

Before the March meeting, the early birds were able to have a look at Mercury before it set behind the houses to the west of the village hall. It's though that less than 1% of the world's population have ever seen Mercury and, of those, probably only a further 1% would have identified it as the innermost planet. We even managed to get a couple of our local constabulary to have a look as well! Inevitably, it was cloudy again by half way through the meeting!

March's talk was given by Tim Wetherell – an old friend of the society – on the subject of Astronomical Drawings. He looked at how drawings of astronomical subjects were the norm from the days of Galileo onwards until the advent of photography towards the end of the 19th century. There are famous drawings from this period, not least Lord Rosse's of M51, the Whirlpool Galaxy. He then looked as to why we would still do drawings and how much science could be extracted from them. He showed a drawing he'd made back in the 1970's of Castor and a recent image through a similar setup which clearly showed the change in separation over the years.

He then showed how he does his drawings: producing a rough sketch with copious notes at the telescope followed by doing a "proper job" in his main notebook. We saw the red light he uses to faintly illuminate his sketch pad which (inevitably for Tim) matches the brass of his 180mm refractor! The final drawing is done with various pencils but he stressed how gentle you need to be making such drawings to avoid marks on the paper.

He had a "case study" of how a rough sketch of Jupiter became a final drawing showing lots of detail and a shadow transit of one of the moons. He also had drawings of the transit of Venus which clearly showed its atmosphere and a comparative one of a Mercury transit which had no trace of the atmosphere. The atmosphere of Venus during transit is well nigh impossible to photograph (I've tried:-) and is an example of where the Mark I eyeball and drawing skill and talent can still produce important results.

Like many, I suspect, I'm always very envious of those who can produce excellent drawing like Tim's and it was great to have an insight into the process.

Half time cakes were provided this month by Sheila and I'd like to thank Sue Nicolson who has moved away from the area and provided half time refreshments for a number of years and is a hard act to follow. On current showing, however, Sheila has more than started well and the cake(s) I tried were delicious!

After the break, Terry went through the astronomical prospects for the next few weeks (below) and asked if we could support Axminster Primary when they talk to astronauts on the ISS. We have one volunteer but if anyone else is interested then please contact Terry at the email address on the main page.

The weather has been dreadful over the last few weeks and only Terry had some Australian images of the Running Chicken nebula (and the stars that form the Running Chicken itself!) and the inevitable NGC6729.

Upcoming Events

Planets

Morning

Venus too close to the sun for naked eye observation until October. Be careful if you try to spot it with binoculars or a telescope in daylight.

Saturn is also lost in the morning twilight. It will be in conjunction with Venus on 21st March. It won't appear in a dark sky until the end of May.

Mars is further from the sun than Venus or Saturn but is still too low and faint to be visible. It'll start being visible again towards mid June. It's moving East and will pass Saturn on 11th April (but both will be too low and faint to be seen).

Evening

Mercury is having its best apparition this year in the evening. It's about 10 degrees altitude at 7pm (GMT) due West on 20th March. It'll move a little north each day but fading quickly.

Jupiter is getting lower each evening as it moves towards the sun and the sun sets later.

Uranus (near Jupiter) is visible in telescopes and binoculars.

Neptune is too close to the sun for observation.

Comet 12/P Pons-Brookes is fairly easy in binoculars and can be photographed with a standard lens. It should brighten, maybe to naked eye visibility. Best time should be between 26th March and 4th April. It will get quite low after that.

Eclipses

There will be a Penumbral Lunar Eclipse starting at 4am on 25th March. It will be low and will set by mid eclipse.

Total Solar eclipse on 8th April. Visible through Mexico, Texas, the US to Niagra Falls and then the east of Canada. Not visible here. Tiny bite at sunset from Scotland and Ireland.

Outreach

Axminster Primary Academy will be talking to the ISS on 19th April and asked if we could support. It will be in the school day so I'm not sure what we could do for them and it is a bit of a way.