

The Association was saddened by the death last summer of Henry Tiarks, elected on 1916 November 29 and its longest-standing member. During a long and demanding career in banking there was never space for astronomy to be anything more to Henry than a hobby, but he wore his astronomical heart proudly upon his sleeve and rarely missed an occasion to use a business undertaking as a route to some possibly more exciting astronomical exploit.

Henry Tiarks was introduced to observing at the age of 11 by no less than the then Astronomer Royal in person, Sir Frank Dyson, an experience that was to captivate his interest in astronomy for life; even by the time he reached his nineties and most of the other interests in his busy life had been outlived, astronomy still retained for him its unique fascination. It was his particular joy to receive news from the astronomical scene, through journals, letters or preferably from visitors (whom he always welcomed enthusiastically and graciously), and he also contributed a few of his own observations^{12,3} and Memoirs⁴ to this *Journal*. Although he had no formal training in science beyond the usual school curriculum of his day, he was blessed with an alert mind and a highly reliable sense of scientific insight; those gifts, combined with an aptitude for being in the right place at the right time, rewarded him with some enviable astronomical experiences that further fuelled his passion for inquisitive observing.

Henry himself describes in his Memoirs the circumstances of that privileged introduction to astronomy. His grandmother, who happened to live near the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, had recently been widowed and found herself the owner of a 4-inch telescope which she had no experience in using. When her grandson was to visit her she invited Dyson to dinner on a fortuitously fine evening, and asked if he would be so kind as to demonstrate to them the use of the telescope. Delighted by the celestial sights which even a modest telescope can reveal, grandmother and grandson alike became fascinated by observing, and as Henry had absorbed the instructions well the pair was soon able to dispense with professional advice and to demonstrate to other visitors some of the wonders of the skies as seen through their little instrument. When Henry was a pupil at Eton a few years later, the mathematical staff granted his request, unprecedented from a junior man, to be allowed to renovate and manage the school's observatory which had been a little neglected through lack of interest. Henry soon became well acquainted with the patterns of stars presented by the night sky,

and was thus able in November 1916 to recognise the appearance of Nova Aquila through a chance break in the clouds and to be the first in the world to report the observation. (When the RAS, to whom Henry had telephoned, rang back to say that the sighting had just been confirmed in a telegram from South Africa, the call was - perhaps unfortunately - intercepted by the Headmaster, who was incredulous that one of his boys could have made such an impressive



Past 90 and still observing ... Henry Tiarks using his 8-inch Cooke refractor in the garden of his home near Marbella, 1991 November.

discovery). Henry also loved to recount, with considerable amusement, the occasion when the school observatory was visited one Sunday afternoon by two senior boys, who made diligent enquiries about the movement limits of the telescope and finally issued a request to point the instrument, not at some day-visible planet or star, but to the window of the Headmaster's house, where a certain young lady was taking tea.

As has been described fully in the press obituary notices, Henry's business life in Schroder's Bank in London was effectively preordained by family tradition, but throughout his smooth and swift apprenticeship he kept a weather eye open for any opportunities to follow up astronomical interests. Thus it was that, during months of commercial training in Hamburg, he con-

trived to be at the gates of Bergedorf Observatory on a fine night when a transit of Venus was taking place, and despite the embarrassing inappropriateness of the visitor's attire (Henry had been to a party) the astronomer who received him allowed him to stay and observe. Henry was also received at Potsdam Observatory by Finlay Freunlich during the same period. He was not then 22.

The influences Henry inherited through family connections together with his known interest in astronomy and a flair for languages (especially German) opened up many such opportunities. He was fortunate in having acquaintances who were not only interested in natural phenomena but who also had the means and the time to carry out enterprising and unorthodox ploys, though the realisation of many of those exploits was in no small way due to his own infectious enthusiasm. He was always ready to take risks to maximise the adventure, and it is clear that personal safety was less of an issue then than it is today. Whilst still a trainee he represented Schroder's financial interest in the Chilean and Bolivian railways, and on one occasion rode on muleback with a guide to see for himself a mining site at a considerable altitude. As the two climbed higher and higher up the lonely mountain track, increasingly frequent piles of bones on the ground drew comment from Henry, who was told by the imperturbable guide that 'it was mules; they can't take the altitude'. He also relished recalling the danger side of a private expedition to the Hebrides in 1921 to observe an annular solar eclipse. The party encountered a superstitious hostility from the locals that might have daunted anyone less than James Cook, but the situation was apparently rescued by inviting the threatening headman to look for himself through the telescope: sharing was believing - or, as Henry put it, 'That converted him!'

