

Reminiscence.....

Eminent Nortonian - Geoffrey Burbidge

While one schoolboy from New Street grew up to pursue a successful career in politics as a Member of Parliament and Government Minister, another was preparing for the life of a research scientist of international distinction. Geoffrey Burbidge's early years were spent at 37 New Street. After leaving Chipping Norton School he continued his education at Bristol University where he graduated in physics in 1946. There followed an appointment in teaching and research at University College, London, where he was awarded a doctorate. But London was to offer him more than academic success.

Working at the university observatory was a young woman astronomer who had also been awarded a PhD degree. Someone who knew them both at this time said to me, "Margaret came to look at the stars and Geoffrey came to look at Margaret". After their marriage, Margaret Burbidge, as she became, was to prove his ideal partner and they formed a husband and wife team of immense prestige in scientific circles, especially in the United States, where they were to spend many years working together at leading American observatories and universities such as Harvard, Chicago and California at San Diego.

They returned to England in 1972 when it was announced by the Science Research Council that Dr Margaret Burbidge was to become Director of the Royal Greenwich Observatory which had been moved from London to the clearer atmosphere of Sussex at Herstmonceux Castle. The previous holder of this appointment had also held the office of Astronomer Royal, but it was decided to separate the two titles and a statement from the Prime

Minister's office reported that the Queen had appointed Sir Martin Ryle, a Cambridge astronomer, to what was purely an honorary position. In the circumstances, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there may have been some reluctance to confer the honour on a woman after three centuries of ~~the~~ uninterrupted male domination. There had, however, been recognition of the achievements of both Geoffrey and Margaret when they were elected Fellows of the Royal Society, the association of eminent scientists which had been founded in 1660 by King Charles II. This was the first election of a woman astronomer in the Society's 300 year history.

As Director of the Royal Observatory, it was inevitable that a variety of administrative tasks arose. These proved less attractive than her own research and after little more than a year they returned to America to resume their work at San Diego. There were yet other rewards to follow when Margaret received a medal of honour awarded by the United States Congress for her contribution to American science and this she received from the hand of the President, Ronald Reagan. Geoffrey was appointed Director of America's new observatory among the mountains of Arizona known as Kitt Peak.

Although their research lay at the very frontiers of scientific knowledge, among the most distant stars and galaxies, they could still find pleasure in field walks around Chippy on their occasional visits to New Street. They were equally at home addressing an international gathering of scientists, as Margaret did on one memorable occasion, giving an informal talk to Over Norton WI.

Roy Worvill