

The two Astrolabe Societies

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When Evelyn Butler, the owner of the shop in 77 Portobello Road, decided to retire in the summer of 1965, our special group of regular customers decided to continue our friendly discussions on a more formal basis. We called it 'The Astrolabe Society, London'. We met regularly once a week at each others home, showed our collections, and soon gave talks about subjects we thought were interesting to each other. Membership was open to 'owners of scientific collections' and its aims and objects were 'to further knowledge of antique scientific instruments and subjects.'

The themes of our talks, which we grandiloquently called 'Transactions' and typed out, dealt with 'The Use of Napier's Bones' Robert Seligman; 'Hadley's Quadrant' R. Seligman; 'Globes, terrestrial and celestial up to 1530' John Didcock; 'Ship Models' Edmund Thring; 'Explorers of the Moon' Patrick Moore; 'Medals of Science', Anthony Michaelis; and two further talks by J. Didcock about 'Globes', the last one on 8 February 1967.

The Society had 22 members in 1968, 11 English, 6 French and 5 Americans, but when the Secretary, Evelyn Butler, became seriously ill, the Society gradually declined. Phoenix-like it was reborn as the 'Société Internationale de l'Astrolabe' of Paris, and it held its first General Meeting on 12 November 1976. By then it had 61 gentlemen and four ladies as members, mostly from Europe and the United States with residents in France predominating. I was again elected President and Alain Brieux Secretary.

The most important person was Alain Brieux, the most knowledgeable dealer of antique scientific instruments in Europe at the time. The publication of learned papers, to be called *Astrolabica*, was achieved by the International Society, many of them dealing with Astrolabes and their historical relevance, fully deserving the adjective 'learned'. The third Meeting took place at Greenwich in the summer of 1978 and set the pattern for the future of the Society. All 24 French members were deeply impressed with the magnificent collection of Astrolabes at the Old Royal Observatory, and from this arose the desire to travel world-wide and see other astrolabe collections, however few or distant they were.

The pattern emerged of one meeting in Paris, followed on alternative years by one in 1980 in Bruxelles, 1982 in Oxford, 1984 Chicago, 1986 Florence, 1988 The Netherlands and 1990 Scotland, the 25th Anniversary of the foundation of the Astrolabe Society, London. Today this pattern continues under the Secretary Anthony Turner who took the place of Alain Brieux after his death. I resigned as President in 1996, when I left London and Anthony Turner became President which, at the time of writing, he is continuing with great devotion to the International Society along well established lines.