THE OBSERVATORY MAGAZINE

Linking Three Centuries

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Abstract. A brief history of *The Observatory Magazine* is presented in the context of a review of the procedures and practices of the Editors over the last 125 years, so far as is known from the available archives. In an age of increasing emphasis on electronic communication, the future prospects for the *Magazine* may not be especially rosy.

1. Introduction

It may be that today, at the beginning of the 21st Century, *The Observatory Magazine*, in its distinctive light-blue cover and distinctly non-electronic format, might be regarded as something of an anachronism in the world of publishing, particularly in what is most certainly a 'high-tech' discipline like astronomy. However, our science has deep roots and, while most practitioners have not been slow to take advantage of the latest electronic apparatus, high-speed computers, and sensitive detectors, not a few retain some attachment to the history and traditions of astronomy. Perhaps that explains why the *Magazine* has survived for more than 125 years, from the more leisured age of the great amateur scientists of the late Victorian era, through the explosive growth in astronomy of the last century, to the present. In this article, I shall attempt an overview of the *Magazine* by looking in turn at the various facets and factors that have made it what it is today.

2. A Very Brief History of Time

The very first issue of *The Observatory, A Monthly Review of Astronomy* appeared on 1877 April 20 at the princely sum of 1 shilling[1], which in

[1] Five pence in 'new money', about 7 or 8 cents to European and American readers.

2003 prices would be around 80 pence. In dimensions, the *Magazine* at its founding was very similar to that of today, perhaps demonstrating the resistance of successive Editors to change (but see the *Editorials* in (Vol. 66, p. 69) and (Vol. 77, p. 1) for evidence of a wobble!). It had just 32 pages, rather fewer than the typical issue today with around 60 pages, but not so very different for the yearly total, as we shall see. The cover was a rather darker blue than with which recent readers will be familiar, and the 'contents' graced the front cover rather than the back.

The founder of the *Magazine* and its first Editor was William Henry Mahoney Christie, at that time Chief Assistant to the Astronomer Royal, Sir George Airy. It is not clear from existing records just why Christie began the *Magazine*; it has been argued that there was some dissatisfaction with the Royal Astronomical Society over the publication of its meeting reports; or more sinisterly, with the goings-on in the RAS Council and even the RAS Club at the time (see Vol. 1, pp. 67, 97, 142, 208, 211, 251). Certainly from that first issue to the present day, reports of the Ordinary Meetings of the RAS have featured prominently in *The Observatory*'s pages, and seem to have been widely appreciated: Sir William McCrea (1975) noted that "Its reports have brought the meetings of the Royal Astronomical Society to life for readers all over the world, many of whom have never actually attended a meeting in their lives." Undoubtedly, given the reputation of Airy as a stickler for discipline and order, one cannot imagine that the publication was produced without his support or connivance, although it must be pointed out that Christie's private address was given for correspondence in that first issue.

The first volume, of 12 numbers, was concluded with the 1878 April issue since there was no *Magazine* published in 1877 December. Volume 2 ran from 1878 May through to 1879 April with an issue every month, but a rather large Volume 3 sought to align the volumes with the calendar by running from 1879 May to 1880 December. From that date until 1940 (Vol. 63), each volume contained 12 issues, and the *Magazine* really was a *monthly* review. However, the material and personal hardships of the Second World War took its toll on *The Observatory*, as it did on most other aspects of life in London, and for the next four years only six issues were produced per year, in April, May, June, August, October, and December, and they were collected together in just two volumes representing 1941 & 1942 (Vol. 64) and 1943 & 1944 (Vol. 65). Volume 66 also covered two years but the *Magazine* was then produced in February, April, June, August, October, and December, the pattern of apparitions with which we are now familiar. Volume 67, however, encompassed just one year, 1947, and set the precedent followed to this day.

Of course, the present arrangement means that the *Magazine* is no longer a *monthly* review, and naturally that claim no longer appears on the front cover. Does this mean that less material is being published? Not necessarily! Fig. 1 shows the number of pages printed per year and, while it is clear that the *Magazine* was generally substantially fatter in its prime, with page numbers often in excess of 400, and that the post-war years — extending into the 1980s — were quite lean, there has been something of a revival in the last few years. Of course, whether quantity relates to quality is another matter!

