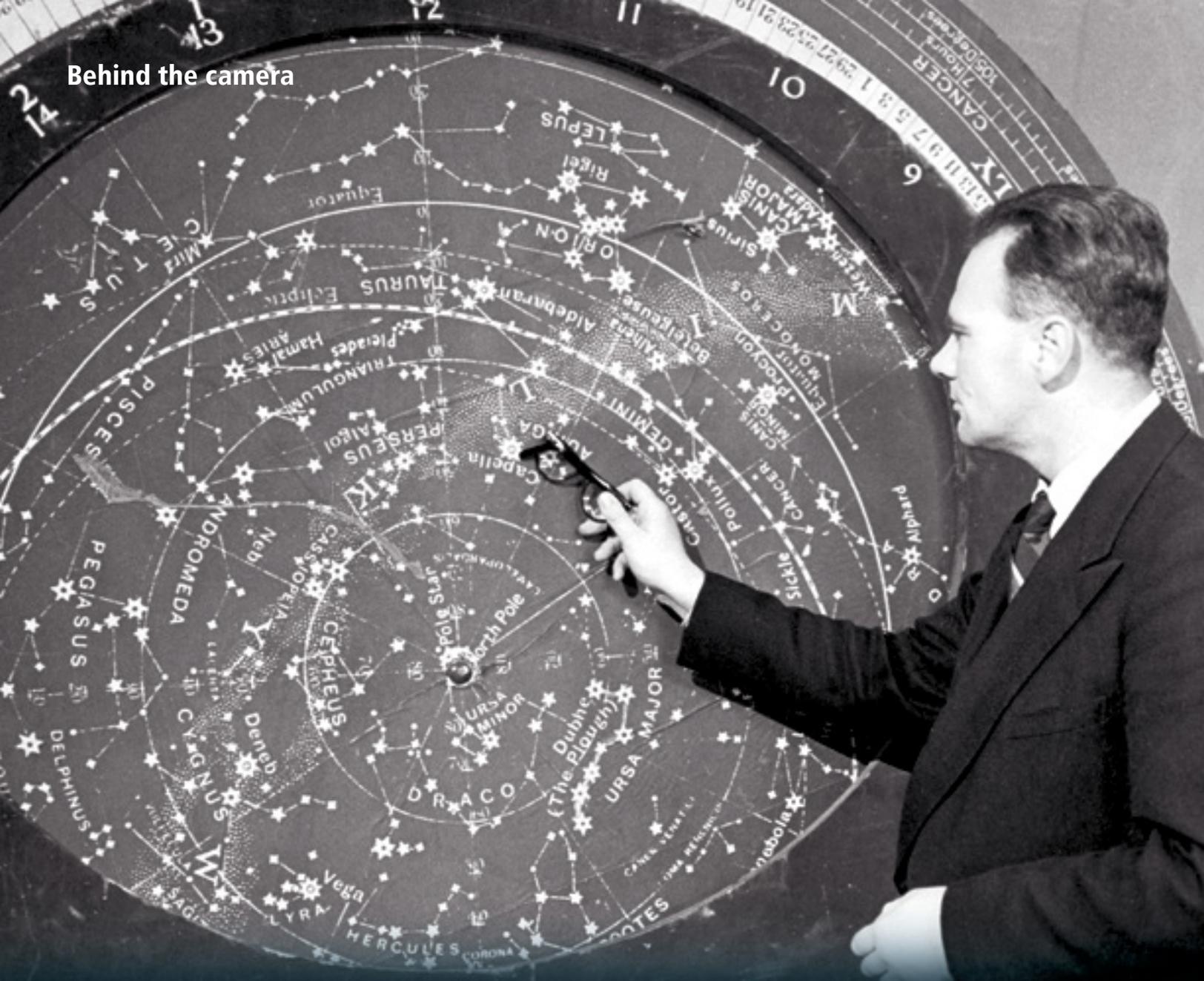


Behind the camera



Nights to remember

[Patrick Moore recalls the best, and funniest, moments from *The Sky at Night* – the TV show that has covered astronomy for nearly 50 years]

April the fourth, 1957. I sat in a BBC studio in Lime Grove, staring at a television monitor. On the screen appeared the words ‘*The Sky at Night*: a regular monthly programme presented by Patrick Moore’. Then I saw myself on the monitor and a thought flashed through my mind: “My entire career depends on what I do during the next 20 minutes.”

