

## Harold Hill (1920–2005)

With the passing of Harold Hill, selenographer *extraordinaire*, not only has astronomy lost one of its last great visual practitioners, but an important link in a chain that stretches back to the moment the first telescope was pointed at the Moon: a period of four centuries during which the backyard astronomer, to use an Americanism, could wander freely across the surface of our satellite making meaningful observations in the spirit of a scientific investigator, and adding to the sum of knowledge. Sadly in the post-*Orbitier* period this role has been reduced to that of a tourist who marvels at relics of the past, and reflects on human destiny.

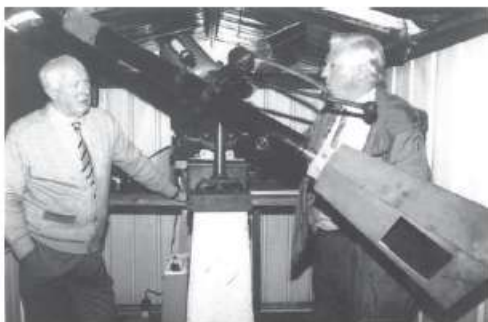
Though witness to the change, Harold stood aloof. He was linked both in spirit and substance to the great chain of pioneers who struck out against all adversity and established the foundations of lunar cartography. The history of that pioneering interval with all its excitements, its false alarms, its wild speculations, from Schröter's 'Selenites' to William Henry Pickering's 'new selenography' to the patient, careful charting of the topographers has yet to be properly chronicled, but when it is, the name of Harold Hill will again be remembered, and the memory of his long night vigils at his home, idyllic Dean Brook House at Orrell, near Wigan, put into true context.

None except a small handful who knew him intimately, can know just how much time he spent at the eyepiece and how methodical was his approach. Some might think him obsessed. They would be wrong. Enthusiastic certainly, but Harold was never

so taken by his subject as to sacrifice all else. He had a genuine sense of wonder, an almost childlike desire to see what it was like on the other side of the hill so to speak. Such an interest cannot be quantified. It is of the same ilk as drives people to risk their lives on some impossible mountain face, or to sail dangerous waters.

Each year Harold would purchase *The Astronomical Ephemeris* and methodically plan ahead in a diary bought for the purpose, when and what to observe on the Moon, sometimes getting up before 3 a.m. to catch a formation at a favourable illumination and libration. Weather permitting he remained faithful to that diary. In this way he constructed a large archive of eyepiece impressions of how diverse regions look under various angles of illumination, the technique initiated by J. H. Schröter in the closing years of the eighteenth century and at which Harold with precision and a good eye for detail became highly skilled.

Spectacle also fascinated him and he would wait years to capture a special moment. He was thus rewarded during the early hours of 1988 November 3 by the breathtaking sight of sunset on the Great East Wall of Clavius, a scene he rendered exquisitely



Harold Hill (left) and Richard Baum with HH's refractor. Photo by Alan Heath, 1993.

sely in a memorable and evocative series of pen and ink drawings. (See Hill, *Portfolio of Lunar Drawings*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp.118–121: 121).

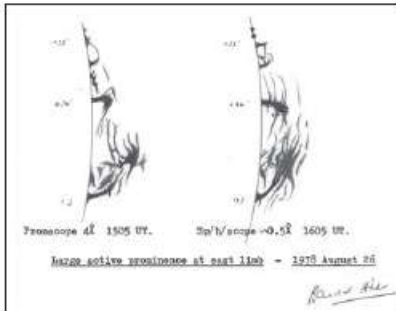
All this is but a fraction of what Harold achieved. Sadly the curtain descended on 2005 October 23 when the man whose consummate artistry had long inspired and encouraged fellow moon-watchers worldwide was suddenly taken ill at his desk. Upon admittance to Wigan Infirmary he was diagnosed as having suffered a mild stroke and kept in for investigation and treatment. Unfortunately he developed a chest infection and in spite of intensive treatment passed away on October 30.

Thus ended the life of a most remarkable man, a dedicated astronomer with a singular gift for drawing exactly what he saw at the eyepiece. But Harold was not solely focused on the Moon. He was also an avid watcher of the Sun and its phenomena, an interest that dates back to the late 1940s. He used a simple but excellent 3" refractor, having made his own projection box. It was equatorially mounted on a tripod and served him for white light observations in his lifetime. He enriched the life of one of the authors (EHS) and awakened his interest in solar work.

