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Chair's Blog

Welcome to the March edition of our Newsletter. We are going to have an astronomical slant this month having had a delightful visit to the Herschel Museum. It turned out to be an unexpectedly interesting afternoon. More about this on page two.

Traditionally, March is the least productive month of the year, maybe because it promises nothing but wind, rain and mud, and that's why March is designated National Umbrella Month.

We were advertising a Woodpecker Walk on Sunday 17th March, but not only is that St. Patrick's Day but the date also clashes with the half-marathon in Bath. This means that the bus service may be restricted in the morning. Colin will host a springtime walk some time in April when hopefully the weather will be much brighter and warmer.

Daylight Savings Time starts on 10th March, with the Spring Equinox on 20th. The period of Lent, which I know you all look forward to, is a chance for self-discipline. Although I never did understand what that was exactly. Why give up chocolate or other sinful delights when it only makes you miserable? Sin is good for you!

There is a full 'Storm' moon around the 24th so hang on to that umbrella should you be out late. And remember, it was on 13th March all those years ago that William Herschel discovered the seventh planet, Uranus.

There will be a book sale at bargain prices on Saturday 13th April. Recently, we had a large addition to our book collection and this will be a sale of the duplicates. Always remember, we have an interesting collection in our library available to members to take out for a few weeks. Do ask Jim or any of the committee members if you want to borrow books.

Happy March!

Michael Reid



The Astronomers' House in Bath

I've lived in Bath for fourteen years and I've never been to the Herschel Museum of Astronomy. So off I tootled to 19 New King Street, sandwiched between Green Park Station and Monmouth Place where the buses run along Royal Victoria Park.

It is a modest town house, open to the public, where we were greeted by two friendly guides. This was the home of William Herschel and his sister Caroline. The Herschel family originally came from Hanover, and William had arrived in England in a rather dramatic way. Being gifted as a musician, he had joined the band of the Hanoverian Guards in 1753, but following a defeat by the French four years later, William had to escape to London.

William and his brother, Alexander, both moved to Bath by 1770. His younger sister, with the magnificent name of Caroline Lucretia, was persuaded to join them two years later. I have great sympathy for Caroline because at first she comes across as a thoroughly put-upon younger sister. They were all gifted at music and in the early years in Bath, William was a successful teacher of music and a composer. This was at a time when Bath was the fashionable place to be during the summer and winter seasons.

William gave Caroline singing and harpsichord lessons, along with basic mathematics and book-keeping, to essentially act as his housekeeper. They lived in various properties in Bath, but in September 1777, they settled at 19 New King Street.

I was chatting to the senior guide who was guarding the copy of the seven-foot telescope in the ground floor reception room. He told me that William had been reading a treatise on musical composition, and in that published series was a similar text on lenses. That is how William Herschel began to develop an interest in optics which eventually led to him to perfect the telescope. William was completely self-taught and it was his brother Alexander, an engineer, who helped to design the casement and frame which could be wheeled about on castors. Instead of viewing the stars through one end of the telescope, there was a brass viewer on the side up near the front.

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Soon, William was totally absorbed in designing telescopes, so much so that Caroline began to complain. He was using most of the rooms as a workshop, and not turning up to meals at set times, so that Caroline had to feed him with a spoon while William polished his lenses. Caroline also acted as his note-taker and this may have begun her training in astronomy.

On 13th March 1781, having wheeled the original seven-foot telescope into the back garden, William was able to find the planet Uranus. He knew it wasn't a comet because it didn't have a fiery tail. He sent details to astronomers in London, and using mathematics and observations it was confirmed that he had indeed discovered a new planet. William Herschel was now famous and soon brought to the attention of King George III, to be given a salary and appointed Court Astronomer. In 1787, Caroline was also awarded a salary as William's assistant by King George.

William died in 1822 aged 84, and it is from this period that Caroline appears to come into her own as a recognised female pioneer of astronomy. She was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1828, and a few years later appointed an Honorary Member. In 1846, the Gold Medal for Science was awarded to Caroline by the King of Prussia, and she became known as the Hunter of Comets.



The little photo on the first page of our Newsletter shows the garden statue of William and Caroline by Vivien Mousdell, carved from Bath stone, and unveiled by Sir Patrick Moore.

There is much more to the Herschel story than I'm giving you, such as the time when William nearly blew the place apart, so do go and visit this interesting museum, it is well worth a visit and highly recommended. www.herschelmuseum.org.uk

Michael Reid

My Work experience

On the 2nd of August 1964 I started my apprenticeship as a carpenter and joiner, the second day after my 16th birthday and a week after leaving school (no summer holidays for me). My dream was to go to Art College, but I was soon to become the main breadwinner for myself and my mother.

