

Astronomy Talk 23rd August 2022

Historical Observations of Mars

David Strange, Chairman of the Norman Lockyer Observatory in Sidmouth gave this talk: there were 54 attending.

The first telescopic pictures of Mars were drawn by Huygens in 1659. He estimated the Martian day length to be 24½ hours, which is very close to the 24 hrs 37 minutes we have today. Many observers followed shortly after, including Cassini in 1666 who noted the polar caps, and Robert Hooke in 1666.

In the nineteenth century with better telescopes, John Herschel pondered Mars's habitability. John Phillips in 1862 noted what he thought was water, and Norman Lockyer made many excellent observations from 1862 onwards. The Hellas impact crater was known for a long time as "Lockyer Crater". (There is now a small crater named after him on Mars). There was general agreement by 1877 that Mars was largely covered by both land and seas. Asaph Hall discovered Mars's moons in 1877.

Then we come to Schiaparelli and his "canali", "channels" mistranslated as "canals" noted in 1883. Percival Lowell's started observing from his observatory in Flagstaff Arizona in 1893, and he wrote several books promoting the idea of designed canals and intelligent life. Most astronomers rejected his theory.

Even in the 1920's many people believed in the canals, and it wasn't until the Mariner probes from 1964 onwards that the idea was finally laid to rest.

Good questions and followed by an interesting talk by Bob Mizon on Jupiter, as well as showing things to see currently in the night sky.