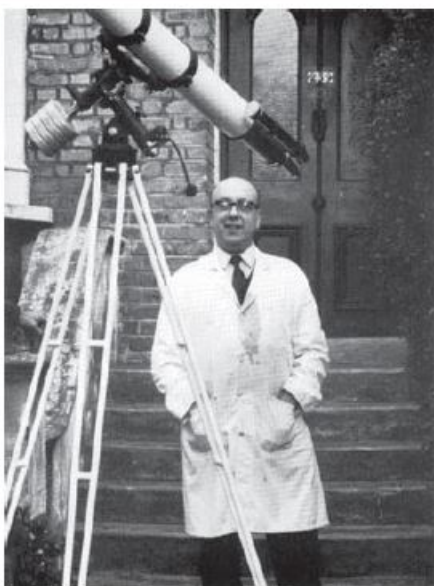


Ronald Nicholas Irving, 1915–2005

With the death of R. N. Irving, an English tradition in brass telescope manufacture with its roots in the early 18th century has drawn to a close. Ronald N. Irving, 'Ron' to those who knew him well, was the sole remaining proprietor of the instrument making firm H. N. Irving & Sons, carrying on his father's business and trade name.

Ron, the youngest of four sons and a daughter, was born to Horace and Mary Irving in Kingston Vale, Roehampton, London on 1915 April 29. In 1918 the Irving family moved to Cambridge House, Teddington. Ron received his early schooling at St Marks Primary. After a short interregnum between 1925 and 1927 when Horace Irving relocated his family and business to Hitcham in Suffolk, they returned to Cambridge House before moving to Kingston Road in 1930.

Ron joined the family firm in 1936 after serving an apprenticeship with Ottway, an instrument making company based at the Orion Works, Ealing. No. 258 Kingston Road was to be the Irving family residence for the rest of his life, and the business was conducted from a study in what had once been a drawing room, and a sprawling workshop at the end of a very long garden.



In 1940 Ron was seconded by the Ministry of Works to the Balham firm Cashmore & Co. as a chargehand, and later a progress chaser in their design office. Although this work was comparatively well paid, he did not like the office environment, or the endless problems in dealing with mechanical engineers who lacked the necessary skills to perform their tasks effectively. Yet he

was obliged to remain seconded to the company throughout the war, despite trying to enlist with the Royal Navy. When his employer found out he had him placed on the reserved occupations register. The company obtained contracts primarily in the aircraft engineering sector. Ron remained with Cashmores until the company closed in 1954.

At this time he also became a volunteer in the Home Guard, and it was in this capacity that he met his wife to be, Joan Higgins, who was working as an assistant ambulance driver. They married in 1943, Ron's father having died in 1941.

Telescope manufacture on the scale at which Ron and his father worked was never so lucrative as to provide a living. Ron took

the bold decision in the mid-1950s to seek contract work from the the National Physical Laboratory. In this venture H. N. Irving & Sons were successful. The mainstay of the business was not telescope making but the manufacture of hypsometers, used by the NPL, Universities and the petro-chemical industry to calibrate high temperature and pressure thermometric measuring instruments. Many of the 'test baths', as Ron referred to them, went all over the world, some to unlikely destinations in Eastern Europe, and even India. This part of the business was sold in 1985.

Although Ron was wont to point out that the hypsometer test baths were his bread and butter, it is for his work as a telescope maker for the amateur astronomical community that he is best remembered. Amateur telescopes in the 1930s and 1940s were either traditionally-made small brass refractors on tabletop or timber tripods, or Newtonian reflectors made of timber, on alt-az tripod mounts. By the 1950s, Ron had moved the designs on to sound all-metal construction, using aluminium alloy castings and precision worm and wheel drives. These were either alt-az or equatorially mounted, and supported on either a tall metal tripod, or a substantial column.

H. N. Irving & Sons gained a reputation for excellence in workmanship, which, though rivals tried to emulate it, could not be matched. Ron could also restore, repair or replicate antique brass telescopes and microscopes, and make eyepieces, finder telescopes and guide 'scopes, rack and pinion focusers and diagonals. Although output declined in his later years, it was still formidable. To some extent this was simply because

▶ he outlived the few other remaining traditional telescope makers.

In 1954 he was contracted to replace the 14-foot dome on 'Mad Jack' Fuller's observatory at Brightling in East Sussex. The original dome was timber clad in lead sheet. Ron took the cladding as part payment, slowly recycling it into counterweights.

Two of his biggest restoration jobs, executed throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s, were the complete rebuild of a 10-inch f/10 Newtonian originally made by Geo. Calver c1894, now housed in Brayebrook Observatory, and the equatorial mount of a Cooke 8-inch refractor, now in Redhill.

Ron was a long-standing member of the BAA, having joined on 1948 December 29. He regularly advertised the telescope making business in the *Handbook*, offering mirror cells, rack and pinion focusers, eyepieces, and all the paraphernalia needed to make your own telescope.

Ron continued to make telescope parts and accessories until shortly before his death following a brief illness. He died in Kingston hospital on 2005 September 29. He is survived by his daughter Maureen, three grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.