Maureen Margaret Townsend [605]

Obituary in the British Astronomical Association Journal 1998

Ernest Agar Beet (1904–1997)

Ernest Beet, a member of the British Astronomical Association during a period spanning some 57 years, died in Reading on 1997 November 5 at the age of 93.

Mr Beet was the son and grandson respectively of the Reverend William Ernest Beet and the Reverend Joseph Agar Beet, both Wesleyan Methodist Ministers and in whose names he was christened. Ernest was born in Oldham in 1904 and always said that he regarded himself as a Lancashire man. Educated at Oldham Hulme Grammer School and Epworth College in Rhyl, he subsequently gained a BSc at University College, Reading in 1925. Mr Beet went on to become a schoolmaster at Epworth College and stayed there for ten years from 1927 to 1937. He subsequently took a teaching post at the Nautical College, Pangbourne where he was to remain until his retirement in 1969. At the latter he was a housemaster for 26 years and head of the science department for 20 years. 'Minnie' Beet, as he was affectionately nicknamed at Pangbourne, was a meticulous, serious but highly respected teacher with a wide range of interests which he shared with colleagues and students. These included railways and model railways, walking, cycling and ship modelling (a collection of small scale model ships built between 1917 and 1942 was subsequently preserved in the Education Department of the National Maritime Museum.) He played football with the boys until the age of 50. Persuaded to stay on for an extra term after his 65th birthday he told acquaintances that it had been 'a term too long, I was losing my grip' – something difficult to imagine of 'Mr Beet'.

Perceived as a confirmed bachelor, he surprised some of his friends when, in 1946, he married the College Matron, Maureen Townsend. Other colleagues, however, surprised him by saying that they had been waiting for it for years since he and Miss Townsend had shared the responsibility during the Second World War of shepherding boys to safety when the sirens rang out. Ernest and Maureen bought South Cottage at Quick's Green, Ashampstead in 1950 and had a very happy marriage until Maureen's death in 1980. The Beets took a close interest in the church and local matters. Mr Beet was Clerk to Ashampstead Parish Council from 1951 to 1982.

Introduced to astronomy during the blackouts of World War I, he was taught the constellations by his father at the age of 11 and built on this knowledge with the few astronomical books which were to hand at his parents' home. Ernest Beet bought a 3" refractor in 1939 after using smaller instruments and an RAS loan telescope during the previous 20 years, but not being a dedicated observer, never aspired to anything larger. His main astronomical interests were in the fields of astronomy education and history. He actively promoted the teaching of astronomy in schools, lecturing on the subject in various parts of the country over the years. The only systematic observational work Mr Beet undertook with his instrument for a period was in the field of lunar occultations. For some years he was a member of the Aurora Watch but, as he subsequently confessed, 'that is not very rewarding in the south of England'.

At the age of sixteen he turned his hand to writing and Ernest Beet's first publication was 'Astronomy with Little Equipment', in the *Boy's Own Paper* in February 1930. The first of his several astronomy books, *A Guide to the Sky* was published three years later in 1933. Others followed over the next four decades: *A Textbook of Elementary Astronomy* (1945), *The Sky and its Mysteries* (1952), *Teaching Astronomy in Schools* (1956), *The Young Astronomer* (1962), *The Solar System* (1965), *Astronomy Old and New* (1967) and *Mathematical Astronomy for Amateurs* (1972). Many papers and book reviews by Mr Beet were published in the BAA *Journal* from 1946 onwards, his first paper being (typically) 'Astronomy in the School'. He lectured very widely on astronomy for 25 years from 1954 to 1979 at the Reading University School of Education and gave enthusiastic support to Reading Astronomical Society until he was 80. He also presented courses on general astronomy for the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and other organisations.

When he retired as a schoolmaster in 1969 Mr Beet took up the role of astronomical correspondent to *The Times*, succeeding W. H. Steavenson. He produced a regular monthly notes column and night sky chart for some 18 years from January 1970. When Ernest Beet relinquished this role appreciative letters were received from the Editor and a director of *The Times* noting that Mr Beet was one of *very* few authors who had hardly ever made *any* mistakes in their contributions!

Ernest Beet was elected a Fellow of the RAS in 1930 but his main activities centred around the British Astronomical Association, which he joined some ten years later in 1940. Within the BAA Mr Beet held the posts of Secretary 1951–62, President 1962–64 and Director of the Historical Section 1968–85. He was awarded the Walter Goodacre Medal in 1969 and the Lydia Brown Medal in 1987 for his contribution to astronomy. Perhaps the most enduring accolade to his services to astronomy education came in 1990 when asteroid 4026 was named Beet following a suggestion by Brian Marsden. This was announced at the 1990 BAA Centenary Meeting when Ernest Beet was present at what was, sadly, to be his last attendance at an Association event.



Ernest Beet at the BAA Centenary Meeting, 1990 October 24.