

Astronomical Society of Southern Africa

How technology influenced ASSA

Centenary of ASSA

The Astronomical Society of South(ern) Africa is 100 years old

The society started by amalgamating two previous astronomical societies

on the 1st of July 1922.

Today (15 October 2022) the Society is 36 631 days old.

The nature of Astronomical Societies

Societies such as an astronomical society usually consists of a very mixed group of people

- Membership potentially cuts across every sector of society. Every race, religion and gender should be represented.
- Every profession could be represented. Members of an astronomical society could even include Professional Astronomers!
- Not every age group is represented.

The one thing that binds them together is the love of stars and an inquisitiveness about more than the world around us.

Then and now

The culture and customs were different.



Figure 2. Frank and Mary Skjellerup in the garden of their home at Rosebank, Cape Town (Orchiston Collection).



Then and now

Technological Differences



The late Clement Jennings Taylor, in his Observatory, "Herschel View," Claremont.



~Dr. Alex

Then and now

Scientific Preconceptions

1919: Eddington's expedition proves Einstein to be correct.

Before this event the scientific attitude was that scientific laws are absolute and correct.

LIGHTS ALL ASKEW IN THE HEAVENS

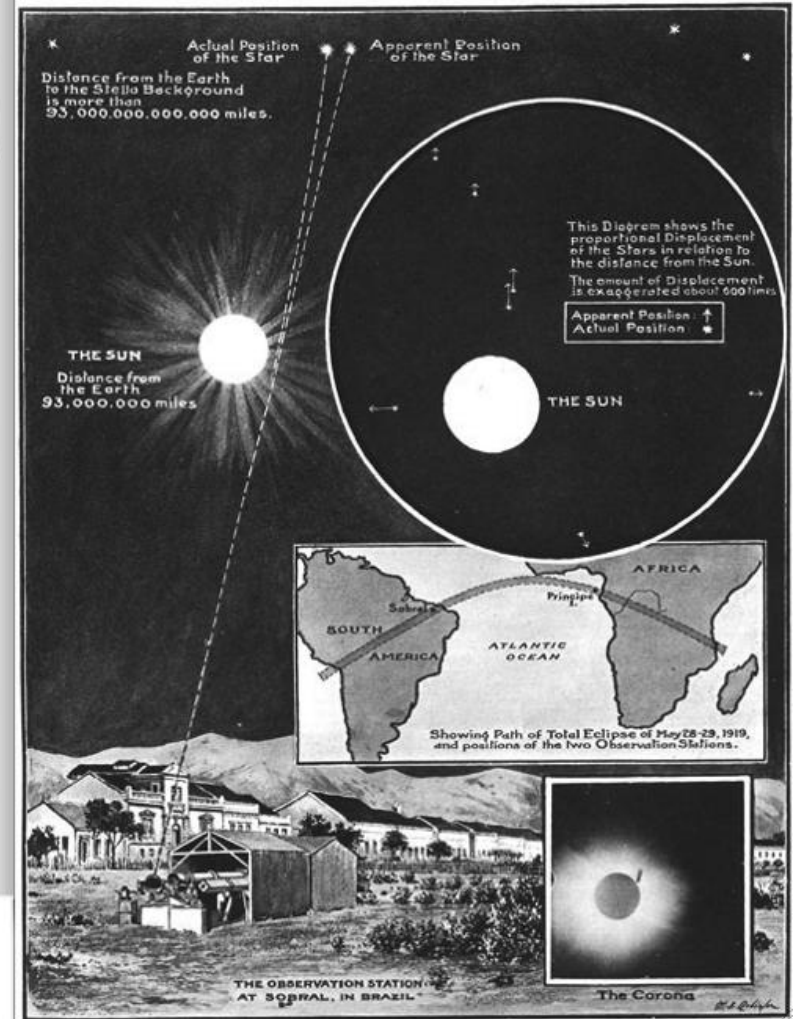
Men of Science More or Less
Agog Over Results of Eclipse
Observations.

EINSTEIN THEORY TRIUMPHS

Stars Not Where They Seemed
or Were Calculated to be,
but Nobody Need Worry.

A BOOK FOR 12 WISE MEN

No More in All the World Could
Comprehend It, Said Einstein When
His Daring Publishers Accepted It.