In addition to the *Magazine* proper, some supplementary material has appeared from time to time. One of the early features of *The Observatory* was a small set of ephemerides and memoranda for the more observationally-minded reader. From 1886 (Vol. 9) until 1920 (Vol. 43), much of the tabular material pertaining to planetary positions and other astronomical phenomena was collected into an annual *Companion* appearing at the beginning of the volume and doubtless produced by the 'computers' at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, which was the home of the *Magazine* for so long.

Every good journal publishes an annual index but in the pre-electronic age the occasional General Index was a great time saver for those engaged in bibliographic research. *The Observatory* has published two General Indices: the first, in 1959, covering Volumes 1–75 (1877–1955) was compiled by E. G. Martin on his retirement from the Royal Greenwich Observatory at Herstmonceux; the second appeared in 1975 and covered Volumes 76–90 (1956–1970) and was again compiled by the tireless Mr. Martin. A third General Index is at an advanced stage of preparation by the current Editors, bringing the coverage up to 2000.

3. Features

So, what do we find on opening a typical issue of *The Observatory*? It still purports to be a *A Review of Astronomy* and in years gone by it did indeed carry many reviews by such popularizers of astronomy as Agnes Clerke (see Brück (2002)) as well as many authoritative articles based on reviews of publications. One of the longest-serving Editors, T. Lewis, perhaps encouraged the idea of serial papers, for which the *Magazine* is well-known, by publishing a four-part review on 'Double-Star Astronomy' in 1893 (although some serial papers had been published before that). Possibly one of the most valuable such series, 'Some Problems in Astronomy', ran to 24 reviews and appeared between 1913 and 1917, with articles on a wide range of topics by leaders in the various fields: Chapman on 'Globular Clusters' (Vol. 36, p. 112), Eddington on 'Spectral Classes' (Vol. 36, p. 142), Fowler on 'Solar and Stellar Photospheres' (Vol. 36, p. 182), Brown on 'The Moon's Motion' (Vol. 37, p. 206), de Sitter on 'The Figure of the Earth' (Vol. 38,

p. 315), Jeffreys on 'The Mechanical Properties of the Earth' (Vol. 38, p. 347), and Jeans on 'Rotating Masses' (Vol. 40, p. 196), to give just a few examples.

Unfortunately, such powerful reviews have been rare in recent times despite sporadic attempts by the Editors of the day to solicit them. They did manage to pull together some valuable contributions for issue 1054 (Vol. 103, 1983) commemorating the supernova that gave rise to the Crab Nebula in the year of the same number. And, of course, recently they persuaded David Hughes to deliver a fine essay on 'Measuring the Moon's Mass' to celebrate the *Magazine*'s 125th birthday (2002 April). It was hoped — and perhaps still is — that the demise of the *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* in 1996 might have thrown some review-type material in the direction of *The Observatory*, but in the event little materialized. The offer is, of course, still open!

The main staple diet of the *Magazine* since the first issue has always been the reports of the Ordinary Meetings of the RAS (now re-branded as the Astronomy & Geophysics Meetings), and these do, by their very nature, contain transcripts of talks on the 'hot topics' of the day; hence the notion of 'reviews' is not completely lost. In days of yore, other meeting reports were carried: those of the Royal Meteorological Society from late 1887 through to 1933 (and, strangely, their 1963 Summer Meeting), those of the Liverpool Astronomical Society from the autumn of 1883 until the end of 1890, and even a few of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, between 1889 and 1892. Given the valuable rôle Editor E. W. Maunder played in the formation of the British Astronomical Association, it is not too surprising to find that the *Magazine* also reported meetings of the BAA from its inception in 1889 until 1935, when their own *Journal* took over. Much more recently, some of the Specialist Discussion Meetings of the RAS have been reported (others are carried by *Astronomy & Geophysics*, the new 'house journal' of the RAS), and some of the discussions held at the UK's annual National Astronomy Meetings. While the RAS Ordinary Meetings are reported by the Editors of *The Observatory* — two of them generally take this responsibility and cover alternate meetings — most other events are reported by the organizers, who are invited to submit a summary for publication.

