

Henry Wildey (1913-2003)



Picture 1: Henry Wildey.

space research.

I often pondered that NASA could have saved themselves a lot of time and trouble, had they allowed Henry to test the Hubble Space Telescope mirror before sending it into orbit!

I first met Henry way back in the 1950's when as a teenager I joined the BAA and the JAS. Henry was President of the JAS from 1959 - 1961. At that time he was also Curator of Instruments for the BAA, a position which he held for many years and I remember asking his advice about testing the figure of a Cassegrain secondary which I was making. I subsequently got to know him well when I joined the Hampstead Scientific Society in 1965. He was then Astronomical Secretary, a position which he held from 1946 until he retired in 1988. Having joined that society in 1934, Henry was one of its oldest surviving members and on his retirement he was made an Honorary Vice President.

As Astronomical Secretary of the HSS, he was responsible for organising the public open nights and maintaining the instruments and building, which in 1946, just after the war, were in sore need of attention. The Society was at that time in financial difficulties and there was a countrywide shortage of materials. Undaunted, Henry applied the 'make do and mend' philosophy and set about re-covering the dome with material salvaged from a barrage balloon!

Sadly, just 24 hours after celebrating his 90th birthday, Henry Wildey suddenly passed away on Tuesday 21st of October 2003. His sad passing will be felt by astronomers, both amateur and professional alike who will mourn the loss of a good friend and a truly great optical craftsman.

How many of us 'senior members' I wonder, began their first serious observations with a telescope mirror or object glass made by Henry? Quite a few of us I would guess, myself included. A lens or mirror made by Henry Wildey was its own quality assurance.

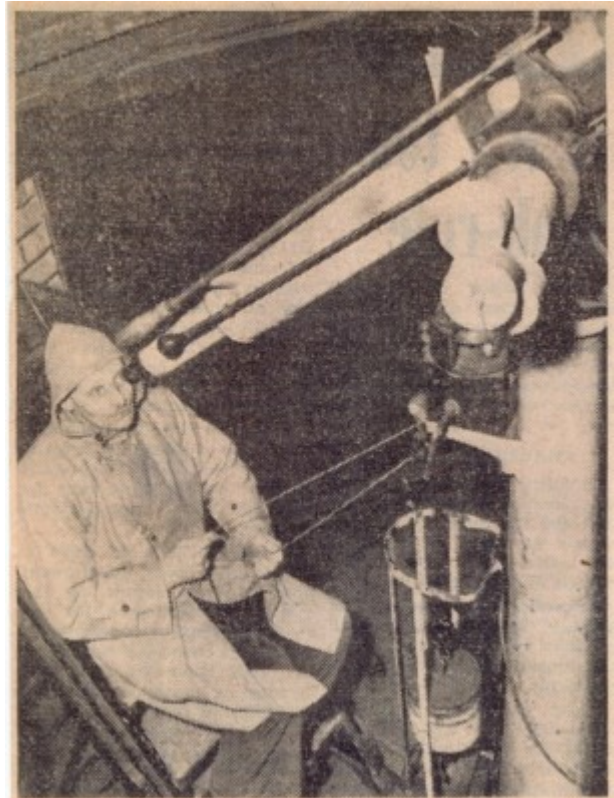
Henry was one of the last of the 'old school' of 'home craftsmen' in optical instrument making brought up on a reading diet of 'The English Mechanic' and 'Amateur Telescope Making' books I, II, and Advanced. His optical work was revered not only by amateurs but equally by professional institutions for which he produced high quality lenses and mirrors for university apparatus and

The Wildey family lived in Hampstead for many years in a large old Victorian house in Savernake Road at the foot of Parliament Hill, the back garden of which featured a huge 18-inch Newtonian/Cassegrain telescope originally built by John Hindle and improved by Henry. In the early 1960's, Henry and his cousin William were still assisting their father with his building business and I still have some wallpaper in my hall at home, put up by them in 1964 proving that good workmanship was not just confined to optics! Indeed, Henry was a man of many talents, a true polymath. He was a skilful artist, who had tried commercial art early in his career. He did not take to the drudgery of churning out artwork to order, so fortunately for the astronomical community, he concentrated on producing telescope optics instead. His artistic and observational skills are recorded in his note books which cover many aspects of observational astronomy from solar prominences to planetary detail.

Apart from his passion for astronomy he had many other interests which included opera and Egyptology. He was a 'ferocious' croquet player and a 'demon' at billiards and he loved general knowledge quizzes. Outwardly, Henry appeared a quiet almost shy individual, but he was always willing to share his considerable knowledge and you soon found out that he possessed a 'wicked' sense of humour and he positively revelled in a good joke.

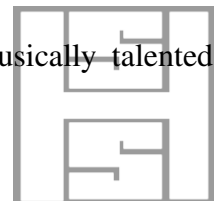
After his 'retirement', Henry and Violet, his wife, moved to Broxbourne to be closer to their grown up family. Sadly, Violet died in 1994 but Henry soldiered on and was still grinding lenses and mirrors up until a few months before his death.

His deep interest in astronomy and Egyptology was well catered for by the courses held at Wansfell College in Epping Forest. For decades, Henry attended the weekend courses at that establishment. The astronomy course held each year in the autumn became a sort of unofficial club where we would all meet up with Patrick Moore, the late Colin Ronan and other distinguished guest lecturers to discuss the latest developments in astronomy and cosmology and discover new insights into that subject's fascinating history. So Wansfell College was chosen as the venue for a party to celebrate Henry's 90th birthday. Over 40 guests, comprising family members and friends gathered there to celebrate with him on the 19th/20th of October.



Picture 2: Henry Wildey in action.

We were all treated to a splendid dinner and entertained afterwards by his musically talented



grandchildren. Henry had also devised a couple of quizzes just in case our wits had become blunted by overindulgence!

During the entertainment, I had the pleasure to pass on birthday greetings from the Presidents and committees of the SPA and the HSS and the BAA and to read a short poem which I had composed in his honour.

Our thoughts, at this time are with his son Doug and daughter Gloria, his grandchildren Deborah and Melissa and great grandchildren Jacob and Tom.

It must be some comfort to know that Henry thoroughly enjoyed himself at his 90th birthday party, never happier than when surrounded by good friends and a loving family.

THE CRAFTSMAN

The craftsman labours at his task in the still of night.
He spares no pain to grind the glass and get the curves just right
To bend the rays from distant suns far across the void,
And reflect them from the surface of a true paraboloid,
To concentrate their brightness and magnify their size,
To show undreamed of wonders unseen by naked eyes:
The spiral form of galaxies, the craters on the Moon,
The surfaces of planets will be revealed quite soon.
And when his work is finished he can at last take rest,
The mirror now quite perfect has passed the strictest test.
What wonders it will show you, and this will come to pass
By skilfully reshaping a simple piece of glass.

Doug Daniels

