



FEBRUARY PUBLIC MEETING

This month we welcome Neil Parker to talk about "The Telescopes on La Palma".

Neil Parker's background is in the world of professional astronomy and the engineering behind the large telescopes needed for it.

He is a former Deputy Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory and was once

Head of its Technology Division.

His talk will explore some of the Isaac Newton Group of Telescopes, located in La Palma's Roque de los Muchachos Observatory, as well as the scientific engineering behind them.

Neil was once involved in the installation and maintenance of the British tele-



scopes on top of the island's volcanic caldera, and so has an expert point-of-view.

You may also know of Neil as the co-founder of Green-Witch, the popular telescope suppliers for amateur astronomers.

The public meeting takes place at the Henry Dixon Hall, Rivenhall End on Wednesday 18th February at 7:30pm.



COMMENT

Please note that the observatory field and access roads are currently flooded due to the recent weather conditions, and so the site is off limits for the time being. The website

will be updated with news when the site is accessible again.

All the best for February

David



North Essex
Astronomical
Society

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Observatory: Stuart Grainger

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ASTROFEST 2009

Hundreds of people braved the recent cold weather and made it into central London for this year's European Astrofest, getting to see a range of talks and exhibitions about astronomy and space.

A high point of the Astrofest was the appearance of Sir Patrick Moore with his Apollo era contemporaries Garry Hunt and Reg Turnhill, who gave their thoughts and reminiscences about the first manned lunar land-

ing—looking back 40 years on. The session went on to a Q&A, covering the future of space exploration, Martian landings and some interesting political views.

The event was concluded by a stunning historical lecture by Allan Chapman about Thomas Harriot—the first person to use a telescope for

astronomical observations.

The exhibition floor featured stands from the usual telescope retailers, and eventually proved too tempting to resist making a purchase!



E.A.R.P. Update

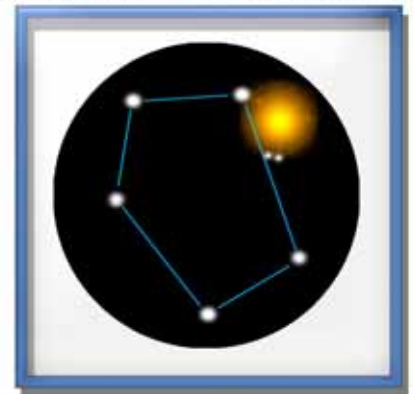
The Society's aim of making observations of the variable star Epsilon Auriga are getting closer to fruition, with

the first stages of preparation well underway.

The Epsilon Aurigae Research Project (EARP) will be using a 50mm lens and CCD camera setup to image the star in order to take photometric readings (that is to measure the amount of light received from the star - photon counting!).

ϵ Aurigae is an eclipsing binary system with a long period of variability (~27 years) and our research will contribute to a global effort to increase the volume of observation data in the

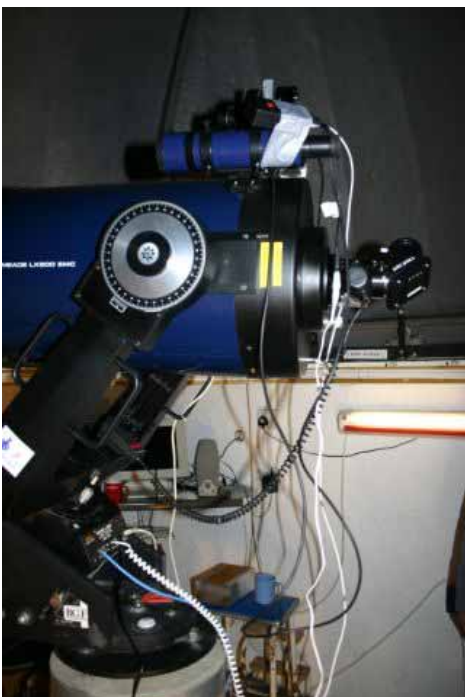
NORTH ESSEX ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY



Epsilon Aurigae Research Project

next couple of years when the star should enter an eclipsed phase.

Keith Elliot and Stuart Grainger has recently engineered the camera apparatus, as seen here attached to the main observatory telescope.



SKY NOTES (with James Abbott)

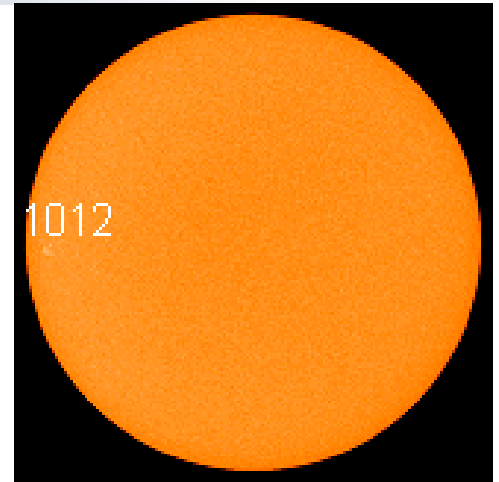
Venus is at its best in February. It sets after 8pm throughout the month, and so will be visible for most of the evening, as a brilliant beacon in the west. Venus is much brighter than any other star or planet in the sky due to its highly reflective atmosphere and the close approaches it can make to the Earth.

