

Obituary

E. H. Collinson, 1903-1990

Edward Howard Collinson, the eldest son of John Howard Collinson and Sarah Catharine (nee Penney) was born on 1903 November 15 in Ipswich and lived in Suffolk all his life. He became interested in astronomy at the age of ten, and his first astronomical notebooks date from 1914, when he was attending Ackworth School along with his brothers Hugh and the late Norman; later he attended Bootham (also a Quaker school) and continued his observations with various small refractors. He was able to see Nova Aquila 1918 three days after its discovery in June, and followed its magnitude and colour changes for some months. Edward joined the BAA on 1920 November 24 and was its third-oldest member when he died in its Centenary year. His astronomical observations were to receive their first mention in print in the report of the 1921 BAA Exhibition meeting: '... perhaps the most interesting exhibits were those by the schoolboys of Bootham School, Yorkshire, a school which has an astronomical tradition, for one of its schoolboy members was a discoverer of Nova Andromedae in 1885. The exhibits were notebooks by E. H. Collinson, W. A. Duckworth, A. Halliday and A. A. Miles, whose ages ranged from 15 to 18 ...' (*Journal*, 31, 214). In his membership of seven decades he served the Association with distinction in numerous capacities. He never sought publicity and was always very modest about his observational work.

Upon leaving School, Edward served Articles as a solicitor to J. B. Cullingham in Ipswich, for whom his father had worked. He took his solicitors' Finals in 1927, spending almost all of his professional career with the firm of Block and Cullingham, becoming Senior Partner in 1946. Edward served as President of the Suffolk and North-East Essex Law Society in 1959, while he was also a Trustee of the Ogilvie Trust (administering Almshouses and charitable funds) between 1930 and 1982. Later, his son followed his father in the legal profession.

In his earlier years Edward's hobbies included tennis, travel, walking and mountain climbing. But astronomy dominated his thoughts from an early age, as we have already noted. In the 1920s he used a modest 3-inch (75-mm) refractor which he mounted in his garden on a cast iron pier. He tried his hand at photography from an early age and set up various cameras on a simple equator-



Edward Howard Collinson.
Presidential portrait.

ial mount. In this he received encouragement from H. H. Waters, then a prominent member and an authority on the subject. A gramophone motor and a driving rod were contrived to provide the motion in RA. Most of the photos were wide-angle ones of star fields, and long exposures were possible in the dark skies of rural Suffolk in the 1920s. His interests moved early on towards meteor photography, but the long hours of work involved caused him to invent an ingenious automatic meteor camera, which he described in the *Journal* for 1929 February (39, 150) and 1934 February (44, 156). This camera changed plates every hour while the observer could go to bed. The meteor work brought him into contact with a life-long friend, J. P. M. Prentice of Stowmarket (who was also a solicitor). Manning Prentice, together with G. E. D. Alcock and Collinson formed the backbone of the Meteor Section for many years. Although Edward did a great deal of meteor photography before the Second World War, and wrote about it several times in the *Journal*, the lenses and emulsions then available led to limited success. Later, however, large fast lenses became available as war-surplus items, and Edward was probably the first to apply them to meteor work. He obtained several excellent images of bright meteors, including one of a fireball in 1948, reproduced here. He encouraged Harold Ridley to attempt

meteor spectrography, in which field the latter achieved considerable success. Edward's photographic work continued into the 1960s and he obtained particularly good results with the 1956 Perseids. He also did a good deal of comet photography.

Apart from his 'schoolboy' observations, Collinson did not pay much attention to the planets in the nineteen-twenties as he lacked a large instrument, but he did observe Mercury in transit in 1924, and in the same year saw Mars at the closest opposition of the twentieth century through a friend's 10-inch reflector when on holiday in Brighton. This series of nine drawings was the first he contributed to the Mars Section. He was inspired by the work of Professor W. H. Pickering on 'lunar vegetation' and made series of drawings of the dark patches in the lunar crater Eratosthenes, which he published in the *Journal* (34, 306).

