



Obituary

David Pettitt (1936–2017)

David was born on 1936 May 18 in Darlington, Co. Durham, the elder of two sons. His father was a tool maker, and his mother a commercial artist, decorating ceramics. The family lived in London during much of the war. During the blitz David and brother John were taken by their mother to Lincolnshire. However they didn't like it, and soon returned to London. From their Harrow home, David remembered seeing the docks in London ablaze. He also remembered the buzz bombs being dropped on London, and during his spare time collected pieces of shrapnel. After the war the family returned to Darlington, and then moved to Newton Aycliffe.

After leaving school David went to college in Darlington. He had a keen enquiring scientific mind, and as a child constructed his own radio set, so it is probably not surprising that he began work in the design office at Ferguson's radio manufacturers in Spennymoor. Here he met Marian,



David Pettitt at the Mills Observatory, Dundee, during the BAA weekend meeting in 2016 September. (Photo: Ken Kennedy)

who worked in the factory as a radio calibrator. David did National Service with the RAF in Lincolnshire, where he was responsible for looking after the RAF radio transmitters. Everything in the station had to be kept spotless, so they came up with the idea of tying towels around their feet so whenever they went anywhere in the building, the floor would be polished to a high sheen.

Marian and David were married in 1958 in Kirk Merrington, and in 1963 David achieved his electronics certificate. In the early 60s David and Marian moved to Cumbria, initially to Whitehaven, so David could work as an instrument technician at Sellafield. A work col-

league suggested David apply for a job with the new ITV station that was starting in Carlisle, Border TV. So in 1963 the family relocated to Carlisle. David's first job with Border TV was as a cameraman. He then moved into video control, ultimately becoming an outside broadcast

supervisor until retiring in 1995.

As well as working for Border TV, David created his own 'pirate' TV station. He built a spot scanner out of bits and pieces and would broadcast simple images to a friend living in Newcastle. This pioneering endeavour was brought to an end when a neighbour, who worked for Customs & Excise, knocked on his door, and said 'I know what you're doing, you'd better take it down.'

There were three keys to David's life: family, fell walking and astronomy. He was a keen fell walker and was a National Park Warden for 37 years. Because of his mountaineering expertise, David was called upon to assist with the search for wreckage and personal belongings following the downing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie. David was assigned to Strathclyde Police as a mountain guide supervisor, to assist them as they swept the mountainside for evidence.

His other great passion was astronomy. He constructed his own telescope and observatory in his back garden and in 1968 he was elected to the BAA. He was also a Fellow of the RAS. His particular interest was in the aurorae. He led the BAA's Aurora Section Magnetometry Group for several years until magnetic data became readily available from online sources. He published a paper in the *Journal* on 'A Fluxgate Magnetometer' (*J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, **94**(2), 5561 (1984)). He was also an active observer of asteroidal occultations, obtaining a positive recording of asteroid (112971) 2002 RA20 occulting the star TYC 2865-00415-1 on 2014 Dec 2. He attended the BAA Weekend Meeting in Dundee in 2016 September.

In Carlisle, David was a founder member of the Border Astronomical Society. About 1979 he was offered a 16-inch telescope mirror by Harry Clough, a member of the Scottish Astronomical Group. This led to the building of Trinity School Observatory, as a member who taught physics there and ran an astronomy club persuaded the Education Dept. to purchase the mirror. The school paid for the building and the work was done by Technical College students over a ten year period. Border Astronomical Society (which is open to all) moved there in 1986 and is still thriving 46 years after its foundation. Carlisle would not have a public observatory if David had not founded Border Astronomical Society.

David had a son, Michael, who was born in 1960, and a daughter Claire, born in 1965. He was also grandfather to Harriet, Alexander, Talia & Gabriel. They remember how he would share his love of astronomy with them, showing them the observatory he built in his back garden, and looking at the stars together. David passed away on 2017 January 14, aged 80.

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▶ 1882 which was the first to be photographed. More recently Ikeya-Seki in 1965 reached magnitude -10 and was photographed near the Sun using a ground-based coronagraph. All of these sungrazing comets have almost exactly the same orbit, prompting Heinrich Carl Friedrich Kreutz to speculate that they are all the progeny of an earlier monster comet which split up at perihelion, possibly in AD 386. Many more sungrazing comets have been discovered by the SOHO spacecraft.

Alan noted that the discoverer of the next sungrazing comet was less and less likely to be a human observer and, by 2022, the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope (LSST) was likely to dominate Solar System discoveries in the southern hemisphere. This widefield instrument will be able to detect comets to approximately magnitude 25 in a 9.6 square degree field with an exposure of only 30 seconds.

Alan then described some of his own recent research, specifically some work done to recover two of the periodic near-Sun comets detected by SOHO as they returned to the inner Solar System. This resulted in the recovery of

P/1999 R1 (SOHO), now renamed 322P/SOHO, using the FORS camera on VLT in 2016 January. This object was previously categorised as a near-Earth asteroid, near its end state. Alan said that any object becomes a comet if it gets too close to the Sun, since even rocky objects are volatile in the heat at that distance!

After a short tea break, members of the Comet Section gave a series of four ten-minute talks. Roger Dymock gave an update on *Astrometrica*, and the debate on magnitudes and comet tails reopened. Simon White showed how he imaged comets to make stereoscopic pictures, David Eagle gave some more details about PACA and Nick Atkinson gave the closing session on the use of APCC to track comets.

BAA President Jeremy Shears then closed the meeting with thanks to the NNHS, the Director and all those who contributed to an excellent day. Given the temperature of the day the scuttle to the nearest watering hole was fairly orderly.

Janice McClean

Editor – The Comet's Tail and the BAA Newsletter