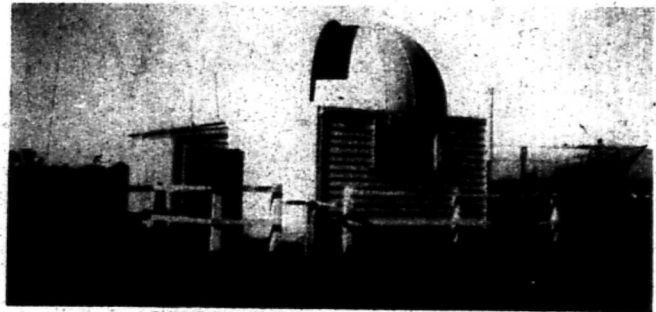




The junior branch of the New Plymouth Astronomical Club at the end of 1945, from left: Back row, Brian Fulton, Colin Blance, Des Snelling, Bruce Gatland, Gavin Crowley, Owen Oats, Dick Dow, Ray Urbahn, John Greiner; front row, Jenifer Church, Faye Rowe, observatory director Francis Morshead, Society president Dr George Home, Jeannette Grey, Dorothy Lacey, Pam Lecher.

Memories sky-high

New Zealand's first star party at the weekend focused attention on Taranaki astronomers. The convention at Rahotu Domain drew about 100 visitors from around New Zealand. Astronomy in Taranaki has a long history. Jeannette Grey of New Plymouth recalls some activities of the 1940s.



New Plymouth Observatory in the 1940s.

The young popular British astronomer, speaker and writer Heather Couper visited New Zealand recently.

She described her very early interest in astronomy and brought back memories of New Plymouth's own junior astronomers of the 1940s. I was one of them.

Revisiting the scene, I strolled up the flank of Marsland Hill to the observatory in daylight and little seemed to have changed. In earlier days we had stumbled over cows and their inevitable cowpats. There are no cattle now and the old animal-pound is replaced by the Civil Defence building. The road to a parking area takes the place of the old muddy and well-worn track up the hillside and there are newer trees surrounding the observatory which still stands, threshold of thoughts and sightings of distant worlds.

Enthusiasts

In the early years from 1939 until 1946, while our older friends and relations were overseas fighting a grim war, we used to gather as a group of teenage enthusiasts at the observatory most Saturday evenings. Officially we were the junior branch of the New Plymouth Astronomical Society. We called it the Junior Club.

We hung on every word while gazing eagerly through the telescope

under the watchful eyes of Dr George Home, Society president from 1920 to 1955, and Francis Morshead, director of the observatory from 1925 to 1958. In retrospect we seemed a mentally precocious group.

In 1943 we never doubted for a moment that man would walk on the moon nor that rockets and space ships would visit other planets of the solar system and beyond. We were so extraordinarily certain. Yet it was to be another quarter century into the future before these events even began to happen.

Telescope

However we also had our feet on the ground and raised the money to line the inside of the observatory (the part housing the telescope).

In 1970 when R. G. Wood wrote the history of the first 50 years of the observatory, he failed to write very much about the junior branch which had met weekly from 1941 until well into the 1970s.

That booklet of the history would also have been an appropriate place to record the three winners of Murray Geddes Memorial Prizes who were trained at the New Plymouth telescope as official observers. These girls proudly received their prizes from the Royal New Zealand Astronomical Society as promising young astronomers. Among their activities

they had contributed hundreds of sunspot projection drawings for the international programme.

Lectures

Weekly lectures at the junior branch featured an amazing range of topics and lists are still in existence in the small but excellent journal, Alpha Crucis, compiled by the juniors themselves over a number of years and even distributed to the senior members. Such subjects as the Ice Ages, relativity, origins of planetary life, atomic research, nebulae and the birth of the planets were presented by students or by older speakers, some of whom were quite famous.

Master

One of them was the distinguished New Zealander, the late Dr L. J. Comrie who ran the first business in London to ever offer the use of calculating machines. These were large and noisy, a far cry from the small, silent, fast calculators of today.

Some topics presented were more mundane and we never tired of hearing

about Great Barrier Island from a very well-known master at the New Plymouth Boys' High School, C. G. Botterill.

Many of the members of our group were boarders at the local high schools. Perhaps some of them, merely attended as an escape on Saturday evenings but there was genuine interest from most.

The hundreds of students who attended over the years are now well scattered around the world and have shown expertise in a number of scientific fields such as mining engineering, physics, haematology and medicine to name a few. Their publications deal with stick-insects and New Zealand mushrooms and toadstools, a great diversity.

Enlivened

Dr George Home was a kindly and inspiring man who devoted a great length of time to the juniors while also running a busy medical practice. He had an insatiable interest in so many subjects and his thirst for knowledge was infectious. As Brian Scanlan wrote

in the Taranaki Herald in May 1984: "Dr George Home... enlivened the Astronomical Society with his wit and knowledge."

So too did Francis Morshead in his own quiet way. His endless patience in instructing us in the use of the six-inch refracting telescope and his fund of astronomical facts and experience endeared him to so many of the students. Nothing was too much trouble and his long and caring leadership of the branch is not easily forgotten.

In 1950 I wrote a very brief history of the junior branch in Alpha Crucis. At the conclusion I remarked that astronomy had not yet found its rightful place in the education system of this country.

I like to think that this need has now been fulfilled and that it was helped along by the many budding astronomers from those early years.

New Plymouth should be proud of its observatory and give it the support it deserves. Not many New Zealand cities or towns have such a fine tradition in astronomy.