



Roger Derek Pickard (1943–2023)

Roger Pickard was known to many members of the Association, having served as Director of the Variable Star Section for 20 years and as President from 2007 to 2009. He was elected to the BAA on 1966 April 27.

Roger was born on 1943 January 20 at Plumstead, London. A quantity surveyor by profession, he worked for many years at the London Electricity Board. He made the daily rail commute from his home in the Kentish village of Hadlow, where he established an observatory.

Roger was introduced to astronomy at the age of 12 by his father. One of his first observations was of Comet Arend–Roland, with its famous anti-tail, in 1957. Possessing no telescope, he borrowed his father's opera glasses which were far from ideal. Things improved when Roger started work, as he discovered that a senior colleague was also very interested in astronomy and had built himself an 18-cm Newtonian. Roger was sufficiently encouraged by this to copy the design and construct his own 21.5-cm Newtonian based on Wildey optics. First light was a while coming, as delivery of the mirrors and eyepieces was delayed by the dreadfully snowy winter of 1963.

After a period of viewing the usual celestial lollipops that all neophytes go through, he was a little bored. All this was to change when he joined the Crayford Manor House Astronomical Society and, shortly afterwards, the BAA. He began a programme of Jupiter transit timings, as well as observing Saturn, lunar domes and, of course, variable stars.

It was the variables that really grabbed Roger's heart. For many years he was a visual observer, contributing over 4,000 observations to the Variable Star Section (VSS) Photometry Database since his first – of the Mira variable, W Cas, on 1967 October 7 at 21:36 UT. However, he was always intrigued by new technologies. It was therefore not surprising that he became an early adopter, within the amateur community, of the blossoming technique of photoelectric



Roger with his 16-inch telescope, specifically designed for photoelectric photometry. The instrument was constructed by John Wall.

► Roger Pickard with the 35-cm Meade LX200 at his observatory in Shobdon in 2023 August.



photometry (PEP) in the early 1980s. His pioneering PEP work with his 40-cm reflector at Hadlow not only yielded important, and precise, photometry of variable stars, but it also encouraged others to enter this rather specialised field. In his 1986 *Journal* paper 'Getting started in photoelectric photometry', Roger casually introduced readers to one of the hazards associated with PEP. He noted that 'There are one or two obstacles to overcome before you can start observing, not least of which is the very stable high voltage of around 1,000 V that is required by a typical photomultiplier tube. But don't let this worry you: with a little care there is no need to be concerned about such high voltages...'¹

Notable PEP contributions included his accurate timings of minima of many poorly observed eclipsing binaries. An example was the identification of a major period change in the W UMa system, VW Cep, based on PEP by Roger and John Watson, analysed by Chris Lloyd.² The star has a very small range of 7.31–7.71 V, which demonstrates the exquisite suitability of PEP to such low-amplitude systems.

Not only did Roger undertake PEP himself, but he was also keen that professionals and amateurs work together to exploit this technique in the furtherance of variable-star astronomy. To this end he became involved in the International Amateur-Professional Photoelectric Photometry (IAPPP) community, organising several PEP meetings.

Later on, Roger once again demonstrated his love of new technologies when he progressed

into the emerging field of CCD photometry with an early Starlight Xpress CCD camera. This also coincided with another of his interests: computers. His first CCD observation in the VSS Photometry Database was of RT And on 1999 Dec 19. This target was chosen as it was part of an observing campaign organised by Prof James Sowell of the Georgia Institute of Technology, USA, to redetermine the times of minimum of a number of members of the intriguing RS Canum Venaticorum family of variables, a type of close eclipsing binary star which exhibits secular variations of period and minima.

Roger focused on CCD photometry for the rest of his variable-star career, and the VSS database contains around a quarter of a million of his measurements. He successfully encouraged others with similar equipment to take up CCD photometry, with quite a number heeding his call, including the current VSS Director.

A major VSS project that Roger promoted was to ensure the Section's vast archives of handwritten observations going back to 1840 were entered into the VSS database. Initially the database was run in DOS, but he was always keen to find more user-friendly interfaces, which ultimately led to the one we have today, developed by Andrew Wilson. Roger coordinated and encouraged a small army of volunteers over the years to enter the data manually into the database. Each regularly received a brown A4 envelope through the post, bursting with photocopies of VSS observation report forms. In undertaking this project, Roger identified a



Roger entering into the Hawaiian spirit during the High Energy Astrophysics Workshop at Waikoloa Beach in 2002 July. *Left to Right: John Toone, Marian Pickard, Hazel the taxi driver, Hazel McGee, Roger Pickard. (Image courtesy of Hazel McGee)*

significant problem in the VSS archives: data were missing for some years. Fortunately, much of the data resided with the original observers, so he encouraged them to resubmit their observations.