It did. In those far-off days, of course, all programmes were in black and white, and most of them were live. There was no chance of re-takes if anything went wrong. I was not actually nervous, because when it comes to stage fright I have about as many nerves as the average hippopotamus, but I knew that I had to do my best.

Now, almost 50 years later, *The Sky at Night* is still shown three times a month, so presumably I did not make ▶

[It'll be alright on the Night]

Things don't always go to plan when shooting in remote locations or filming a live show...

JUST IN TIME

"Once Patrick almost missed a live show. He'd been in the Midlands giving a lecture, but didn't arrive for the usual rehearsal. It wasn't like Patrick to be late, but this time there was no sign of him. Finally the phone rang – it was Patrick: 'I'm in north London,' he said. 'A kind friend lent me a car compass. I thought instead of following the road signs, I'd use the compass. Something deflected it, and I found myself going north instead of south.' But with just minutes to spare he made it to the studio and did a perfect job. It was always such a pleasure working with him."

Pat Owtram



METEOR MISS

"We were expecting a shower of Leonid meteors, which we thought was going to be rather spectacular. So we invited viewers to send in for a sky map and a report form, to let us know how many meteors they saw that night. We were absolutely overwhelmed by the demand. But on the night, the meteors didn't appear. Although they were highly visible in America, they weren't actually seen in Britain. Despite not actually seeing anything, people sent their forms back saying they had a great night. One amused us, it said, 'Meteors from sky: nil. Meteors from wife: plenty!'"

Pat Owtram

FLY TRAP

"I have heard of a hilarious incident which happened in the very early days of the show, when all the programmes were live. Patrick was doing one of his usual pieces to camera, chatting away happily, when all of a sudden he swallowed a fly. He managed to carry on as if nothing had happened, but he probably didn't feel too good about it. The funniest thing about the incident, though, was when Patrick got home. He told his mother about what happened, and she said, 'Oh, it must have been awful for you dear. But it must have been an awful lot worse for the fly!'"

Pieter Morpurgo



The return of ► Halley's Comet in 1986 was a landmark event, but not Patrick's happiest experience in broadcasting



[PIETER MORPURGO]

Producer 1981-1998

Patrick was great fun to work with. He was very enthusiastic about the work, which is an all-embracing hobby for him. Patrick once said there was a very good astronomer in South Dakota, who was measuring neutrinos. We arrived to find he'd had a throat operation and could barely speak. But after three days he regained his voice and it turned out to be a good programme.

◀ In the show's 48 years on screen, *The Sky at Night* has broadcast from the world's great observatories, including Palomar in California

► a complete hash of that first effort. The idea came from Paul Johnstone, a senior television producer who was a scientist – inasmuch as he was an archaeologist. He was anxious to present a regular astronomical programme, and he chanced upon a book of mine called *Suns, Myths and Men*, now long out of print. For some reason he thought that I might be suitable, so he asked me to go and see him. The programme was born.

Facing the music

My first task was to choose the title music; I selected *At the Castle Gate* from *Pelleas and Mélisande* by Sibelius, which we have used ever since. There have been only two departures: for our last programme about Halley's Comet, in 1986, the Band of the Royal Transport Corps played us out with the march of the same name – one of my compositions; and for the *Music of the Spheres* programme, Catherine Galloway sang another of my compositions, *It May Be In My Stars*. For the record, I have always vetoed any background music during the programme. So many producers are obsessed with it; for me it dumbs down the whole show and I will have none of it.

One more comment about music. Once, during the 1960s, we were presenting a programme about



[GARRY HUNT]

Presenter 1973-

My favourite memory is presenting the first ever interplanetary weather forecast on TV, for the first Viking lander on Mars. We gave the weather forecast for what it would be like at the landing site, and when we did the second programme a month or so later we were able to see that we'd been dead right. We were able to demonstrate that interplanetary weather forecasting could be done quite accurately.

transits of Venus from a house at Hoole in Cheshire, from where the first observation of a transit had been made by Jeremiah Horrocks in 1639. The house had been turned into a doll museum, and I thought it a little sinister.

