



Time travel at Greenwich

The IYA Cosmic Diary project seeks to utilise blogging to educate readers about astronomy and those that conduct it. To that end, the Royal Observatory Greenwich has come up with a rather novel blog of its own.

“**L**ast evening an explosion was heard by a keeper of Greenwich Park on the hill close to the Royal Observatory... a bottle, in many pieces, which had apparently contained an explosive substance, was found near the spot where the explosion took place...”

Don't worry if you think you missed this report on the news. It was indeed an anarchist attack on the Royal Observatory Greenwich, but it took place 115 years ago in 1894, the year that is the focus of Cosmic Diary: Greenwich 1894. Cosmic Diary is an International Year of Astronomy project that allows astronomers and astronomy educators, both professional and amateur, to blog on their jobs, their work, their astronomical hobbies and all things to do with space (for those readers who aren't computer-savvy, think of a blog as a kind of online diary). The National Maritime Museum and Royal Observatory, Greenwich, have taken it one step further though with a daily blog that reveals details of what life was like at the observatory back in its heyday, showing the contrast between astronomical research

then and now. The blog is based on the journals of three men: William Henry Mahony Christie (the Astronomer Royal of the time), Herbert Hall Turner, who was Chief Assistant at the observatory between 1881–1894, and Frank Watson Dyson, who succeeded Turner as Chief Assistant from 1894–1905.

Aside from the aforementioned bombing attempt, there were several good reasons to blog about 1894, says Dr Rebekah Higgitt, who is the Curator of History and Science and Technology at the National Maritime Museum and the Editor of the Greenwich 1894 blog. “The 1890s saw a series of important changes at the ROG, in particular in terms of staff, buildings, instruments and the types of astronomy that was undertaken,” she says. “Even better is the fact that the results of some of these changes (e.g. the buildings and the 28-inch telescope) can still be seen or used by visitors today. Also, for 1894 I found two journals written by three individuals, which meant that the blog could include more than one voice.”



■ The former Astronomer Royal, William Christie. Image: National Maritime Museum.

The daily journal entries highlight life at a leading observatory in the nineteenth century. “Routine work tended not to be recorded in the journals as there are extensive records of observations recorded elsewhere,” says Higgitt. Instead, the journals give us an insight into Dyson being trained up to replace Turner, Christie shopping on New Bond Street for furnishings for the new buildings, excursions to Oxford and meetings at the Royal Astronomical Society (one meeting in particular in January 1894 saw a discussion of observations of Io made by none other than E E Barnard, which are particularly fascinating given as to what we know about Io and its volcanoes now), and dealings with other staff (human ‘computers’) who worked at the observatory. “Certainly Christie spent a lot of time telling the Admiralty how overstretched and under-resourced he and his staff were, particularly at this period of expansion,” says Higgitt, who posts a new journal entry on the blog every day, often with her own commentary highlighting certain aspects of the day's posting. “I think that it will be particularly revealing to make a comparison with a period like the 1890s when – with the real arrival of relatively new techniques like photography and spectroscopy and the availability of increasingly powerful telescopes – astronomers had a sense that they were at the beginning of a new era in their field, and yet they could never have foreseen what can be done today.”

FIND OUT MORE

To travel back in time and learn about what professional astronomy was all about in the 1890s, visit the Cosmic Diary: Greenwich 1894 at

www.cosmicdiary1894.blogspot.com

To take a look at other Cosmic Diary blogs, the project's homepage is

www.cosmicdiary.org



◀ Construction work on the South Building at Greenwich that lasted throughout the 1890s. Image: National Maritime Museum.