My Mum worked as a school dinner lady at the local junior school and her supervisor's husband was a builder and knew that Randall's and Son's where he got his supplies, were looking for an apprentice. So that was that.

The company has long disappeared. As was the thing then, the first two years as an apprentice I was to make the morning and afternoon tea and fetch the cakes and fags from the local shops. This turned out to be quite profitable as I charged them an extra penny on each item purchased. The tea was made in a large urn and stirred to perfection using whatever available piece of wood was handy at the time. The tea was almost black and textured with sawdust, lovely.

By the summer of 1968, I was a qualified carpenter & joiner and then a year later, after a swift exit from Randall's (another tale for later), I worked for various companies and was self-employed and employed over the years. The one thing you learn in the construction industry is how to be resilient.

In the early seventies I was working for Cowlings at St Anne's Board Mills, mainly maintenance work around the site which was very large and was once one of the biggest paper manufactures in Europe, long since gone. Alongside the river there were landing stages where the barges of the past would unload, now the pillars were rusting, so we had to put shuttering around them for new concrete to be poured. It was heavy work, soon it was time for a tea break which was a fifteen minute walk away.

It was spring time and the tide coming up the Avon can be high. So when getting back to the job all we could see was floating plywood, just like rafts, and all the concrete pillars exposed and news that the ready mix was on its way. I believe the language at the time was quite vivid as it can be sometimes in the building trade.

Also in the seventies, I teamed up with another Colin and we set up a loft conversion company but we did not make our fortune, as soon after, the country was put on a three-day week.

In the mid-seventies I got a job with the engineering firm Strachan & Henshaw, again on the maintenance team and also in the packing department. My interview consisted of tea and biscuits and a few questions and then I was offered the job, what the other interviewees were like I don't know. Here I learned a lot about engineering and also about nuclear energy as the company built the charge machines for the British Power Stations, and positioner machines which automatically shunted and unloaded coal or other materials from the mines. There were large overhead gantry cranes that were operated by a remote control box from the operator on the ground.

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I never established how to stop the crane when it got to the end of the building so I was banned from offloading the huge stacks of timber from the lorries when they arrived, or maybe it was just a cunning plan.

A year after a visit to the works by Margret Thatcher, I was made redundant, and a few years later the company closed. From the late 80's to late 90's I was self-employed and worked for many companies and travelled around the West Country. I remember my first meeting with the very new technology, the mobile phone, not having one myself but I was working on the headquarters of a well-known pet store in Swindon. If you wanted to talk to a boss, or contractor, you could find him outside with this brick thing with a large aerial sticking out of it.

Religion seemed to be a prominent feature during these years. I worked alongside the Bristol Brethren, and had to have my lunch breaks alone so I did not contaminate the Brethren who were all very nice. Bristol Churches Housing Association was a multi-religion affair.

There is a dry dock at Symington, near Devises, where I spent an interesting time fitting out a narrow boat. The other carpenter was a Jehovah's Witness and he continued to try and convert me, mainly so I could help him build their new Kingdom Hall. It was during the early months of the year, but the work was being done for a local millionaire who wanted us to have the best "on site" facilities. No porta loo, or a nice warm rest room, instead he supplied a round table with table cloth, fancy cutlery and teapot and posh dining chairs all situated on the end of a jetty where the narrow boat was moored. Still it must have looked good as we sat there drinking our tea from our flasks.

As one would expect, there were a lot of Irish labourers on many projects, my own Irish decedents came to England this way. One day I was given a job of fixing roof trusts on a rather large double garage to house the Rolls Royce and the Jag. Not a big deal, until after I had completed the job, there was one truss left over. The boss arrived when I mentioned this, being a man with large feet he walked the length of the rolls, then the garage. To his horror we discovered that the garage should be about thirty inches longer, but the Irish lads had made it too short. To overcome this problem I was told to cut up the roof truss and put it in the skip. Never found out if the cars fitted in.

Another time I was working on restoring a mansion built in the 1700's near Devises, the same ground crew were told to demolish a single story extension to the house. However there were two, an 18th century one that matched the original house on the left and a 1960's style on the right which was the one that needed to be demolished. Yes you guessed it, the left one was demolished. The result was blamed on lack of communication!!

A fair amount of my time as a jobbing carpenter was spent around the St. Pauls area of Bristol. I arrived ready to start work around 8am, when there was a knock on my van door. "Good morning," the young lady said "are you looking for business? "Not now love I have a busy schedule". Much of the work around this area involved repair work from police raids and one particular time a flat I was working in belonged to a gay couple, very nice but I had to decline again, after they asked if I would like to join them for a threesome, due to my work schedule.