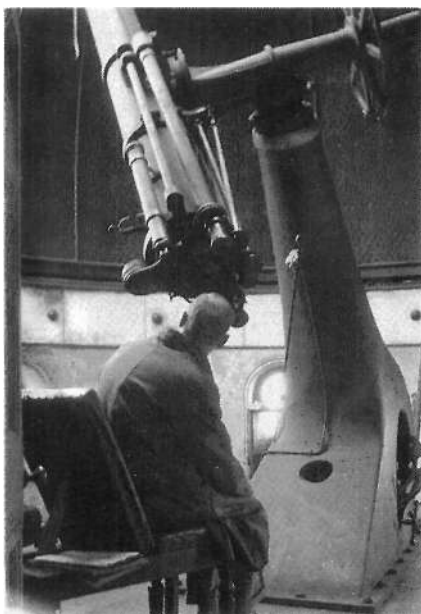
In 1930 Edward was invited to make systematic use of the 10-inch (254-mm) Merz refractor at Orwell Park, Nacton, Ipswich. This telescope, once used by the eccentric Colonel Tomline had not been used much since the Colonel's death. Living only a short car journey away, Collinson put the telescope to good use, principally on Mars and Jupiter during 1930-35. The dome rail of the Orwell Park telescope afforded spectacular views of the surrounding countryside, being built on a very high tower, and Edward often reminisced about those times in later years. His drawings appeared in the *Jupiter Memoirs* and some of his Mars work appeared in the *Journal*. He also took some lunar photographs. Many years later he told the writer that this had probably been the best planetary work he had accomplished. Edward's drawings were always accurate and artistic, but he considered that he never saw exceptionally fine planetary detail. By the 1930s Edward was enjoying a voluminous correspondence with Prentice, Waters, W. M. Lindley and many others; he preserved most of this till the end of his life.

In 1935 he was elected FRAS and also borrowed the Association's 10-inch With-Browning reflector, on a massive German equatorial mount, and built a run-off shed in which to house it in his garden at Felixstowe (*Journal*, 45, 248). This instrument stayed with him till he felt he could no longer make full use of it, in the late 1980s. He kept up his meteor work and started observing fainter variable stars (in addition to Mars and

Jupiter) with the reflector. He later told me that he took up the work on variables 'to have something to do when Mars was not around'. However, he was also very interested in variables for their own sakes, and had in any case been observing them since the 'twenties.

In 1938 he married Eileen Mabel Woodhead, and they later had two children, John and Jenny, but their domestic life at Playford, Ipswich was soon interrupted by world events. Upon the outbreak of War in 1939 September, the Association's Council debated a set of emergency regulations and Edward gave valuable legal advice at short notice. He had already served on Council from 1927, and his legal opinion was often sought on future occasions. He was unable to observe for much of the War, being engaged upon relief work in London from 1941 June, as a member of the Friends' War Victims Committee. This committee had been set up to alleviate civilian distress, and Edward used his professional skill in arranging hostels for bombed-out Londoners. After the War he was active in the new Ipswich Astronomical Society, and served a term as President. Mars was still his favourite planet, and he was able to assist P. M. Ryves with the preparation of the 1941 *Memoir*. In 1952 Gerald Merton invited him to become the next BAA President.

Collinson's period as President seems to have been a tranquil one. The *Journal* was expanding again towards its pre-War length, and contained more illustrations. He presided over the Burlington House gatherings of Council and mem-

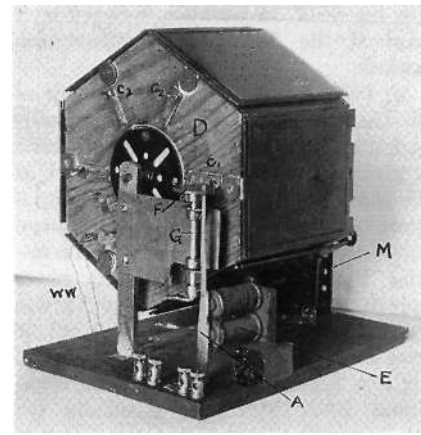


Collinson at the eyepiece of the Orwell Park Observatory's 10-inch refractor in 1930.

bers in a quiet and efficient manner. The most notable event of his Presidency was the organisation of a joint BAA-RAS expedition to Sweden to view the 1954 July total solar eclipse. This venture was a great success, and it was fitting that he himself described the expedition in the *Memoir* 'The British Astronomical Association: The Second Fifty Years' (42 (2), 1990). He also gave much time and energy to writing and delivering two authoritative and well-illustrated Presidential Addresses on 'Photography' and 'The Planet Mars'. Although these subjects have dated rather badly, they represent excellent summaries of our knowledge at that time. The Address about Mars was soon produced as a special BAA reprint. Edward served on the RAS Council from 1954 to 1956, and also sometime as a member of the Royal Society's National Committee for Astronomy. The Collinsons moved to Culpho End in 1954.