Attempts at airborne observations of solar eclipses were to follow, the supremest by far being a successful expedition to fly in the path of the 1954 eclipse over the Shetlands in a BOAC Hermes. The chosen location proved to be very cloudy, but as the plane was engaged in training exercises its precise flight path could be diverted to a region where the sky above was entirely clear. Tiarks' account of the adventure⁷ reveals not only his utter fascination with the phenomenon itself but also a shrewdness in noticing many peripheral effects - the colour of the approaching shadow upon the clouds beneath, the optical effects of viewing the shadow upon, rather than through, clouds, the fade-out of nearby radio stations during totality - as well as scientific descriptions

supported by confident numerical estimates. His other published notes, on a vivid sighting of the 'green flash'¹ from on board the *Mauretania* during a transatlantic run, and a well-argued explanation for the familiar 'moon illusion'³ are remarkable in that they reveal eyes that are constantly taking in the natural sights and a mind that is always concerned to understand what is explicable yet also appreciating what is purely aesthetic. Even for a high-powered businessman, the pace of life in those decades allowed opportunities for reflection about the relationships between the phenomena that observant eyes could spot. It is not self-evident that astronomers who now function almost entirely via computer terminals are necessarily better off in every respect.

Henry never missed an opportunity to capitalise on 'being in the neighbourhood' to make unofficial visits to world observatories. He had become acquainted with Edwin P. Hubble, and on one truly memorable occasion was invited as a personal guest of EPH to spend a night with him at the Mount Wilson 100-inch telescope. During visits to other major observatories in North America he records a night spent at the newly-commissioned 200-inch Palomar telescope, and also meeting the Slipher brothers at Lowell and enjoying discussions

with them. He always had the good sense to do his homework properly, thus constituting the perfect 'intelligent layman' to whom most professional astronomers enjoy talking. Much later, when he had retired to Spain, he enquired about the possibility (in September 1987) of visiting the new William Herschel Telescope on La Palma, and was not only received graciously by the incumbent staff in charge but also had the honour of watching the night operation of the telescope for many hours in company with the Director (Professor Bokserberg) who was also visiting the Observatory. To mark the occasion Henry presented the Observatory with the copy of the National Portrait Gallery's picture of William Herschel that hangs in the dome still.

The house in Spain which he built for his retirement had telescopes mounted on both south and north balconies, while his beloved 8-inch Cooke refractor in the garden was housed in a replica of the Palomar 200-inch dome. Automatic radio control of the dome was introduced later so that he could demonstrate its neatness to visitors from indoors - and without having to display at the same time his increasing frailty, which irritated him as much as it shackled his adventurous spirit. He was the chief inspiration behind the Malaga Astronomical Society, to whom

the door of his dome was always open and with whom he happily shared sights and thoughts. Having seen Halley's Comet as an 11-year old boy he was absolutely determined to see it from terra firma on its next return - and did so, though of course sharing with everyone else a disappointment at the poor spectacle it provided. His youngest grandson attempted some solace in observing that he (James) was young enough also to expect to see it twice - even though he could never hope to see it in its impressive 1911 glory.

In all the many activities that occupied his long life, Henry Tiarks exhibited a strong affinity for adventures that required entrepreneurial skills. His was that special charm of appearing what one observatory manager described as 'riveting yet self-effacing'. He was a born leader of men and a true lover of the skies, and it was in a sense astronomy's loss that so much of his energy had to be focused on business rather than on astronomy.

R. Elizabeth Griffin

- 1 *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, 42, 226 (1932)
- 2 *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, 64, 364 (1954)
- 3 *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, 87, 302 (1977)
- 4 *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, 100, 172 (1990)