Short papers (and some not-so-short ones — see Vol. 120, p. 1, and Vol. 121, p. 1) are undoubtedly an important feature of the *Magazine*, and have been since its inception. The early days saw many short reports of (often visual) observations of comets, meteors, and planetary phenomena, although the accent in more recent times has been on distinctly professional work, especially in astrophysics. Regrettably, the concept of 'prestige' amongst journals, especially in recent years where publications have become a form of currency amongst upwardly mobile astronomers, has militated against a strong flow of exciting material for publication. Some element of original research material is probably essential to preserve the circulation amongst professional libraries. However, it seems that we can always count on the amazingly productive pen (figuratively speaking) of Roger Griffin to ensure that we have *something* original to publish each issue. His remarkable series on 'Spectroscopic Binary Orbits from Photoelectric Radial Velocities' has, at the time of writing, reached 171! Others, such as the present author, have tried to emulate Professor Griffin, but only a pale and poor imitation was forthcoming.[2]

Correspondence has long been an essential part of the *Magazine* but it flourished more vigorously during its youth, in part because of the monthly publication schedule and the rapid processing of material from receipt to press in those days. For all our present-day electronic wizardry, it is salutary to note that contributions were appearing just a week or two after submission around the turn of the 19/20th Centuries, whereas now, with two stages of proof checking to be fitted in around the (presumably) busy schedules of those involved, at least four *months* are required. This is bound to dampen the spontaneity of an exchange of views, although the Editors regularly throw down the gauntlet to potential correspondents. In 1988–89, I tried to encourage a debate on the funding of British astronomy (Vol. 108, p. 128), but it fizzled out after just two further contributions (Vol. 109, pp. 154 & 156), one of them mine. Generally, only rather minor matters have been discussed, such as the pronunciation of 'aphelion' (Vol. 104, p. 199; Vol. 105, p. 44) and the origins (and spelling) of the word 'asteroseismology' (Vol. 116, p. 313), interesting though they might be. In the days of W. T. Lynn, correspondents were *real* correspondents: he wrote letters for almost every issue between 1878 and 1912, and sometimes more than one, on an enormous variety of topics (see his obituary in Vol. 35, p. 47). Similarly, W. F. Denning contributed a huge number of letters and short notes between the second issue in 1877 May and 1931 October (see his obituary in Vol. 54, p. 276). And, of course, the exchanges of fire could get quite heated — see, for instance, the correspondence relating to the 'Sadler-Smyth Scandal' (Vol. 3, pp. 24, 59, 94).

Of course, not all correspondence with the Editors actually makes it into print, for a variety of reasons (including the possibility of libel!). Such archives as exist, principally from the 1960s and 1970s, which are lodged with the RGO archives at the University of Cambridge Library, contain some most interesting letters on would-be contributors to the *Magazine* and their offerings! Earlier archival material may exist in the home institu-

[2]See the series on 'Spectroscopic Binary Orbits from Ultraviolet Radial Velocities', which ran in a sporadic fashion from 1987 to 2001.

tions of other Editors or more-deeply buried in the 'official' RGO collection. It is, *en passant*, of some concern that, in more recent times, much communication is carried out by email, which is not often retained for long after the events to which they relate. Quite how future historians will fare with such insubstantial records is unclear.

Book reviews are currently one of the major 'selling points' of the *Magazine*, with typically 20 per issue, probably more than any other astronomy publication. They have, of course, long been a feature, first appearing under the 'Notes' banner in Volume 11, 1888, and later under 'Publications', although never in the numbers that we find today. In fact, it is a non-trivial task to find reviewers for the 150-or-so books that might arrive during the course of a year, and for the past few years I have established a panel of 'suggestors' who offer names of possible reviewers for the books on the list I produce every week or two. The books are despatched with an apology for no prior contact, and it is a credit to the (generally, but not exclusively) UK astronomical community that well over 90% of the books sent out are actually reviewed. Occasionally the reviews give rise to some adverse comment or attract a hostile reception from the author of the book or his publisher, but thus far the libel lawyers have been kept at bay.