Astronomical Society of South(ern) Africa

The first Astronomical Societies were

- 1912: Cape Astronomical Association
- 1918: Johannesburg Astronomical Association

Astronomical Society of Southern Africa started by amalgamating two previous astronomical societies

on the **1st of July 1922.**

- The Cape Astronomical Association became the Cape Centre,
- The Johannesburg Astronomical Association became the Johannesburg Centre.

Structure of ASSA 100 years ago

The National Body had a Central Council.

The Centres were controlled by Centre Committees.

Section Directors were appointed to manage the Sections

ASSA National Council Meeting

The first Council meeting of ASSA Central Council took place at the private residence of Mr Long in Rosebank, Cape Town at 8 o'clock on the evening of 15 July 1922.

Structure of ASSA 100 years ago

The structure was one of

- an elected President
- 3 Vice Presidents
- Secretary
- Librarian
- Treasurer
- Auditors.

Over the last 100 years this structure has remained largely intact. The librarian for Council disappeared, but Council gained a business manager, membership secretary, public relations officer, curator of instruments, scholarship and a webmaster.

Eight Members of Council

Originally there were 8 members elected to Council;

4 representing the Cape Centre

4 representing the Johannesburg Centre.

Founding of new Centres

- 1932 a 3rd Centre joined ASSA namely the Natal Centre.
- 1959 Bloemfontein Centre
- 1965 Port Elizabeth Centre
- 1975 Salisbury Centre which renamed to Harare Centre in 1982
- 1998 Garden Route Centre
- 2009 Hermanus Centres

Founding of new Centres

In the meantime the big cities experienced problems with traffic and distances to travel. Thus new centres were created.

- 1966 the Pretoria Centre split from the then Transvaal or Johannesburg Centre
- 1975 Natal Midlands based in Pietermaritzburg split off from Natal of Durban Centre
- 1993 – 6 Helderberg Centre.

Use of Alternaties

Now imagine how the seat allocation in council had to adapt!

This was at a time when the meeting were held physically in Cape Town. There were on average between 6 to 10 meetings per year held for Council. It was impractical for a member from Harare to drive or fly down to attend every meeting.

Technology

Let us go back to the meetings held in Cape Town a hundred years ago.

Communication:

- There were telephones, but phone calls were very expensive especially when long distance calls were made.
- The postal service was slow, but it was reliable. You were guaranteed that your letter would EVENTUALLY arrive. TELEGRAMS were used for emergency communications.

Use of Alternatives

Council solved the problems by making superb use of the members of the Cape Centre.

Each “out of Cape Town member” would appoint an ALTERNATE.

Through letter writing, telegrams or the odd long distance telephone call the member would instruct the alternate to raise an issue, or vote on his behalf with instructions to vote YEA or NAY.

Meetings of the Council of ASSA

1922 to 2010: The meetings of Council were held in Cape Town, with the odd exception.

2010 to 2013: Council Meetings were held in Johannesburg.

2013 to today: Meetings are conducted over the digital media such as Skype and currently Jitsi.

Note: We actually started the mass use of digital meetings before Covid!

Going Digital:

- Suggestion Overbeek that ASSA convert to electronic media for communication such as e-mail. Create membership list with e-mail addresses. (co_19940208)
- Slotegraaf established a website for ASSA (mnassa_v57_n9-n10_1998-Oct)
- Rijdsijk proposal that Council accepts technology and that in an emergency emails can be used to resolve an issue instead of waiting for a physical meeting (co_20050411 M)
- Booth proposes that emails become a recognized method of communication and doing business in the society and this should be reflected in the constitution (co_20060620 M D)
- Digital: Proposal to use video conferencing for meetings (co_20061109 M)
We got around to doing it in 2013

Let us talk about technology

- The structure of ASSA council has changed greatly over the past century. Many of those changes were due to technological advances.
- What seems like common sense today were major issues at one time or another.
- Technology streamlined communication in Council and even made this symposium the first ASSA symposium which members can attend digitally.

Let us talk about technology

- A Century ago it was difficult for the amateur astronomer to keep up to date with the latest technological advances and scientific discoveries and thinking.
- The Society filled the role by publishing journals such as MNRAS in which the latest discoveries and information were disseminated and presented to the members.
- Today anyone with access to the internet can keep up to date with latest developments and even participate in events.
- These technological advances have made some functions of the society redundant.

Summary

Technology has solved many problems for ASSA, especially in streamlining communications and decision making.

The social function that a society fulfills is most important although other function may have become redundant.