As it swings by between us and the Sun in March Venus will be less than 30 million miles away. On the evenings of the 27th and 28th, the young crescent Moon will be nearby making an attractive pairing.

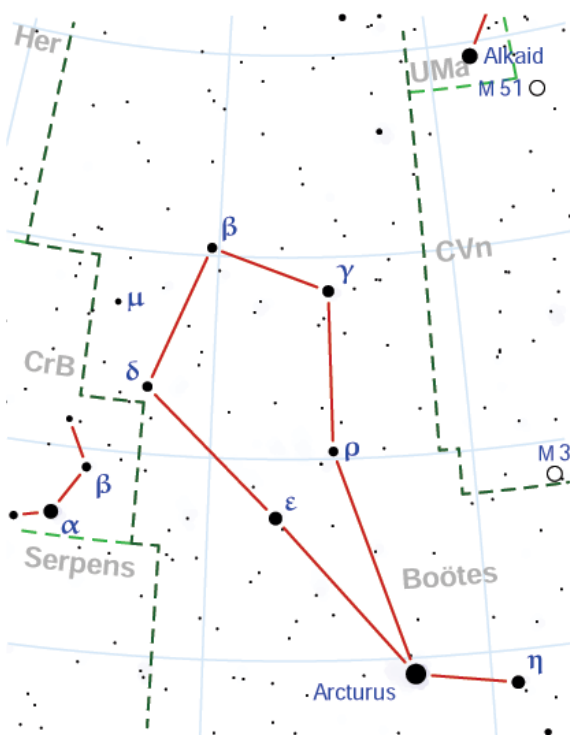
Watch to see if the Moon shows strong Earthshine at this time - the glow on the darker portion of the Moon caused by the Earth.

At 8pm in mid-month, Orion stands upright and due south and in subsequent weeks as the Spring approaches, the most easily recognisable of the winter constellations starts to sink into the west. By contrast, during late evenings in February the bright orange star Arcturus is starting to rise in the north east, a herald of the Spring to come. Arcturus can be found by continuing the curve of the Great Bear's tail downward.

The Sun climbs the sky noticeably in February, ending the month about 10 degrees higher at noon than at the start of the month. Daylight hours increase by around an hour and a half. The Sun itself



remains very quiet at the moment, with little sign that the long-awaited new Solar Cycle is starting. When it does, sunspots numbers and sightings of the Aurora should increase, but perhaps the very prolonged minimum this time may be pointing to a change from the expected cycle behaviour?



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OUTREACH

As part of the Society's plans to organise outreach activities with which to use our Lottery-funded observatory and telescope equipment, as well as to promote the subject as part of the International Year of Astronomy, connections have been made with two Scout groups in the area and a grammar school in Colchester.

Both Witham Scouts and the Great Tey Cub group have been visited by Society members, with the Witham group aiming to use our observatory site to eventually claim their Astronomy Badge.

Colchester Royal Grammar School is in the planning stages of their own observatory, in order to begin a programme of study for GCSE Astronomy. They have sought out the Society's advice and we will be forging an association with them for future interactions.

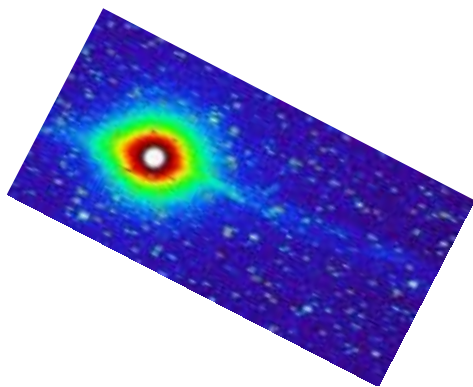
Another International Sidewalk Astronomy Night is coming up in the next couple of months, and hopefully a lot of us will be able to take part in what will be the largest global star party ever.



COMET LULIN

Comet Lulin Update

As reported last month, Comet Lulin has become the first comet highlight of the year.



Discovered in July 2007 by Chinese astronomers, it is predicted to reach about 5th magnitude in late February. At the moment, as of early February, it is fairly easy to see with binoculars—as long as you have good viewing conditions and a dark site.

Visibility will improve later in the month as the comet swings into the inner Solar System and the Earth-comet distance shrinks. At closest approach (~0.4 AU) on February 24th, the comet should brighten. It may still even become visible with the naked eye in a dark, moonless sky.

Don't assume that these future brightness predictions are trustworthy. It may be disappointing and surprises are possible. How it will react to increasing sunlight is anyone's guess.

In current images, the comet is showing a dim tail and anti-tail.

Italian astrono-

mers witnessed a "disconnection event" on the 4th February. While imaging the comet, parts of the tail were observed to twist and then be torn away. It is thought that interactions with a strong solar wind caused the disturbance. Such phenomena were seen last year when Comet Encke was struck by a Coronal Mass Ejection (CME).

A finder chart can be found here:

<http://tinyurl.com/chdz2m>