For many years, there was a section for 'Notes', very much intended to be part of the review function of the *Magazine*, into which all manner of items could be put: 'cuttings' from other journals, observatory reports, reviews, short obituaries, personal notes — such as the announcement of appointments — and so on. This was supplemented from 1894 November for 18 years by 'An Oxford Note-Book', with a rather more personal treatment of current events. However, as time went on, and perhaps as more rapid methods of transmission of such gossip evolved, 'Notes' dwindled and finally disappeared in 1983. Obituaries are, however, still an occasional feature, although the better organization of the RAS in gathering such tributes means that *Astronomy & Geophysics* (formerly *QJ*) is the location of choice for such matters, at least, when Fellows or Associates of the Society have passed away.

The Editors have periodically looked around for other ways to serve the astronomical community, and, for a short while in recent years (1991–1995), *The Observatory* carried a list of astronomy meetings supplied, in the main, by Elizabeth Bryson of the *Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope*. However, the rapid development of electronic communications and the relatively long time-scales for publication has rendered the *Magazine* unsuitable as an appropriate medium for such information.

Altogether more successful has been the publication of astronomy PhD thesis abstracts, primarily but not exclusively from British students, as a way of advertising new research. By no means all UK-based students have availed themselves of this opportunity but each issue since 1996 February has typically carried one or two such summaries. This offer also remains open!

Concluding each issue, the Editors try to find space for a couple of items collected by their network of sleuths for the 'Here and There' section. The general idea is to find some typographical or grammatical infelicity which opens up a whole new meaning to the phrase or sentence. To qualify, the candidate material must have been published in print and must cause all of the Editors some amusement! A collection of the best of these is to be found in the 'Millennium' Issue (2000 February) produced on the occasion of the first number of the new (if false) millennium. Which, of course, draws attention to one final — but rather rare — feature: the pink pages. On three occasions in the *Magazine*'s history, a 'Special Pull-out and Throw-away Supplement' has been added to the usual *Magazine* in commemoration of some particular event. The first appeared in the 1000th issue (1974 June), the second in the 100th year (although in the October issue rather than the April one), and the third, as indicated above, marked the (false) millennium (the true one having started in 2001). The pink pages contain rather less-orthodox material than is usually the case, in the hope of raising a smile or two among the hard-pressed astronomical community.

4. The Editors

As related above, the founder and first Editor of *The Observatory* was W. H. M. Christie, Chief Assistant at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. On his elevation to the post of Astronomer Royal in 1881, the editorial mantle fell on E. W. Maunder, also of the Royal Observatory, well-known for his work on the time-variability of sunspot numbers. In 1885, he was joined in running the *Magazine* by A. M. W. Downing and T. Lewis, again both on the staff at Greenwich, and from that time the number of Editors has generally been three or four, occasionally rising to five or even six at a transitional period.[3]

Quite what the Editors all do has clearly been an occasional source of mystery; see, *e.g.*, Paul Murdin's letter in Vol. 105, p. 139. If recent practice is anything to go by, two Editors are usually fully employed writing up the reports of RAS meetings — and chasing speakers for summaries of their contributions, another deals with the preparation of material for the printer, while another handles the subscriptions and financial side of the operation (although at the moment, with just three Editors in post, the positions

[3]As an exercise for the student, plot out the number of Editors in each year of the *Magazine*'s existence and derive the mean and standard deviation; data may be extracted from the first page of the annual index, reproduced in Fig. 2.

of Copy Editor and Managing Editor have been combined in the present author). Naturally, all of the Editors read all the submitted material[4] and also read through both galley proofs and page proofs. Given that each Editor is normally employed by a government establishment or university department, the editorial work has to be squeezed in around his more formal duties.

This need to juggle the responsibilities of paid employment with editorial work has had certain consequences for the *Magazine*. Primarily, Editors have been required either to work in an institution in which the *Magazine* has been given a somewhat privileged status, or to have been especially dedicated to working long hours, as I suspect was the case with Roger Griffin, who currently shares the long-duration award for editing the *Magazine* for 23 years with T. Lewis; or, of course, both! These conflicting pressures have usually been the cause of editorial retirements, and I can recall several cases during my 20 years in office where academic duties have finally overwhelmed an Editor into giving up. The value of a sympathetic institution was clearly why the *Magazine* was based for so long at the Royal Observatory (at Greenwich) and then at the Royal Greenwich Observatory (at Herstmonceux). It helped, of course, that two Astronomers Royal after Christie, Sir Harold Spencer Jones and Sir Richard Woolley, had both been Editors, and, no doubt, that the *Magazine* had been founded there.

