

OBITUARY

WALTER PENNELL: 1910-1977

Walter Pennell was born in 1910 in Lincoln and was educated in the city, before going to Gresham School in Norfolk. At Reading University, while studying for a horticultural degree, he developed such a strong interest in chemistry that he seriously considered switching to this subject. He decided (or was persuaded) not to do so, and went on to take an active part in the family's long-standing horticultural business in Lincoln. His love of chemistry remained with him, however, and was later undoubtedly a factor in making photography one of his major interests. During the Second World War he became a Captain in the Royal Artillery, serving principally in North Africa and receiving a mention in dispatches for his conduct.

His work with the family firm, including the development of a considerable number of new varieties of clematis, kept him fully occupied for many years and it was some time before his interest in astronomy came to the fore. This was brought about when his son obtained a small refractor, whilst his interest in astronomical photography was kindled by an article in *Scientific American* in 1965 on the use of a 35 mm camera for sky photographs. He soon initiated a project to photograph the whole of the northern sky. Some early difficulties were caused by the large scale originally contemplated, but complete coverage was finally obtained in a series of 107 photovisual atlas plates. Cygnus and other areas of particular interest were also charted at a considerably larger scale. At a later date when visiting his children in Australia, he seized the opportunity of using the facilities of Mr Mathers' observatory in Tasmania to take a further series of 98 photographs to the southern constellations, to complete the coverage of the whole celestial sphere.

He went to considerable trouble to determine the best methods of obtaining the photographs he wanted, and progressed through a series of telescopes to a 310 mm reflector. He made extensive modifications to this himself to ensure the best performance and to provide all the facilities which he had found to be necessary. Once he had developed suitable techniques, he was able to produce consistent results throughout his photography, not least with regard to his developing and printing methods. It was this consistency that made his work of such great value to the various Sections to which he contributed.

Walter's services were particularly appreciated (and are now correspondingly missed) by the Variable Star Section, as his excellent photographs of

stellar fields, obtained both with cameras and through the telescope, provided the basis for many accurate charts and magnitude sequences. His dedication was apparent in the efforts which he made to satisfy particular requests, and also in the amazing rapidity with which he often obtained the required photographs. This was of particular value in the case of novae or stars suspected of variability, which he took great delight and pride in photographing as soon as possible. He also submitted large numbers of variable star estimates to the Section. His photographs of stellar fields were also the basis of the charts of Pluto's position which were prepared by the Computing Section and published in the *Handbook*. For the Meteor Section he provided valuable coverage by his operation of an all-sky camera as part of the United Kingdom fireball network. It was certainly not just due to luck that he caught a brilliant fireball shortly after he commenced this form of work, but also to his determination to have the equipment in operation whenever conditions permitted.

Walter Pennell joined the BAA in 1967 and was first elected to Council in 1972, the same year in which he became a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. He served on Council for three consecutive sessions and was again a member at the time of his death in 1977 July. He was very active in support of local astronomical groups, especially the Lincoln Astronomical Society, where he served in various capacities, including Chairman, and later, President. He was also elected Honorary Vice-President of Edinburgh University Astronomical Society, in recognition of his abilities as an astrophotographer. He assisted in planning the Association's Horncastle weekend courses, and was a welcome lecturer there, as at many other astronomical societies. He will be remembered best for the many striking photographs and transparencies which he showed at many of the Association's meetings, as well as for his papers and letters in the *Journal*, while astronomers outside the BAA will have noted his many contributions to *The Astronomer* and several other publications. His photographs were in considerable demand as book illustrations, and any fees he received from this source were devoted (usually anonymously) to helping others with their astronomical projects, while he gave encouragement and advice to many others through his correspondence.

His interests and activities were by no means confined to astronomy, as he was a fisherman and a Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society, besides serving a term as President of the Horticultural Trades Association and being a Justice of the Peace for a number of years.

Walter Pennell's sudden death came as a profound shock to his many friends and acquaintances, who will long remember his courtesy. His astronomical skills will be evident in his legacy of fine photographs, which, it is hoped, will serve as an inspiration to others.