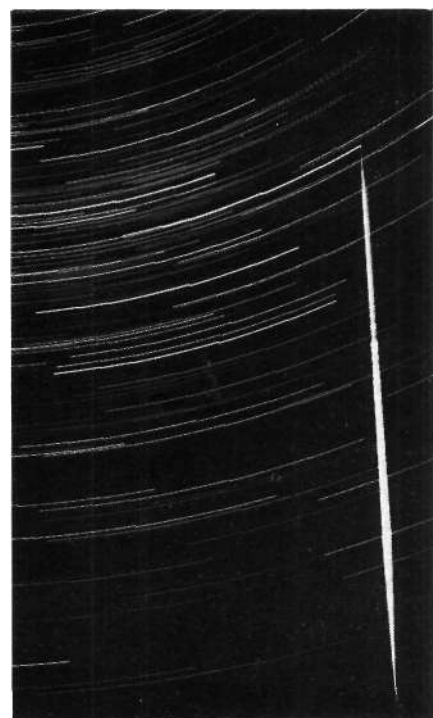
In early 1956, Ryves died suddenly and Collinson was appointed to succeed him. He considered that it was not really possible to publish reports on the observations which had accumulated during Ryves' tenure of office, and instead began a series of reports on the contemporary oppositions of the planet in the *Journal*. 1956 was a perihelic opposition, and the great dust storm made it an unusually interesting one. The Section was in contact with the Commission des Surfaces Planetaires of the Societe Astronomique de France, then chaired by Dr Audouin Dollfus. One result of this collaboration was the use of the Wratten 47 blue-violet filter in the observation of white clouds, and in searching for the Blue Clearing. The new IAU map was adopted as a standard reference, and new report forms introduced (there had been none previously). He produced brief but informative reports at each of the Martian oppositions from 1956 till 1978. During his Directorship, the post of Director of the Variable Star Section also fell vacant. Edward was one of its most senior observers, and he was offered the post as an alternative Directorship. However, he felt he did not have the theoretical knowledge necessary nor the time to do the job well, and declined with regret.

Collinson continued to direct the Mars Section till 1979. He moved from Culpho End to Snape, Saxmundham, in 1972 and retired from his business in 1973, living happily in retirement. Both Edward and Eileen enjoyed the Snape Music Festivals, which they never failed to attend, but Eileen died in 1979 and Edward moved for the final time, on this occasion to a bungalow in Playford in



The automatic meteor camera plate-changer.

the garden of the house he built in 1939. Edward was now able to take up regular solar work with his Watson-Conrady 3-inch refractor bought as long ago as 1920. He also found some additional time on his hands for desk-work for the Variable Star Section, and together with John Isles and Ian Howarth compiled three Section Reports on Z Cam for 1926-77 (*Journal*, 85, 438; 89, 169, 597). But a great deal of analysis he did remains unpublished for he worked on the logging of observations (involving the writing out of a fair copy of the combined light estimates for a particular variable in chronological order) for a future VSS *Memoir* on Long-Period Variables.



Fireball of 1948 August 12d 23h 41m, photographed with a Kodak Aero-Ektar lens of 7-inch focus at $f/2.5$.



BAA Update

For his work on variables Edward later received the Association's Steavenson Award.

In 1979, faced with the retirement of the Directors of the Mercury and Venus and Mars Sections, and realising a desire to give greater continuity to the work of the Mars Section (Mars comes to opposition only once every two years) Council combined the two into the new Terrestrial Planets Section. Edward never approved of this decision (and he was certainly not alone in this view) but he took an interest in and gave support to the new Section: he also attended occasional BAA Meetings, especially the

Exhibitions. He missed the 1980 Mars opposition as his telescope was still dismantled after his move to Playford. In 1982 and 1984 the planet was too low from his observatory, after which he retired from telescopic observation with the reflector. His solar and binocular variable work continued till the summer of 1989, when he suffered a stroke. Though weakened and immobilised by the illness he never lost his interest in the BAA, and was always keen to see astronomical friends. A year before his death he presented all his astronomical equipment and his entire library to the Association. Some years before, he had

already given the BAA his collection of photographic lenses. He died peacefully on the morning of 1990 September 26, less than a month away from our Centenary on October 24. By his passing, the BAA has lost a 'gentleman astronomer', and we extend our sincere condolences to his son, daughter and seven grandchildren.

The writer thanks John Collinson, Michael Hendrie, Colin Munford and Harold Ridley for their reminiscences which have helped in the writing of this tribute.

R. J. McKim