In addition to three Astronomers Royal, a number of observatory directors all had experience on the *Magazine* before reaching the pinnacles of their careers, and one might argue that editorship is a valuable rite of passage. For others, on the other hand, the pinnacle is past and *The Observatory* represents a satisfying 'hobby' on the way to retirement! A full list of past Editors is now routinely presented as the first page of the annual index to the *Magazine*, although this was not always the case. The first, somewhat compressed list was published with Volume 69 in 1949, while the present format, giving the dates of joining and leaving, first appeared in Volume 97, 1977, thanks to some research by Roger Griffin.

Each year (at present, at least), the Editors gather for their annual meeting — and annual lunch! On these occasions, vital matters of policy are thrashed out, including prices for the following year, new initiatives, and 'house style'. The latter is a vexatious matter which, during the proofreading stages, sparks endless discussion: whether to allow split infinitives, use of the serial comma, spelling, hyphenation, use of italics, and sundry other matters — which are not always to the liking of contributors. Then there is the matter of sticking to those rules and of being consistent in the long term. It can be very trying for amateurs in the publishing business!

[4] Papers and letters are, in addition, sent out to an external referee.

From time to time the Editors, naturally enough, contribute *Editorials* for publication. Generally they deal with mundane matters like price changes or the retirement of one of their number, but occasionally they are more forthcoming on other issues, as, for example, the problems facing astronomy after the Second World War (Vol. 66, p. 97), or the funding of science and scientist's pay (Vol. 66, p. 165). Indeed, *Editorials* seemed to be very popular in Volume 66, where they frequently usurped RAS meeting reports from the 'prime slot'. Two rather nice letters, almost 'emeritus editorials', were written by H. H. Turner and H. P. Hollis for issue no. 500 (Vol. 39, pp. 224 & 227), carrying some interesting reminiscences from the early days of the *Magazine*.

Even more infrequently, past and present Editors gather to celebrate some benchmark anniversary; as an example, in the RGO archives I found a menu from the 90th Anniversary Dinner held at Herstmonceux Castle on 1967 August 15. Iced melon was followed by clear soup, leading on to braised steak, mushrooms, garden peas and potatoes, washed down with either Trittenheimer Riesling '65 or St. Estephe '61. Fruit salad and fresh cream followed by coffee brought proceedings to a close.

5. The Subscribers

Although for most of its life *The Observatory* has been associated with one institution, a typical 'editorship' lasts only a few years, and inevitably each 'new broom' sweeps clean to a certain extent. This housekeeping, together with the upheavals caused by the Second World War, the transfer from Greenwich to Herstmonceux, and then from Herstmonceux to Didcot, has meant that not much in the way of records has been kept on just who has subscribed to the *Magazine* over the years. Certainly most major astronomical institutions subscribe and a surprising number of minor ones, together with a few places which one might not associate with astronomy, *e.g.*, the New York Public Library at Grand Central Station. These institutional subscribers presently number around 400, although some, for example, in a number of countries formerly in the Soviet Union, are receiving gratis copies while their economies strengthen. In the 1960s, the number of institutional subscribers was probably somewhat larger, perhaps up to 500 or more, when science — or at least astronomy — was better funded than it is today. Our present list of institutional subscribers shows a world-wide distribution for the *Magazine*; it is certainly not confined to the English-speaking regions, although just how well the 'Here & There' column is received in some parts is unclear!

Other recipients of free subscriptions are the 'places of deposit', to which we are legally obliged to send copies, such as the British Library, and some of the abstracting agencies. We also send the *Magazine* to a number of other journals who have agreed to exchange copies, thus creating a small library of magazines and journals for the Editors' use (excluding, unfortunately, the 'heavyweights', such as *MNRAS, A&A, ApJ* !).

There has always been a number of individual subscribers among both the professional and amateur communities. During my time as an Editor, but prior to 1998, that number was quite small, generally a few dozen. However, at that time and for reasons that will be outlined in the next section, the Royal Astronomical Society ended its block subscription for the Fellows (numbering then around 2800, less a few who opted for a geophysics magazine). Around 450 who wanted to continue to receive *The Observatory* were obliged to pay an additional £10 for their copies, which they did (and most still do) either through their annual payments to the RAS or directly to the Editorial Office.

