

Obituary

Peter D. Wroath, 1926–2008

Peter Dowling Wroath was born on 1926 March 26 in St Austell, Cornwall, the eldest of four children. His early years were spent at South Molton in Devon where his father kept a newsagent's shop and in due course became Mayor. While at school Peter developed an interest in science and also showed a talent for painting. At the start of the war he left school to help run the family business. During the war Peter and some friends formed the locally popular Ricardo Dance Band in which he played the piano-accordion. Following a period of national service Peter moved to the Isle of Wight with his family and continued to work in the family business, at the same time becoming an accomplished yachtsman and tennis player. While living in Cowes he met and married Norah and they had two daughters, Julie and Jenny.

Around this time his interest in astronomy was growing and in December 1955 he joined the BAA. One day while he was working in the shop a lady came in and asked Peter if he would like to buy her husband's telescope



as he had lost a leg and was no longer able to use it. This turned out to be a 10" Newtonian reflector on a Sellers mounting, a very substantial instrument in those days. This really got him going. Astronomy also led to some family strife. While attending the first BAA Exhibition meeting in London, Peter could not resist buying a new eyepiece. Unfortunately the money used for this had been earmarked for a new carrycot for Julie.

Finding the 10" telescope too cumbersome, Peter decided to make an equatorially mounted 6" reflector from scratch including grinding his own mirror. To this he attached an old Victorian plate camera for his first experiments in astrophotography.

In 1957 Peter attended Ripon Hall theological college in Oxford with the intention of becoming a member of the clergy but after two happy years there realised that his real leaning was towards science. With no scientific qualifications he applied for a job at the nearby Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell. To his surprise they took him on and he became a member of the team building the new Proton Linear Accelerator. It soon became clear that Peter had an aptitude for building experimental equipment and making it operate reliably. When the Rutherford High Energy Laboratory was formed under the auspices of the National Institute for Research in Nuclear Science to take forward the UK particle physics research programme, Peter transferred across with the PLA team. There he met Laurie Lintern who became a life-long friend and with whom he was to share many of his subsequent astronomical adventures. Together they spent many years helping to build and run a series of particle physics experiments on the Proton Synchrotron at Rutherford, at the DESY laboratory in Hamburg and at CERN in Geneva.

When funding for particle physics in the UK was reduced and staff redeployed into other areas, Peter moved into the Press and Public Relations Group where he produced the Rutherford Annual Report and organised external visits to the laboratory. During one of these visits by the newly formed Newbury Astronomical Society, Peter met for the first time many of the people who were to become close personal friends. He quickly joined the Society and attended meetings regularly for many years. He served on the committee for seven years during the 1990s and was always to the fore in helping at public events run by the Society. These included the 'Stars and Space' public open day at a local school in 1994 which attracted over 1000 visitors including many children, and the annual Newbury Garden and Leisure Show which proved to be fertile ground for growing membership of the society. Peter had an amazing memory for jokes and stories and was great fun to be around. He was a regular attendee at the BAA Winchester Weekend and when this coincided with his birthday it provided an ideal excuse for a party and a cake.

In 1967 and 1975 Peter published two



articles in the *Journal* on practical methods in astrophotography and on building an observatory. The latter described the roll-off roof observatory he constructed with his brother's help in the back garden of his house in Abingdon. This housed his remounted 6" reflector and a wide-field camera equipped with an Aero-Ektar lens which he used for comet photography. With this equipment he secured excellent images of Comets Bennett (1969i) and West (1975n), among others. He particularly enjoyed photographing the Moon and took photographs of several lunar eclipses. He often hosted visits by schoolchildren to his observatory and gave talks to local Scout and Guide groups.

In 1983 Peter obtained images of Comet IRAS-Araki-Alcock and as Halley's Comet approached in 1985 he was determined to try to photograph this also. By now he had a 8" Celestron SCT. After several attempts thwarted by light pollution, weather and nearby trees, he and Laurie finally succeeded in securing an image just as the comet was about to disappear once again behind the trees. This was clearly a cause for celebration (above). In spite of deteriorating health, he also managed to photograph Comet Hale-Bopp in 1997. He became an honorary member of the BAA in 2005 marking 50 years of continuous membership.

In later years Peter suffered an increasing number of health problems which curtailed his astronomical activities although he never lost his enthusiasm or interest in the subject. His beloved Norah died in 2005, a loss from which Peter never really recovered. He passed away peacefully at home on 2008 August 9. He is survived by his two daughters and will be remembered with great affection by his many friends in astronomy.

I am grateful for much help from Jenny Wroath, Paul Thompson and Ann Davies in preparing this appreciation of Peter's life.

David Boyd