Roger became VSS Director in 1999, a position which he held until 2019. This makes him the longest-serving Director since the Section was formed in 1890 – a remarkable record. In this role, Roger made a significant contribution to variable-star astronomy. In recognition of this meritorious service to the BAA and the VSS, he was awarded the Association's Merlin Medal & Gift in 2020.

As VSS Director, Roger continued to encourage the pro-am links to further variable-star science which he had already established. In the late 1980s, he gained a place on the Professional-Amateur Liaison Committee,

which was formed to discuss projects in which professionals and amateurs could collaborate in variable-star research. The idea was that amateurs would produce observations under the guidance of professionals, who would then carry out the analysis. Other pro-am collaborations were to follow, such as the RAS/BAA Pro-Am committee, which held its inaugural meeting at Mill Hill in 2000, and another at Cambridge in 2002 January on the subject of 'Explosive and Variable Stars'. He also supported many pro-am campaigns, both in a personal capacity and as VSS Director. These included a CCD photometry campaign on high-amplitude delta Scuti stars (HADS) and the 'HOYS-CAPS' pro-am campaign on young stellar objects run by Dr Dirk Froebrich from the University of Kent, both of which continue today.

Another milestone in Roger's variable-star career was attending the first High Energy

Astrophysics Workshop in 2000 April, at Huntsville, Alabama, USA. The workshop was organised by the American Association of Variable Star Observers (AAVSO), NASA, and the Marshall Space Flight Center. The aim was to encourage amateur observations of gamma-ray bursters (GRBs) and other exotic objects. At the time it seemed barely credible that amateurs could detect GRBs, but subsequent history showed that they can and do! Roger attended a similar workshop at Waikoloa Beach in Hawaii in 2002 July. In later life, Roger and his wife Marian spoke fondly of these overseas trips which they went on together.

Although he was especially interested in electronic photometry, Roger faithfully promoted and supported visual observers, drawing attention to what can be achieved in spite of the rising tide of digital observations. He was always keen to counter the myth that the era of the visual observer is drawing to a close. He gave innumerable talks at BAA meetings and at local astronomical societies, and wrote extensively on visual observing in the *BAA Journal*.

Roger was given the rare honour of being made an Honorary Member of the AAVSO, which was bestowed upon him by the AAVSO Director, Arne Henden, at the joint BAA/AAVSO meeting held at New Hall, Cambridge in 2008 April. Dr Henden noted that this was in recognition of his contributions to, and support of, international cooperation in variable-star matters and promoting the exchange of information, data and ideas between the BAA VSS and the AAVSO.

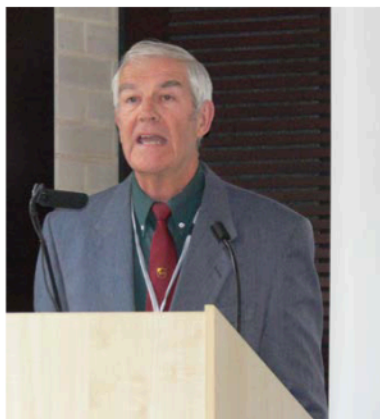
Roger served as President of the BAA during 2007–2009, a role he fulfilled whilst still VSS Director. Characteristically, his Presidential Addresses were on the subject of 'Variable stars and stellar evolution';^{3,4} during these he discussed how amateurs can contribute to furthering the field.

Beyond the BAA, Roger was also very active in the wider astronomical community and will always be associated with Crayford Manor House Astronomical Society (CMHAS). He was introduced to CMHAS by the late Jack Ells, one of its leading members. One day Roger noticed Jack, seated in the same compartment of their London commuter train, reading an astronomical book. Rather than introduce himself straight away, which might have been seen as presumptuous, the next day Roger brought his own copy of the same book and a conversation began! It was Jack Ells who fanned the flames of Roger's burgeoning interest in variable stars.

For many years, Roger was responsible for putting together an outstanding programme of speakers for CMHAS' weekly meetings. His network of contacts in both the amateur and professional communities was extensive and proved invaluable for attracting the range of high-profile speakers for which Crayford became famous. Together with the late Dick Chambers, Roger also ran Crayford's two-year basic astronomy course and another course on advanced amateur astronomy.

Crayford was of great significance to Roger's life in another regard. It was through CMHAS that Roger met his future wife, Marian. She

► *Left: Roger addressing delegates at the joint BAA/AAVSO meeting held at New Hall, University of Cambridge in 2008 April. (Image courtesy of Tonny Vanmunster)*



Right: Roger with his BAA Merlin Medal and certificate in 2021.





was not a member herself, but her father was. Roger related the story that Marian's father had told her that there was little point in going out with him as he was far too dedicated to astronomy. Despite this, Roger and Marian married in 1970.

For many years, Roger was also a member of Maidstone Astronomical Society in Kent. Meetings were held in Nettlestead Village Hall, not too far from his Hadlow home.