Half an hour before transmission, it was found that the record of *At the Castle Gate* had been left behind in London. Panic! We searched frantically for a piano. There wasn't one, but we did locate a harpsichord. I had never played a harpsichord, and I had never before played *At the Castle Gate*, but bravely I did my best. Nobody protested, but I shudder to think what Sibelius would have made of it.

The last transit of Venus happened last year, and as the next chance will not be for over a century, we decided to take advantage of it. Over a hundred astronomers, mainly amateur but a few professional, gathered at my observatory in Selsey, and we had a perfect view. One member of the party was Brian May, whose fame as the Queen guitarist is so great that many people do not know he is also a well-qualified astronomer specialising in studies of cosmic dust.

Brian was also with us during a solar eclipse seen from northern Scotland. This, however, was only an annular; when the Sun is completely covered by the Moon during a total eclipse, the

sight is breathtaking – there is nothing like it in nature. We have covered several totalities in *The Sky at Night*. In 1961, we decided to show totality three times as the Moon's shadow crossed the Earth. We had observers in France and in Italy, while I was dispatched to Mount Jastrebac in what was then called Yugoslavia.

It was thought that the mountain top had the best chance of being cloud-free, so we made the ascent while our gear was hauled up by mountain oxen. Of course we had a Yugoslav crew, and my Serbo-Croat is not very good, so in the end I talked French to a German astronomer who passed it on to the producer in Croat. This is where the trouble started. The producer had heard that when the eclipse was total and darkness falls, animals lie down and go to sleep. Nice idea – let's show the oxen! When totality came, he did just that, but to give a better view he floodlit the brutes. Predictably, they merely chewed the cud and looked silly. I made a gesture which could not be misinterpreted in any language, and the cameras swung back to the Sun.

We have been to most of the world's great observatories, and it is good to note that we have always been welcomed. The programme has come from Palomar in California, Siding Spring in Australia, Flagstaff

in Arizona and the Atacama Desert in Chile, site of what is now the world's most powerful telescope. We have broadcast from the bottom of Meteor Crater, the Sahara Desert, and deep inside a gold mine at Homestake in the United States, ducking to avoid an overhead cable which would have fried us like an egg if we had touched it. The astronomers there were trying to catch neutrinos – elusive particles sent out by the Sun – by using a vast tank of cleaning fluid. It was certainly an elaborate observatory; the one thing lacking, unfortunately, was a toilet.

Great astronomers

I have vivid memories of the great astronomers who have appeared on the show. The list seems endless, and I have been honoured to be joined by present-day leaders, such as Sir Martin Rees, Stephen Hawking and John Brown, the present Astronomer Royal for Scotland.

Of course there have been mishaps. Our programme about the encounter with Halley's Comet was a disaster, because it was hijacked by *Horizon*, and the then producer was simply not equal to the job. I was at Darmstadt in Germany, headquarters of the European Space Agency with the two most famous comet experts, Jan Oort and Fred Whipple. Every time I tried to get on the air, the programme switched

back to Greenwich in London, where a team of non-experts tried to show an elaborate demonstration which failed to work. Well, I can honestly say that it wasn't my fault.

Why has the programme lasted so long? Not because of me; I am irrelevant – it is the subject which matters. We have always tried to provide something for everybody and I like to think that we have encouraged others to take a real interest in the skies. I have had hundreds if not thousands of letters by now, and I do my best to answer them although my 1908 Woodstock typewriter works overtime, so there can sometimes be delays.

Now that an old wartime injury has caught up with me, my travelling days are over, but I have welcomed my co-presenter Chris Lintott, who can do anything that I can do – and do it better. I will keep on as long as I can, and as long as I feel that people still want to watch me. I would like to see my 50th anniversary in April 2007 – I have missed only one programme in that time, when I ate the wrong sort of egg and was laid low in hospital.

I have done my best. Whether or not I have succeeded is for others to judge. ☺

 AN EVENING OF THE SKY AT NIGHT
On Saturday 6 August, BBC Four will be showing a special night of programmes to celebrate the show from 7pm