



Twittering astronomy: IYA2009 with Newbury Astronomical Society

This is a mid-year report on activities organised by Newbury Astronomical Society in support of International Year of Astronomy 2009. Our aims are to make members of the public and especially children more aware about astronomy, to communicate the fun we have doing it and to encourage them to come to our meetings. Good involvement and support from many members

of the society has been a key factor in helping us achieve these aims.

Our first IYA event was a public lecture given by Francisco Diego at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in January. RAL were kind enough to host the event for us in their 200-seat lecture theatre and are continuing to give us good support during the year. In his talk entitled *Creation by Evolution*, Francisco used a clothes line stretched across the lecture theatre to represent the lifetime of the Universe. He pegged pictures representing significant events to the line as they occurred and focused towards the end on the development of life on Earth. On this scale intelligent life occupied the thickness of a sheet of paper! Questions from the packed audience at the end seemed to last almost as long as the lecture. A good start to the year but a little disappointing in the relatively poor response we got from school groups who were invited to attend. Pressures of work and cost of transport seemed to be largely responsible.

Our next event was a star party in March held at the local Thatcham Nature Discovery Centre which is close to Newbury but has reasonably dark skies. The society has worked with the Centre and run observing sessions and other events there for several years. The weather had been dreadful all week but just as the event started the skies cleared. We had a steady flow of people during the evening. We had planned carefully and advertised the event extensively and were well supported by members of the society. We put up displays and during the evening offered two short talks: *Galileo and 400 years of the Telescope* and *50 years in Space*. We also provided advice on what was currently visible in the night sky and ran a telescope clinic for anyone who was not sure about how to use an astronomical telescope. We had more than ten



telescopes in use including all the common types showing people a variety of astronomical objects. We counted over 120 visitors, a large proportion of whom were children. The Centre opened their café so people were able to warm up. The local newspaper sent a reporter and the local TV station recorded interviews which were broad-

cast over the following days giving us useful publicity. Thanks to careful planning and preparation we felt it had been a very successful evening. Afterwards we adjourned to the pub for a quick recap on what had gone well and areas we thought we could improve for future events. Capturing this knowledge while it was fresh in our minds was very helpful.

In May we set up an IYA exhibition at the same Nature Centre to run during half term week when we were more likely to be able to reach children. We had a general display on astronomy with the Sun as the central topic. This linked into solar observing sessions which



Dr Francisco Diego. Photo courtesy Rutherford Appleton Laboratory.

we held at both weekends. There were also displays showing what society members do. It turned out to be an unusually hot and sunny week so all three of our solar observing sessions were successful. These were set up in the spirit of sidewalk astronomy to catch people's attention as they walked by. We were careful to explain the potential dangers in observing the Sun, particularly to children who stopped to look. It was surprising how many people were aware of the current absence of sunspots and that this was cyclic behaviour. Although the face of the Sun was blank, we were able to show some small wispy prominences using H-alpha telescopes and hopefully passed on our enthusiasm.

During the week four members of the society ran workshops at the Centre mainly for children. Richard and Nicky Fleet's workshop *Making Rainbows* provided practical insight into the variety of colourful effects which can be produced with water drops and sunlight. David Boyd and Ann Davies' workshop *Sundials and Shadow Sticks* explained the basis of early timekeeping using the Sun and showed examples of different types of sundial, both ancient and modern. We also showed the participants how to make two simple sundials and gave them the materials to try making these for themselves at home. Both workshops were fully booked with 20 participants each. In addition, Guy Hurst ran a WEA Astronomy Day School during the week. The week was hard work but rewarding and hopefully has sparked some longer term interest in the children who attended.

As a result of the exposure we gained during this week, BBC Radio Berkshire invited the society to take part in their breakfast programme. The interviews were held on Wednesday May 27 in

Ann's lounge starting at 7am. Maggie Philbin interviewed Ann, Richard, Adrian West and Steve Harris during the three hour show.

A chance remark during the interview eventually grew into a major IYA event. Maggie asked Adrian if he had thought of using Twitter (<http://twitter.com/>) as a way of engaging people in astronomy. Twitter is a website that allows people to exchange messages of 140 characters or less, a bit like text message broadcasting, with each message visible for all who are following you to see. Links can be included to images on sites such as Twitpic (<http://twitpic.com/>). Maggie said she had used it extensively and believed it would work. Without too much thought of what might be involved, we agreed to set up a 'Twitter Moonwatch' three days later on Saturday 30 May when the weather forecast was good and the Moon was near Saturn. Adrian was the prime mover in this and, although he had never used Twitter before, he had the confidence to try using it. With Maggie's help and encouragement he set up the NewburyAS Twitter feed and started climbing the learning curve – very quickly! Maggie was a great help by spreading information about the event to her circle of contacts.

The Twitter Moonwatch was advertised to start at 9.30pm and finish around midnight. The Moonwatch control centre was Adrian's greenhouse in his garden in Great Shefford where he worked on a



laptop connected by a wireless network link to the internet. Chris Hooker set up his 20cm SCT and webcam in Adrian's garden and Richard and Nicky operated a DSLR camera in their garden 20 miles away in Wilcot. Both had relatively dark cloud-free skies and started taking images. Meanwhile Adrian uploaded some night sky maps from Stellarium to TwitPic to give those with no astronomy background an idea where to look in the sky. Within minutes of the event starting we had over 30 followers (Twit-speak for participants). Chris quickly took, processed with *Registax* and uploaded an image of the lunar craters Aristoteles and Eudoxus. At the same time Richard sent in an image of the whole first quarter Moon. These seemed to open the floodgates. Questions and comments poured in and Adrian, with help from Maggie Philbin and Philip Stobbart, spent the next 2 hours responding to



Star party at the Thatcham Nature Discovery Centre

those tweets and uploading new images of the Moon as they came in from Chris and Richard. Chris then posted an image of Saturn which generated a particularly large amount of interest. Most of the questions were from people who had little prior knowledge of astronomy and were just fascinated that people were able to take such good pictures from their back gardens and wanted to know how. There were now over a hundred people following the NewburyAS Twitter feed. Long after the Moon had set and the official Moonwatch was over tweets continued to arrive. Eventually at about 3:30am, cold and exhausted but ecstatic, Adrian called it a day. During the course of the evening more than 2500 hits were recorded on the images we had posted on TwitPic. What had started as a tentative experiment ended as a resounding success.

Looking back it seems amazing that news about such an event could travel so fast but this is the nature of Twitter and clearly shows its potential for engaging people who are internet-savvy. We often discuss the lack of younger people in astronomy. Here is one way of catching their attention and perhaps drawing some of them into a longer term and more active interest in the subject.



We have plans for several more IYA

events. There will be more observing evenings at the Nature Discovery Centre and elsewhere. We plan further events on Twitter when there are suitable astronomical events to feature. We are also fortunate to have engaged Dr Maggie Aderin to give a talk at RAL in December to bring our IYA programme to a close. IYA2009 is trying to reach out to people who have never been particularly interested in astronomy and to both inform and engage them. From our experience in Newbury there is a great appetite for this, and we are having lots of fun doing it.

Adrian West, Ann Davies & David Boyd
[\[http://www.newburyas.org.uk/\]](http://www.newburyas.org.uk/)