Many friends and acquaintances called at Dean Brook House to look at sunspots. Anyone who had a real interest was welcome but Harold was not so happy if a visitor just wanted a 'peep'. He had many friends in the United Kingdom and abroad, mostly like-minded, with whom he had an intensive correspondence. Though often considered a 'loner', he and Phyllis frequently hosted visitors from near and far, some even from the USA. He particularly disliked the occasional flamboyant visitor who professed enthusiasm without any firm grounding. Harold was



Harold with his spectroheliograph. Photo by Norman Rogers, 1977.



An example of one of Harold Hill's solar drawings.

loath to join any local Society. At times he was a member of the BAA and held the position of Director of the Solar Section, but for one year only as he found the job too arduous and it interfered with his observing programme.

Harold had superb engineering skills. He constructed a prominence spectroscope and started to produce fine drawings of prominences. Yet he wanted to record H $\alpha$  features of the solar disk, and embarked on the construction of a spectrohelioscope – a mammoth task. He obtained a fine grating on permanent loan but the rest of the equipment he made himself apart from the mirrors. He constructed a hut to house the instrument. A motorised heliostat directed the sunbeam through a small hole into the darkened hut. The result was stunning due to his superb planning and craftsmanship. It enabled him to observe the Sun not only in H $\alpha$  but also in other wavelengths.

With this setup he made a rare observation. During the 1973 November transit of Mercury he was able to see the planet in H $\alpha$  light after fourth contact. (*J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, 84(4), 279–280, 1974.)

A nature lover and a keen gardener, devoted husband and family man, Harold was also a first-class nature and architectural photographer, but never used his camera on astronomical objects. He and his wife Phyllis always had one or two dogs, some having been found abandoned and rescued by their son Edward on the motorway and brought to his parents. Many years ago

Harold worked as a surveyor in the coal mines and was held in high esteem as an accomplished draftsman.

As an astronomer, this skill served him well when drawing what he saw at the telescope. He made a sketch, noting carefully the dimension and proportions of the object and numbering the various shades of brightness. Later, at his desk, he transferred his sketch onto drawing paper, using ink and rendering the light intensities by diluting the ink to various degrees or by using the stippling method and, if need be, using subtle and exquisite colouring. He added beautifully handwritten comments to each finished drawing.

Originally, Harold used his fine 12-inch (305mm) f6 reflector in his home made observatory. Years later he used a 10" reflector. Eighteen months before his passing, he treated himself to a superb 8" Maksutov which he deemed superior to any other reflector he had used. It enabled him to intensively observe Mars at its most recent opposition.

He was awarded the well deserved Merlin Medal by the BAA in 1969.

He was always hesitant about publishing his work but his lifelong friend Richard Baum talked him into sending a selection of his lunar drawings to Cambridge University Press, which resulted in the publication of his masterpiece, *A Portfolio of Lunar Drawings* (1991). His special interest in lunar topography was the South Polar Region. He famously worked on this project for almost four decades, even waiting 18 years, to revise or complete an observation under identical libration and illumination. To his friends his map of the region seemed perfect, yet he was not satisfied as some minor details remained unsolved. Sadly, it was never published.

Around that time one of the authors (EHS) carefully studied Horace Dall's article on constructing an H $\alpha$  Promscope. He managed to follow the well-described instructions and having obtained a 4Å H $\alpha$  filter, succeeded. Harold was quite impressed by its performance and decided to

make one himself. Both were thus able to observe prominences and compare findings.

Some years later Harold acquired a Daystar H $\alpha$  filter which enabled him to observe solar disk features such as filaments, plagues and the occasional solar flare. Eventually the filter developed a fault. He then gave up solar observing, concentrating on his lunar and planetary work.

He was engaged in observing Mars during its very recent apparition. In September 2005 he wrote to say that he had made some 40 drawings of the planet since July of that year, and was looking forward to its November opposition – but fate intervened.

He is mourned by his dear wife Phyllis, his son Edward and family as well by his very many friends. But his drawings live on as a memorial to a most gifted man whose artistry is unique.

**Eric H. Strach**  
**Richard M. Baum**

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