In an effort to spark some interest in the *Magazine* among the up-and-coming generation of (British) astronomers, the Editors agreed to offer free copies to postgraduate students studying astronomy or a related subject in a British university. Starting in 2002, all the student had to do was to request, by e-mail, a free subscription! Almost 140 students took up the offer. At the end of the year, those continuing their postgraduate course (moving into year 2 or 3) were invited to re-apply for 2003, those qualifying were encouraged to take out a personal subscription at the usual rate, and those newly entering postgraduate work in astronomy were invited to join the scheme. The nett results are somewhat disappointing: around half of those eligible (year 2 & 3) requested continuation of their free subscriptions, none of those graduating took out a personal subscription, and just under 50 new students joined the scheme. It may confirm my, possibly jaundiced, view that today's scientists want to get everything from their PC screens!

6. Finance

The Observatory has always been a low-cost operation, largely because of the honorary status of the Editors and the support given by the institutions hosting the Editors, especially the Managing Editor. Aside from the lunch taken on the occasion of the annual Editors' Meeting, and some travel expenses incurred by the Editors reporting the RAS meetings — and recently those of postgraduate students helping the Editors with those reports — the bulk of the expenditure goes on printing the *Magazine* and offprints[5] and postage out to subscribers. This has to be met by subscriptions, a very small amount of advertising revenue, and some help presently given

[5] 25 of which are still offered gratis to authors of papers, letters, and reports of discussion meetings.

by the RAS towards the expense of reporting their Ordinary Meetings. Two rates are set, one for institutions, and another, substantially lower, for those "who undertake not to re-sell or donate the magazine to libraries". The rates are reviewed annually, but the recent practice has been to make, when necessary, a significant change every few years rather than a small adjustment each year. The aim has been simply to cover costs, and no effort has been made to make a profit.[6] Of course, much depends on inflation and just how the printer's costs change. As this is written, inflation is low and prices have remained the same for five years. The *Magazine* being a rather small 'business', it has not been worth setting in place complex systems of payment, such as by credit card. At present, and probably until (or if) the UK abandons sterling and joins the Euro, most payments are made in sterling, although US dollars are also accepted since a sizeable number of subscribers are in the USA; for them, a rate of exchange is set to reflect market rates plus the conversion of funds to the sterling account.

In 1941, with the distribution and other problems caused by wartime, the Editors came to an arrangement with the Council of the Royal Astronomical Society whereby the Society would take out a block subscription to the *Magazine*, which would be distributed (by the Society) to all Fellows. This was seen at the time and for many years after to be mutually beneficial, with reports of meetings being carried to Fellows all over the world, and with the Editors being given a sound financial underpinning, which in later years became, in fact, something like half the total income as the number of Fellows rose strongly. The Editors further agreed at the time effectively to absorb, for the duration of the war, the RAS's *Occasional Notes* (see Tayler (1987)).

In 1960, the RAS launched its own 'house' publication, the *Quarterly Journal*, containing more general material, often of a review nature, in comparison with the 'hard' science to be found in their *Monthly Notices*. *QJ* ran successfully for 37 years but then ran foul of a committee set up by the RAS Council to consider the 'rôle and image' of the Society, which deemed it to be 'stuffy' and evidently not glamorous enough for the up-and-coming young astronomers the RAS needed to attract. Their response was, in 1998, to replace it with *Astronomy & Geophysics*, a lively, colour, glossy magazine compiled under a paid, part-time editor. This venture appears to have worked well for the Society although the financial costs, in large part imposed by the introduction of colour printing, were substantial. This exercised the then-Treasurer (an ex-Editor of *The Observatory* !) to look

[6] What profit has been made, at least for the past 60 years, has been subjected to taxation, formerly income tax and more recently corporation tax. So the famous words by Benjamin Franklin about the only two certainties of life being death and taxes seem to apply in astronomy too.

for significant savings in the Society's budget, and a major — and possibly the *only* — casualty was the *Magazine*'s block subscription. Immediately the Editors were forced to double prices, but to their enormous relief, the number of cancelled subscriptions, especially amongst libraries, was small. What it did mean, of course, was a drastic reduction of circulation, from around 3000 to about 1000, which would always be a painful experience for any publisher — and the Editors are technically both the owners and publishers of *The Observatory*. However, the *Magazine* has survived that upheaval and, as recounted earlier, prices have remained constant since that watershed.

