



Obituary

Gilbert Satterthwaite, 1934–2013

With the passing of Gilbert Satterthwaite, who died suddenly at his home in Kent on 2013 July 20, we have lost a long-standing BAA member and Council member, a founder member and past-Chairman of the Society for the History of Astronomy, and a connection to the Royal Observatory at Greenwich when it was still a professional establishment.

Gilbert was born on 1934 May 22 in Norwich. His father was an accountant in electrical contracting. During World War II, the business was seconded by the military, and the family became responsible for contracting and auditing the electrical requirements of new army bases right across the southwest of the country. The Satterthwaites moved to Dorset, and Gilbert recalled their house in Weymouth being bombed, forcing them to move out into a local village.

Gilbert's grandfather had to move around between the many different military camps in the West Country. Gilbert recalled one particular manor house being kitted out as the headquarters for the local US army. Rather than going to school, he would occasionally be allowed to go with his grandfather to work where he could get nice food and treats from the American soldiers such as chocolate, which was not available anywhere else in the UK.

When the war was over, Gilbert's father and grandfather returned to Weymouth. His grandfather opened a café, his father started an accountancy business nearby, and his uncle took on the army electrical contracting. Gilbert attended Weymouth Grammar School. As a teenager, he was an NCO in the Army Cadet Force and a signalling instructor. He took A-levels in Physics and English Literature.

His introduction to serious astronomy was under Dr A. F. O'D. Alexander, then director of

the Saturn Section of the BAA, which Gilbert himself later directed. Gilbert joined the BAA in 1948 at the age of 14.

His first job was in 1952, as part of the Meridian Department of the Greenwich Observatory. Famously, in 1954 he was the very last person to log published observations (of 1 Ceres) at Greenwich before the observatory moved to Herstmonceux. This was not supposed to happen – that honour was meant to belong to the Astronomer Royal – but the weather intervened and the final night's observing was lost.

Many years later Gilbert took an MSc in the History of Science and Technology at Imperial College, and his dissertation was on the history of the Airy Transit Circle; Dr Allan Chapman recalls Gilbert presenting him with a copy of the thesis, which Allan has cited in his own researches on the Greenwich Observatory. Gilbert also took part in two 1971 editions of *The Sky at Night*, one demonstrating the Airy transit telescope and the other describing the return of the 28-inch reflector back from Herstmonceux to Greenwich. His son, Martyn, recalls going to bed early so that he could be woken up to watch his father on television.

In 1957 Gilbert married Valerie; they had three children, Martyn, Joy and Nigel (who sadly predeceased his father). Between 1957 and 1965 Gilbert worked for the scientific publishing department of Pergamon Press. This involved travel to visit authors, and sometimes book fairs, on the Continent. Also in 1957, he began lecturing in Adult Education, specialising in astronomy. He became University of London Evening Lecturer at Goldsmiths College and St Marylebone Literary Institute. In 1970, he returned to Greenwich to become a lecturer at the Greenwich Planetarium, a job he carried out for 32 years.

Martyn recalls 'sitting under the dark dome at the planetarium in Greenwich. Dad would be giving lectures using the planetarium projectors which seemed like such futuristic and amazing machines to a small boy, watching the audience's amazement as the stars, planets etc. filled and moved across the sky, and dad explained to them what they were experiencing'.

In 1961 the family moved to North Leigh, Oxfordshire, and here Gilbert started work on *An Encyclopedia of Astronomy*, which was published in 1970. He was also an editor of the 1973 edition of *Norton's Star Atlas*. Between 1971 and 1975 he was editorial controller for Pitman Publishing, and later in the seventies a freelance editor. He also wrote many articles on popular astronomy.

After careers in observational astronomy, lecturing, publishing and writing, Gilbert added another string to his bow in 1976, becoming senior laboratory technician at Ravens Wood Boys' School, Bromley, Kent. Around this time he also became further education lecturer in astronomy for Bromley Adult Education. Later he taught applied optics in the teaching laboratory at Imperial College between 1989 and 2001, remaining afterwards as an honorary member of the Optics

and Photonics group of the Physics department.

In the BAA, Gilbert served as a Council member between 1959 and 1961, and again between 1967 and 1975, during which time he was also Director of the Saturn Section (1970–'75). His time as Section Director was not helped by illness and his other commitments at the time; he found it difficult to keep up to date with Section reports, and eventually the Directorship reverted to Alan Heath. As an observer, Gilbert was popular and gregarious.

His son mentions the 'huge telescopes in the garden – we weren't allowed to touch them unless under his strict supervision, of course – and groups of astronomers congregating around. I remember observing comets and planets with him.' He was a founder member and honorary life president of Orpington Astronomical Society, and an honorary member of Ewell Astronomical Society, among others.

The range of Gilbert's interests was quite extraordinary. In 2000 he was elected a member of Commission 41 (History of Astronomy) of the International Astronomical Union. He was a fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, a member of the British Society for the History of Science, and editor and executive secretary of the Geological Society of London. He was a member of the William Herschel Society and also a Founder Member of the Arthur Ransome Society.

Finally, there was the Society for the History of Astronomy, the setting in which I knew him best. Gilbert was a founder member of the SHA in 2002 and became the society's second chairman between 2004 and 2011. I remember him as a genial chairman, who ran society meetings with good humour and common sense; he clearly relished the rôle and the honour of the post. At the SHA's AGM in 2013 October, we stood in silence for Gilbert, remembering a popular and knowledgeable man who was a central part of British astronomy for over sixty years.

Madeline Cox, the current chairperson of the SHA, wrote 'Gilbert made an enormous contribution to the SHA as well as to the history of astronomy, and indeed astronomy generally, over a very long and productive life. And he was a thoroughly nice chap to boot: a gentleman in the very best sense of the term. He will be greatly missed.'

I am grateful to members of the BAA and SHA for their memories of Gilbert; and especially to his son Martyn, who took time to send me a comprehensive biography with fond and touching recollections of his father.

Mike Frost, Director, Historical Section

