

OBITUARY

John Christopher Taylor (1952–2024)

John Christopher Taylor was born on 1952 March 25 the only son of William Albert Saxon Taylor and Lillian Alice Mildred Taylor. His father was in the RAF and stationed at Halton, Buckinghamshire, at the time. He was one of the RAF apprentices known as the Halton Brats, and he had joined up at the age of 16.

His early years were ones of constant moving, typical of the forces world — Blackpool, Gibraltar, Ramsgate, Chelmsford, Braintree. And, when his father left the RAF and eventually worked for Cambridge Instruments, the last family home was in Coton, outside Cambridge. His schooling was affected by the endless moves and for a time he attended Woodbridge in Suffolk as a boarder in order to have some educational stability. He was devoted to his father, devastated by his early death in 1979, and for the rest of his life could barely talk about him without tears in his eyes. His parents encouraged his very early leanings to all things scientific — a chemistry set at the age of seven which in those days contained things no child or adult would be allowed anywhere near today, and they put up with his experiments, giving him his own asbestos-lined shed where he miraculously survived his own cocktails and in particular his interest in explosives. His days in Woodbridge were terminated as a result of these experiments and in Oxford he became known as John the Bomb.

Undoubtedly the most important event in his life was when he was having his eyes tested by a Harley Street optician when he was 15. At the end of the consultation he asked the optician if he should wear glasses while using his telescope. The subject swiftly moved to astronomy and Mr. Roderick McIver Paton (1908–1969 and an FRAS) told him that he could no longer observe on account of his asthma and was forthwith going to give Christopher his 12½-inch reflecting telescope. The telescope was unusual in that both primary and secondary mirrors were mounted outside the wooden tube. This meant Christopher had to carry the optics from the house each evening, mount them on the tube and then carry out an alignment, a process which was refined and condensed into about ten minutes. The resulting performance of the 12½-inch Calver mirror justified this, allowing the duplicity of binary stars as close as 0.2 arc second to be ascertained. This has been his instrument for over 50 years with which he has made his own observations, all carefully recorded alongside his own sketches and drawings, and these are to be deposited now with the Royal Astronomical Society. The observing area in the garden is also home to the unusual folded 30-inch refractor^{1,2} designed and built by the well-known optician John Wall. His knowledge of and interest in astronomy was phenomenal and he was always ready on a cold clear night to be out observing. His greatest interest was in double-star astronomy and his published work was largely in this area but he also had a deep interest in the history of astronomy and he was a founder member of both the Stratford Astronomical Society and the Society for the History of Astronomy. Travel plans often revolved around observatories — in France the Pic du Midi in the Pyrenees and the observatories in Paris and in Strasbourg — or the birth places of some of the great astronomers, and in 1999 Hanwell Community Observatory members made an expedition to Alsace to view the total eclipse.

He went up to Oxford in 1971 to read Chemistry at Lincoln College but he took a year out in order to do the necessary first-year work on his own so that he could switch to Physics. He began teaching when he returned to Oxford to do graduate work but on the first occasion he discovered the subject had been done and on the second, working on artificial diamonds, ironically the funding ran out. He remained in teaching for much of his life and for a time in the late 1980s was director of an American study-abroad programme based in Oxford.

He and Rowena met in 1979 and married in Ireland in 1981. Three years later they made their first purchase in Hanwell and over the following six years were able to add adjoining land and a further wing to the property. From a 1930s semi-detached house in Oxford they plunged into what became the Hanwell Project — unplanned but evolving in many directions that reflected their joint interests.

The gardens had been untouched for over 40 years but they slowly uncovered the planting scheme of the Berkeley family from the 1910s and 20s and began to follow through with species already on the site and many new ones — over 300 species have been planted in the gardens. The gardens have been opened since 2005 for the annual ‘Stars and Snowdrops’ weekend in February and thousands of people have been welcomed in those years, teas becoming a legend in the locality on those occasions. Christopher and Rowena were founder members of the Friends of Oxford Botanic Gardens and have hosted a sequence of visits as fund raising for the Gardens at different times in the year, most recently last August, despite Christopher’s illness.

The telescope, of course, moved for the final time to Hanwell in the mid-1980s and after teaching astronomy evening classes, in 1998 a successful application was made by Christopher and his students for a Royal Society Millennium Award for public outreach, resulting in funds to build a 30-inch reflecting telescope for public star-gazing evenings, though these had already started, using the *McIver Paton* telescope. The 30-inch³ was formally inaugurated in 2009 by Professor Alexander Boksenberg, former Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory. Christopher was especially keen to encourage young members of what became the Hanwell Community Observatory and two of them went on to do PhDs in astrophysics. Two more are currently reading the subject at Cardiff University. On 2011, December 9 Christopher was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society and was a regular attendee of the monthly meetings at Burlington House. — ROWENA ARCHER and ROBERT ARGYLE.

References

- (1) J. Wall, *JBAA*, **119**, 163, 2009.
- (2) <http://www.hanwellobservatory.org.uk/telescopes/john-wall>
- (3) J. C. Taylor, *The Observatory*, **130**, 37, 2010.

[Christopher and I corresponded for a period of about 30 years. Our occasional face-to-face meetings I will remember with great pleasure. — RWA]