The early 2026 weather has been dreadful for astronomy with only a handful of clear-ish nights and the weather for the February meeting was no different so we were really glad to welcome Brian Fraser (of Somerset Levels Stargazers) back to the society. Brian's talk this time was on The Exploration of Mars.

Brian quickly ran over the early and telescopic observations of Mars and moved on to the exploration of Mars by spacecraft launched from the Earth. He looked at the favourable positions of Earth and Mars every 2 years or so when it's possible to launch a spacecraft to Mars and started with the Mariner 4 mission in 1965. This gave the first pictures of Mars and, famously, a "colour by numbers" picture made by the JPL staff running the mission. Mariner's pictures, though, showed Mars to have craters and be essentially a dead world, more like the Moon than the Earth.

This was followed by a number of orbiters (which showed the changing face of the planet like short duration water flows) and landers (like the Vikings) and the early rovers, including Sojourner, Spirit and Opportunity. These rovers were followed by the much larger and ambitious Curiosity and Perseverance. Brian showed a movie of the Perseverance landing including the ingenious (or perhaps over-complicated:-) sky crane used to get the rover safely to the surface. Perseverance also carried the small Ingenuity helicopter which itself ran some 72 flights when only about 5 were expected.

These missions have indicated that, though Mars appears dead now, that it certainly had considerable liquid water soon after it was formed. There are strata of sedimentary rock which could only form in large bodies of water, there are minerals that only form in the presence of water and there are chemicals which (on Earth anyway) only form from biological processes. All of these make it tantalisingly possible that life did exist on Mars when the Earth itself also had primitive life.

Many thanks to Brian for (again) bringing us an illuminating and interesting presentation.

AGM

The Society is required to hold an AGM every year to report on the Society's finances and to elect officers for the upcoming year. Bud presented the accounts for 2025 which show a small loss for the year. However, at the current rate of loss, the society could survive for another 30 years without any real issues! One issue is, however, the charges that Lloyds Bank is now levying. These charges were over £50 which is about half of our loss. If anyone knows of a bank that does not charge for community societies, then please let us know. Thanks to Bud for keeping these accounts and also for making sure that we have cakes and goodies for the refreshments. Following the report, the committee (Terry & Bud) resigned but were re-elected by the meeting for the upcoming year.

It was suggested that we have a short question and answer session, or a discussion on any astronomical topic raised from the floor of the meeting as part of the "post refreshments" part of the meeting. We will institute this next month so bring any questions or points of discussion ready!

After the AGM, Terry did his usual Upcoming Events presentation (below) and showed some images of Mercury in our evening sky along with the comets in the Upcoming Events. He also highlighted the Star Count being run by the CPRE. This simply involves counting the stars inside the main 4 stars of Orion (if we ever see it again!). See https://www.cpresomerset.org.uk/news/somerset-star-count/ for details.

Next month's talk will be by John Stapleton of the Torbay Astronomical Society and entitled *Amateur Astronomy: Why do we do it?* Let's hope for some better weather by then to allow us a chance to do some!

Upcoming Events

Planets

Mercury and Venus are in the evening sky low down in the WSW with the moon between them tonight, 18th February. Venus is bright but very low down at the end of Civil Twilight (About 18:15 GMT). Mercury is currently higher than Venus and directly above it but will start to fade and lose altitude very quickly and be very difficult, even with binoculars, by 1st March when it will be west of Venus. Venus will continue to climb slowly from night to night and will still only be 10 degrees altitude at the end of Civil Twilight on 18th March (then at about 19:00 GMT).

All the planets (except Mars) and the Moon will be visible at the same time until the end of February (when Mercury disappears).

Mars is still behind the Sun.

Jupiter is now well past opposition and transits before 22:00 GMT. There are numerous transits of its moons.

Saturn is starting to get lower in the evening sky from night to night. It's all alone below Pegasus with the Moon nearby on 19th February. It will start to disappear from the evening sky from around 1st March. Venus passes by very close on 6th to 9th March but very low down in the twilight and will probably need binoculars for Saturn (which will be to the left of Venus on the 6th and below it on the 8th).

Uranus is still below the Pleiades and should be visible in binoculars.

Neptune is only visible in a telescope. It will be in conjunction with Saturn (again) on 20th February when they will be less than 1 degree apart.

Comets

Periodic comet C/29P Schwassmann–Wachmann 1 has outburst on 9th February from magnitude 16 to about magnitude 12. It's below Leo and just south of the celestial equator.

C/2024 E1 Wierzchos has a fine tail with multiple dust tails. It's currently still too far south but is heading north (but fading) and may be visible in binoculars by the end of February.

Kreutz group sungrazer C/2026 A1 MAPS will pass the Sun on 4th April at a distance of 160,000 Km from its surface. More next month!

Constellations

Orion and its winter retinue (Canis Major, Taurus, Gemini, etc) are south when it gets dark with Leo rising in the east. Autumn constellations like Pegasus (with Saturn) are getting low in the west. By the next meeting, Orion will be past the meridian when it gets dark with Sirius and Jupiter south. Leo will be quite high up with Arcturus rising in the ENE. I always think of Arcturus in the early evening sky as the harbinger of Spring (and maybe some less cloudy weather!).

Upcoming Meetings

Mar 18 John Stapleton *Amateur Astronomy: Why do we do it?*
Apr 15 David Strange *Norman Lockyer*
May 20 Ask the Panel
Jun 17 Hugh *Allen Reaching Across the Gulf of Space: The life and work of Sir William Huggins*
Jul 22 James Palmer *Approaching the Stars - single image shots to short exposure astrophotography*

Events

Manor Court Friday 23rd January 2026. Peter and Ken did this indoors on a wet and windy night. Thanks to both and Manor Court is making a donation to the Society.

Redstart School Thursday 29th January 2026. This was cancelled under the threat of yet another named storm!

2026 Programme

2026

Jan 21 Bud Budzynski Albert Einstein

Feb 18 Brian Fraser Exploration of Mars

Mar 18 John Stapleton Amateur Astronomy: Why do we do it?

Apr 15 David Strange Norman Lockyer

May 20 Ask the Panel

Jun 17 Hugh Allen Reaching Across the Gulf of Space: The life and work of Sir William Huggins

Jul 22 James Palmer Approaching the Stars - single image shots to short exposure astrophotography

Aug 19 Mark Hardaker Astronomical Planning and Recording - How to Get the Most Out of your Hobby

Sep 16 Gadgets and Gizmos Evening followed by Observing Session

Oct 21

Nov 18

Dec 16 Christmas Social and members' short talks

CADAS meetings start at 7:30pm and last about 2 hours including a break for tea/coffee and cake. We meet at the Village Hall in Norton-sub-Hamdon, TA14 6SF. See http://www.cadas.net/ for further details.