When Roger retired, he and Marian moved to Shobdon, near Leominster. Here he established an observatory dedicated to CCD photometry. The observatory was not much larger than the Meade LX200 14-inch (35-cm) telescope, but that was of no matter as Roger controlled it, and its CCD camera, from his study in the warmth of the house. He soon came to appreciate the warm delights of remote observing, though he did miss seeing the night sky rotating above his head. Living in deepest Herefordshire, he also became involved with his local astronomy club, the Marches Astronomy Group.

Beyond astronomy, Roger and Marian were dedicated church bell-ringers. They enjoyed visiting many bell towers around the country to ring. They also fostered many children over the years.

In summary, Roger Pickard made a lifetime contribution to variable-star astronomy, both as an observer and as VSS Director. As its longest-serving Director, he saw many changes in the field, including the adoption of new observing techniques such as photoelectric and then CCD photometry, the move from handwritten observation reports to digital submission, and the emergence of large astronomical surveys. Yet he ensured that the Section remained relevant to contemporary variable-star enthusiasts, both visual and CCD. He promoted the VSS far and wide and encouraged people to take up variable-star observing with simple equipment such as the naked eye or binoculars. He forged links with the professional research community, which rightly holds the work of amateur observers in high regard. He has many citations in the NASA Astrophysics Data System, including peer-reviewed papers.

Roger was a true gentleman and a wonderful encourager of people. He passed away on 2023 December 26, at the age of 80. He will be missed by all who knew him and who cherished his friendship. Roger is survived by Marian and his three children, Christopher, Stella, and James, to whom we extend our sympathies. It is surely a great comfort to them that his work and legacy live on. 📧

Jeremy Shears

Director, Variable Star Section

- Pickard R. D., *J. Br. Astron. Assoc.*, **97**, 14–22 (1986)
- Lloyd C., Watson J. & Pickard R. D., *Information Bulletin on Variable Stars*, no. 3704 (1992)
- Pickard R. D., 'Variable stars and stellar evolution – Part 1', *J. Br. Astron. Assoc.*, **119**, 241–248 (2009)
- Pickard R. D., 'Variable stars and stellar evolution – Part 2', *ibid.*, **120**, 273–279 (2010)

Notice

The BAA Awards & Medals for 2024

Council will shortly consider nominations for the Association's Medals and Awards for 2024. If any member wishes to nominate a fellow member for some notable contribution, please send a suitably worded citation to the Business Secretary no later than Sunday, 2024 May 12. All nominations must be in writing and signed by two sponsors. Please try to confine citations to one side of an A4 sheet of paper.

Conditions relating to each award are given below. Members are requested to read the conditions carefully and to ensure that citations comply with the conditions for the relevant award. A list of previous recipients of the Awards and Medals may be obtained from the BAA Office or the website at britastro.org/home/about-us/awards.

Walter Goodacre Award

The award, which is the senior award made by the Association, shall ordinarily be made at intervals of not fewer than two years, and not more than four years since the last award.

The award shall be given in recognition of the recipient's contribution to the progress of astronomy over many years, special regard being had to his or her work communicated to the Association, this work being communicated in any form, and not necessarily in writing, provided that the recipient is a member of at least five years' standing in the Association at the date of the Annual General Meeting in the year of the award.

astronomy. If two or more persons have been jointly concerned in any particular work, a joint award may be made, in which case each person shall receive a medal and gift.

Steavenson Award

This award shall be made at the discretion of the Council. It shall be awarded to a member who has made an outstanding contribution to observational astronomy.

Lydia Brown Medal & Gift

This award shall be made at the discretion of the Council. The award shall be in recognition of meritorious service to the Association in an honorary capacity over many years, on grounds that would not qualify the nominee for either the Walter Goodacre or Merlin Awards. If two or more persons have been jointly concerned in any particular work, a joint award may be made, in which case each person shall receive a medal and gift.

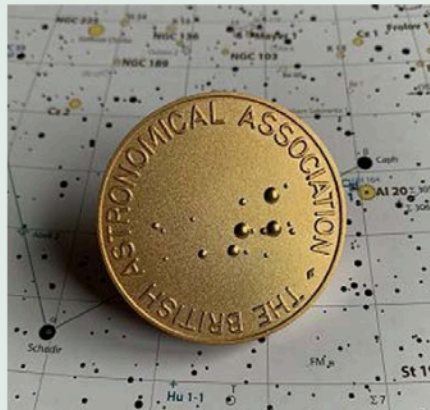
Merlin Medal & Gift

The award shall ordinarily be made not more than once in any year and not less often than once every five years, the year being reckoned to start at each Annual General Meeting.

This award shall be made in recognition of a notable contribution to the advancement of

Horace Dall Medal & Gift

The award shall be made at the discretion of the Council but not more than once in any calendar year. It shall be made to a person or persons, whether or not members of the Association, who have shown marked ability in the making of astronomical instruments. If two or more people have been jointly concerned in a particular work, then each person may receive a medal and gift. 📧



Bill Tarver, Business Secretary