

## Documenting the History of ROE since 1975

Version 3 prepared by John Davies on behalf of the informal history group (A. J Lawrence, C. Davenhall, K. S. Moran, J.K Davies) June 2024

**Objective.** For a brief period around 2010 an ROE history group was set up to record a narrative, comprehensive history, of the ROE from the 1970s made by those that were here at the time. This was to be done via by submitting recollections to paper, digital format or audio disk, The objective was to create an archive which might, at some future time, be useful to anyone preparing an history of ROE to follow on from the book produced by Hermann Bruik which chronicled astronomy in Edinburgh up to about 1975. This period can be considered to have two elements, the period from the 1970s until 1998 when the ROE as an establishment ceased to exist and the period since then during which the site has become the home of the UK Astronomy Technology Centre. Some activities transcend this administrative border, for example the ROE visitor centre and the Institute for Astronomy have existed throughout this period. Some progress was made before the project stopped in about 2011. We hope to re-establish this activity in 2024 in order to expand this archive. The resulting material will be stored in the ROE library against the day when the final chapters of the ROE, and the opening scenes of the UKATC are finally documented. Note that this effort is specific to the Edinburgh site. The history of facilities such as UKIRT, JCMT and the UKST are already recorded elsewhere or are out of scope of this project. Furthermore, actually preparing a detail historical manuscript, ie a book or monograph, is not an objective.

**Methodology.** The following types of information are required for the success of such a project:

- ✘ A detailed timeline/chronology to form a framework around which other information can be fitted.
- ✘ Details of local in-house research and its impact at the time, and since.
- ✘ The evolution of the internal structure of the observatory (in terms of working groups/formal management into divisions and responsibilities up to the period when it became clear that ROE and RGO could not survive in their current forms).
- ✘ The events leading up to the formal dissolution of the Royal Observatories and the setting up of the UKATC.
- ✘ The evolution of the UKATC as a distinct entity which has just celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> year of existence

There are many ways individuals can contribute to this effort and no one method is favoured over the others. They include:

- Recording a video/oral history 'Tape' and depositing it in the archive. This can be done either alone, using a list of memory jogging questions such as those below or in an one-to-one or small group environment which would form more of a conversation than a monologue.
- Preparing a written timeline of individual involvement which can be integrated into/cross checked with the master chronology which is being prepared.
- Sending written notes on any of the above topics based on either personal recollections or any physical documents which may have retained.
- Donating to the archive any physical material such as notebooks, reports, or even old hardware.

**Proposal** The plan moving forward is as follows

Develop a site chronology using written material in the library and its annexes. This has already been started.

Identify a list of persons who have experience of the site during the period of interest (see Appendix 1)

Ask these individuals, should they wish to contribute, to send a written personal chronology of their involvement with ROE/UKATC

Use this, together with the wider site chronology being prepared separately, to identify specific topics to bring out in more detail with each individual.

Invite those persons to develop these topics either in a further written form or via an oral history interview.

Convene a group of interested persons to meet on site at typically monthly intervals to further develop this plan, expand the written chronology and rationalise and document the historic materials held in the Library annexes. This group can either elect its own chairperson or be overseen by an existing member of UKATC/IfA Staff.

**Other activities.** There is small and partly organised collection of material in one of the library annexes. This needs to be better organised and if possible documented. Ideally this should be done by someone with appropriate skills, an historian or archivist, but initially at least simply grouping the material into a larger number of smaller and self consistent sub-packages should be feasible. It would require minimal expenditure, perhaps a few box files and a pack of document wallets, and can be done using mostly unpaid effort from the history group.

**Budget.** On the assumption that most of the participants would be retirees little or no staff effort is required, except where staff still in post wish to be involved. Expenses are likely to be limited to such things as coffee/snacks for the regular meetings and some physical storage items (box-files, envelope folders, DVDs) for use when developing the library archive. Hopefully this can be accommodated within the library, media services and PR budgets.

#### **Oral history interviewees.**

Some such recordings have been done Already: Peter Brand, Russell Eberst, Joe Matthews, Terry Purkins, Malcolm Smith, Sue Tritton, Ramon Wolstencroft. A list of potential future candidates is given in the Appendix. Its is possible, indeed likely, that starting such a programme may trigger additional contributors to volunteer. In person interviews may be possible with person who still live locally, otherwise a video tool such as Zoom can be used. Individuals who have left, but still work in astronomy, may visit the site from time to time and may be willing to participate during such a visit.

#### Typical video interview topics

- ✦ A description of why you took the post & position offered initially at ROE.
- ✦ Any impressions of ROE and its ethos and particularly if it changed during your tenure.
- ✦ A description of working relationships : colleagues with whom you worked {anecdotes too}: who, when, what they did, how work was carried out and how these roles and tasks evolved. Did the managers with whom you worked inspire, motivate or not?
- ✦ A description of facilities & equipment used: were they good/bad, state-of-the-art, unique?
- ✦ Any recollections of important events that happened such as official visits, social events, retirements, conferences, training courses.
- ✦ Descriptions of the technological advances/improvements made in instrumentation, especially if these were due to work at ROE.

**Timescale:** The initial objective would be to have made significant progress, developing a detailed chronology and recording at least a dozen oral histories by the end of 2025.

The group submits this plan to invite comments and suggestions with a view to obtaining support for its activities over the next two years.

Appendix: Potential New candidates for oral history interviews: Note that the majority have not yet been approached nor their contact details established. Indeed in some cases the group is not even sure if some of these retired individuals would be able to contribute at all.

#### Existing staff (including Emeritus/visiting Scientists)

Steven Beard, Ewan Brown, Nick Cross, Jason Cowan, Jim Dunlop, Alistair Glasse, Nigel Hambly, Bob Mann, John Peacock, Mike Read, Eckhard Sutorius, Peredur Williams (again), Gillian Wright

#### Former staff now working elsewhere:

Walter Gear and Shona McEarchen, Tania Johnson, Matt Mountain, Suzie Ramsey, Adrian Russell

#### Former staff, now retired, some of whom may not be contactable

John and Jo Barrow, Russell Canon, Mark Casali, Victor Clube, Collin Cunningham, Liz Gibson, Peter Hastings (written material already received), Frances Hawarden, Dennis Kelly (if interested) John and Fenella Lightfoot, Andy Longmore, Harvey MacGillivray, Bennet McInnes (participating already), Alex McLachlan, Horst Meyerdierks, Bill Napier, Alan and Gillian Pickup, Gary Rae, Ian Robson, Liz Sim, Sue Tritton, Richard Wade, Fred Watson