



Obituary

Vinicio Barocas (1914–2016)

Professor Vinicio Barocas has died in Preston at the age of 102. He was a respected professional astronomer specialising in solar research, and a lifelong supporter of amateur astronomy and the BAA in particular.

Vin, as he was known to friends and colleagues, was born in Alexandria in 1914 of Italian parents. His father was the chief accountant of a Liverpool firm of importers of raw cotton. His academic career began with a doctorate at the University of Florence and he was about to begin work in 1938 at the Arcetri Observatory (a mere stone's throw from the home of Galileo) under the direction of Giorgio Abetti. However Italian racial laws of the day prevented his taking up this post, and other astronomers in Italy were also affected by them. One outcome of these laws prevented the publication of his doctoral thesis. This had to be rewritten in English and was published in the *Astrophysical Journal* in 1939 (<http://adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/1939ApJ....89..486B>).

Vin came to England to work at the private observatory of the industrialist Dr Wilfred Hall in Northumberland with the intention of studying the infrared spectrum of the Sun. Unfortunately that research was brought to an end with the onset of the Second World War, because the only photographic plates suitable for recording the IR spectrum were manufactured by Agfa in Germany. When Italy entered the war Vin was interned and deported to Canada. He unsuccessfully applied to the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars in America in 1939.

He turned down an invitation by Harlow Shapley to work at Harvard, and instead returned to England after a policy review of internment, under a special Home Office scheme to recruit scientists for war work. He was directed to take a post in the Time Department of the RGO at Abinger. He remained in England as a refugee, and applied for and was granted a Certificate of Naturalisation on 1947 February 8.

Vin remained in his RGO position until 1949 after which he successfully applied for a post as Director of the Jeremiah Horrocks Observatory, which was managed by Preston Borough Council. This facility was unique, being under local authority control and also operating as an Institute of Further Education. This changed the focus of his work from research to education and public outreach. However during his early tenure he was also able to complete a programme of solar research under a UNESCO grant at the University of Florence. He was also appointed Visiting Astronomer at Asiago Observatory, Padua, in 1953 (where he obtained the first infrared spectrum of Beta

Lyrae). At the invitation of the Italian Research Council in 1954 and 1961 he also participated in solar eclipse expeditions.

At Jeremiah Horrocks Observatory, where the main instrument was an 8-inch Cooke refractor, Vin organised public lectures, open observing evenings and school visits. He made the observatory a popular venue for locals and visitors. He improved the meteorological instrumentation and the observatory became an official Station of the Meteorological Office in 1951.

In 1951 a large Grubb 15-inch double refracting telescope came into the possession of the RAS, that had belonged to Wilfred Hall. Vin had worked with the telescope in Northumberland prior to WW2 and was familiar with its operation. On Hall's death his telescope was offered in his will first to the BAA, which declined the bequest after consulting the members. The RAS were next beneficiaries and an appeal went out to UK universities to take the instrument. In collaboration with RGO astronomer (and future BAA President) Dr R. d'E. Atkinson, Vin successfully applied to the RAS on behalf of Preston Borough Council for the loan of this telescope.

A grant was sought from and approved by the Ministry of Education for an appropriate observatory building. It was built in the grounds of Alston Hall at Longridge near Preston, named the Wilfred Hall Observatory, and opened by the Astronomer Royal (R. Van der Reit Woolley) in 1957. So a new UK research astronomical observatory, administered by a local authority, was established. A very unusual situation and one brought about by Vin's drive and vision.

The Preston observatories under Vin's direction became popular venues for school and public visits. Scientific observations were regularly made at both observatories. After local authority reorganisation in 1974 Vin persuaded the newly created



Vin Barocas at his 100th birthday celebration in 2014.

servatories still function within that organisation.

Vin's dedication to education and outreach was seen not only in his involvement with local authorities but also with many national government bodies and the BAA. He served as President of the BAA from 1970–'72, as Director of its Solar Section from 1972–'77 and again as acting Director from 1978–

'79. He was a Chairman of the BAA Education Committee, and led the International Union of Amateur Astronomers as its President in 1979. His appointment to many academic bodies related to education at national level were a recognition of his expertise in the field.

In the mid-1960s Vin organised the BAA/Carnegie weekend residential courses at Alston Hall and continued these until his retirement in 1979. This series of weekend meetings is fondly remembered by the BAA members who regularly attended them and where many lifelong friendships were established. Use of the 15-inch refractor during these weekends was the best available opportunity at the time for BAA members to use a large professional telescope. Vin was also able to invite many BAA Section Directors and professional astronomers to the courses and in the pre-internet era these meetings were inspiring as well as informative.

My own personal relationship with Vin was that between novice and mentor. In 1982, in preparation for the upcoming apparition of Comet 1P/Halley in 1986, he spent many evenings at the library of the Wilfred Hall Observatory instructing me in the use and procedures for measuring plates for cometary astrometry. That teaching served me well, as today I am still involved in making astrometric observations of comets.

Vin Barocas died in Preston on 2016 November 16 at the grand age of 102 (his wife Winifred died in 1988 aged 80). He was a charming and gentle man who was well liked by all who came into contact with him. He will be missed by all of those people. He served the people of Preston well. His involvement with and support for education was his life's work. His participation in the BAA at a national level and other amateur organisations locally showed that he was a man of the people. He came to England as a refugee, integrated into the fabric of his adopted country and became a respected local figure of considerable stature.

My thanks for providing information for this obituary go to Prof E. Ian Robson, Vin's successor at Preston Polytechnic, who supplied an extract from the 1979 *Report of the Director of the Preston Observatories*; Dr Keith Robinson, Vin's observatory assistant at Jeremiah Horrocks Observatory; Peter Gill, Vin's longstanding friend and colleague in the IUAA; and Arthur Missira, a regular attendee of the Alston Hall weekends.

Denis Buczynski



Barocas with the 8-inch Cooke refractor at the Jeremiah Horrocks observatory.