, and he was instrumental in bringing practical CCD cameras into common use amongst amateur astronomers in the UK and around the world. Those of us brought up in the days of chemical photography owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

Terry was born on 1946 March 30. He first developed an interest in astronomy in 1955, when he received an encyclopedia as a Christmas present. The sky at his home in the small village of Gargrave, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, was dark and perfect for astronomy. His first telescope was a 32-mm refractor which he used on many nights to seek out objects listed in various library books, and he attempted to photograph the Moon by placing a cheap 120 roll-film camera behind the eyepiece.

The appearance of comet C/1956 R1 (Arend–Roland) in 1957, combined with the start of the Space Age, confirmed his interest in the night sky. He was also very enthusiastic about electronics and made many radio receivers and transmitters from parts scavenged from old TV sets.

In 1961, he decided to build a reflecting telescope. He bought a 15-cm $f/8$ mirror from Brunnings in London and made the tube from oil drums flattened out and riveted together. A wheelbarrow wheel served as the polar bearing, together with an ancient gearbox. Although this setup, which saw first light in 1962, was crude, it worked quite well. Over the following years he experimented with various films, made several telescope drives and tried his hand at mirror grinding. He also built radio telescope receivers while attending grammar school in Skipton. The school acquired a 10-cm refractor, and he became involved with the school astronomical society. He first joined the BAA in 1962.

In 1970, he started work with Racal Electronics in Bracknell, Berkshire. At about this time, the first imaging CCD prototypes were being developed in the USA, but it would be another decade before they started to make a significant impact. One of the firm's engineers had an old analogue security TV camera, and Terry soon attached this to his 25-cm Newtonian with encouraging results. Terry's experiments with analogue vidicon TV cameras culminated in the early 1980s, when he developed a digital frame grabber interfaced to a 48K Sinclair Spectrum



computer. This allowed video frames to be integrated and processed. He started submitting impressive planetary images, taken using this system and a 30-cm $f/5$ Newtonian, to *The Astronomer* magazine. In those days, data were stored on cassette tape, and it took half an hour to read each image into the computer!

In 1986, Sony brought out a relatively low-cost CCD imager, the ICX021. Terry bought one, and the results were dramatic. Terry's planetary images using this device were excellent, but he wanted better optics, so he decided to build a telescope with no central obstruction. The design he selected for planetary imaging was an off-axis 32-cm $f/12$ quadri-Schiefspiegler. Terry always submitted his images to the relevant BAA sections, and in 1990, he captured a high-resolution image of a large regional dust storm on Mars, which appeared on the front cover of the *Journal*.

In 1990, Terry founded Starlight Xpress, and he started to develop CCD cameras for sale. At the time, there were various guides to building your own CCD camera, but this was fiddly and not an option for many people. The early Starlight Xpress designs used a Peltier-cooled, 500×256 pixel sensor with an external frame store, which interfaced to a PC via the parallel printer port. The sensor may have been small, but the performance was spectacular, even compared with the best films available at the time, and key BAA imagers, such as Ron Arbour and Martin Mobberley, started to take up the challenge of digital observing. Take-up of this new technology in the UK would have been much slower if it had not been for Terry and Starlight Xpress.

Over the next two decades, planetary and deep-sky imaging techniques changed dramatically, and much of this was due to the ►



► cameras that Terry developed. As technology and sensors evolved, Terry and SX continued to introduce new cameras to the market. Even though the business was now growing rapidly, Terry always found time to answer technical and observing questions. Despite the arrival of Chinese manufacturers in the market, SX managed to remain a powerful force due to the quality of its products and Terry's personal touch. This remained the case right up until Terry's untimely death last summer.

Terry married in 1969. He met Christine through her father, who also worked at Racal in Bracknell. They had two children, Nicola and Adrian, along with a granddaughter, Amber.

Terry was a big Disney fan and was often seen walking around the office wearing a Disney tie. Due to his fondness for Disney, he and his family spent most of their holidays in Orlando, Florida, for more than 25 years, hopping from one Disney Park to another, with the odd visit to the Universal parks thrown in. He was also a huge fan of *Star Wars* and, in recent years, could not visit the parks without riding the simulators there.

Terry was a very private and unassuming person. He was always humble about his achievements and felt lucky to be able to spend his life combining astronomy and electronics, his two passions. 📺

Nick James

BAA Comet Section Director

This obituary was written with assistance from Richard McKim, Martin Mobberley and Michael Hattey.



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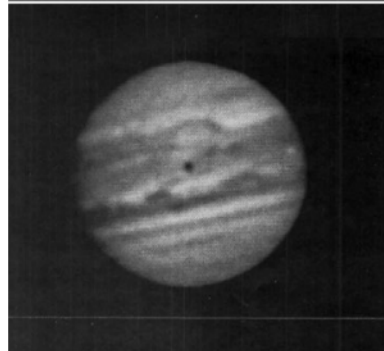
A young Terry, pictured with the reflector which he constructed.

RIGHT

Early CCD planetary images of Mars and Jupiter by Terry, which in 1991 appeared on the covers of the February and June issues of the *Journal*, respectively. Top: 1990 November 6, 00:15 UT. Bottom: 1991 January 1, 01:04 UT (Europa and its shadow are in transit). Taken using a Sony ICX027B CCD and a 318-mm off-axis reflector.



The first commercial Starlight Xpress camera.



Terry's first CCD imaging set-up.