As a footnote to the relationship between *The Observatory* and the RAS, it is interesting to record that on the occasions of the founding of both *QJ* and *A&G*, at least some members of the RAS Council were keen to amalgamate the *Magazine* with those new journals, but at both times the Editors considered their independence too high a price to pay; another take-over bid in 1974 was similarly repulsed.

7. Printers

The Editors have evidently always been somewhat conservative in their attitude to printers, especially with regard to changing them. The first, Taylor & Francis of Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, London, was the first, and they continued printing the *Magazine* until 1946. It was perhaps the reasonable proximity to the Royal Observatory at Greenwich that prompted that choice; one can imagine a trail of messengers taking proofs backwards and forwards between the two places, and thus maintaining the rapid production schedule of just two or three weeks. Taylor & Francis is, incidentally, still very much in business.[7]

The second printer to be used by the Editors was Vincent-Baxer, an Oxford-based firm which produced the *Magazine* between 1947 and 1959. It is not yet clear to me why this change was made, although it may have related in part to the removal during this period of the Royal Observatory from Greenwich to Herstmonceux. Vincent-Baxer no longer appears in the Oxford telephone directory, so has presumably closed down.

Suffice it to say that, once the Royal Observatory had settled into the Sussex countryside, a printer was located closer to hand. Sumfield & Day, based in Eastbourne, was the third printer for *The Observatory* and they continued until 1987, when a succession of less-than-modest price rises forced the Editors, including me, to look around for someone more com-

[7] It also seems, from the archival records, that they were the formal publishers of *The Observatory* and were responsible for most of the business activities until Richard Woolley assumed those powers in 1938.

petitive. At the suggestion of Jacqueline Mitton (now the RAS's Press Officer), we investigated University Printing Services (an off-shoot of Cambridge University Press) and commenced a generally satisfactory collaboration which runs to the present day. Given the 'amateur' status of the Editors, it was important to build up a good working relationship with the printer, so that we felt that we were dealing with someone who 'knew' the *Magazine* to the point where at least some of the omissions or errors of style created by the Editors would be quietly picked up and corrected. This certainly is the case at present; long may it continue!

8. The Future

In 2002, *The Observatory* passed its 125th birthday. It was founded in an age vastly different from that of the present readership, although the Editors over the years appear to have fought to keep the general appearance and format as constant as possible, and most certainly the present team are not about to 'rock the boat'. Whether this very conservative approach is viable is quite another matter. Although I know that younger members of the astronomical community are to be counted among our readership, they are distinctly a minority, for what may be a number of reasons. As alluded to earlier, it may be that only information pouring from a PC screen is deemed to be acceptable to the new breed of astronomer; perhaps the impermanency of academic positions today has made young researchers reluctant to take up the habit of collecting journals. Whatever the case, the limited evidence so far indicates fewer personal subscribers for the future.

For those addicted to the PC screen, the Editors have, in the last few years, provided Guenther Eichhorn and his NASA-supported team at Harvard's Astrophysics Data System with a complete set of 'Tables of Contents' together with all the available back issues of the *Magazine*. The latter have been scanned in, together with quite a few missing issues obtained from elsewhere, and made accessible on-line to web users. However, under the present editorial régime, that is probably as far as it will go! While we have a useful web page, begun by Andrew Collier-Cameron at St. Andrews and continued by Stephen Fossey at the University of London Observatory (see www.ulo.ucl.ac.uk/obsmag/), it is highly unlikely that we shall progress to a true electronic publication. I doubt whether there is the expertise, time, or even interest in pursuing that avenue among the present Editors. More to the point, it is hard to imagine such a small operation being able to handle the electronic subscription problems. Perhaps that is being unduly pessimistic; or perhaps the *Magazine* that has bridged three centuries is nearing retirement. Time will tell.

9. References

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Figure Captions:

Fig. 1. The number of pages published per year (excluding the 'pink pages'); note the disruption caused by the Second Word War.

Fig. 2. The first page of the 2002 Annual Index, showing the editorial role of honour.