I got to know many of the residents and business owners in the area. One day I was repairing a bathroom door in a ground floor flat, the resident was quite agitated and kept asking how long I was going to be. Well, I said maybe another hour or so, why? His customers were beginning to get impatient. Customers? He was only running an illegal brothel. I completed the work then within the hour.

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Many banking establishments were also my work places, but I was a bit annoyed one evening when the police turned up at my home and asked if I could accompany them to the station as the bank I was working in had been broken into. They did agree that it would be foolish to hang around, if I was involved, seeing I had been working at the bank. I still had to be questioned and make a statement though. I decided not to tell them that I only fitted the new locks the day before the robbery and that I was also a trained lock smith and quite good at picking a lock.

Lastly I spent many happy years working as Maintenance Forman at St. Johns Hospital in Bath. Still standing, until my retirement fifteenth and a half years of more work experience stories but that's for another day.

Colin O'Brien

GayWest Social Evening Wednesday 13th March 2024

Join us for our social evening at **“The Lodekka”**

Tramway Rd, Brislington, Bristol, BS4 3DS

Meet from 8pm for a chat, a laugh and
to put the world to rights.

The venue is part of the Green King chain and
the food is good and reasonably priced.





Daffodils

After the long winter gloom, the sun becomes stronger and we start to feel the warmth on our skin. At the road entrances to villages, towns, cities and in our municipal parks, sunshine yellow flowers mark the end of winter and lift our spirits in March as the daffodils start to bloom.

March is predominantly when our large daffodils start flowering, their golden heads following the sun as it tracks across the sky from dawn till dusk. Many are yellow, but quite a lot are bicolored, so that they are single, semi and double flowers in yellows, whites and oranges

People ask what the difference is between daffodils and narcissus. Its truly easy: daffodil is the common name in this country for narcissus, which is the Latin name.

These bulbous plants are bought in the autumn and planted at least 3 inches down with the smaller bulbs, and as much as ten inches down in the soil with larger bulbs. As a rule of thumb, after the first three inches plant daffodil bulbs twice the height of the bulb. Plant between October and November when the ground is not frozen.

Plant Daffodils up to three inches apart after digging a hole large enough to take the bulbs you have bought. Sprinkle some potash in the base of the hole and then place your bulbs on top and fill the hole in.

Once your Daffodils have flowered, remove any seed pods and allow the foliage to die down for at least 6 weeks. You can also apply a general fertilizer (Growmore) or a high potassium based liquid feed like tomato food to help boost the bulbs for next year.

The number of daffodils that are available on the market is quite mindboggling. Daffodils are split into fiveteen different sections and it's for you to choose the varieties that you wish for your garden.

If you find, like me, you can't wait for daffodils to flower then you could always try growing some paperwhites that flower for Christmas, or buying bunches of daffodils from the shops that come from the Isles of Scilly and then from Cornwall.

Stephen Lee's website: www.gardening-coach.co.uk
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The Ustinov Studio

Performance 02/2024

The acclaimed Theatre Director, Deborah Warner, has been appointed at the Ustinov Studio in Bath as Artistic Director.

A few years ago I saw prima ballerina Alina Cojocaru dance with the English National Ballet in a performance of *Giselle* at the London Coliseum Theatre. After the performance, I met her at the stage door and we had a very interesting conversation.

So when I saw that Alina was to dance at the Ustinov Studio, I was virtually at the head of the queue to book tickets!

Alina who comes from Romania, has danced with many different companies, including the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden, and justifiably has won many awards. The programme we saw consisted of two works both choreographed by Kim Brandstrup, the first being *Minotaur* with three dancers. The second half consisted of *Metamorphoses* based on the story of Cupid and Psyche who were divine lovers. This piece showed the soloists at the very peak of their dancing skills and art. Alina was partnered by Mathew Ball, of the Royal Ballet, and together they had a particularly dynamic stage presence.

After the performance I dashed to the stage door – hoping once again to catch a glimpse of Alina, and suddenly she appeared – carrying a holdall and obviously in much of a hurry. I called to her and she stopped for a chat saying that she had to catch a train back to London!

So it was the perfect ending to the day, a live performance and meeting the star. She is a petite and charming person and it was a delight to see her a second time.

I hope she will return to Bath and dance for us again.

Valentino

STOP PRESS: Our Woodpecker Walk that was scheduled for 17th March, has now been changed to Sunday 14th April—and we do hope in glorious sunshine. Colin will lead the walk as usual and we all meet at 11.00am at 30 Woodpecker Close, Bilbie Green in Keynsham.

Followed by refreshments.