The Crago Observatory at Bowen Mountain

The guest speaker at our Australia Day breakfast was John Flavin, a long time member of the Astronomical Society of NSW, who gave a most informative and entertaining account of the background of the Crago Observatory at Bowen Mountain. John, born in Ireland, resident for some years in England, and in Australia since 1959, has an infectious enthusiasm for astronomy, and he conveyed this very effectively in his talk. What follows is an edited version of that talk, taken from John's notes.

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The Observatory at Bowen Mountain is owned and operated by the Astronomical Society of NSW. Construction began in late 1978 after Council and the Lands Department approvals had been obtained. It was completed in 1993. The observatory houses a 16-inch Dobsonian (Newtonian), reflector telescope, one of the two main types of reflecting telescopes.

The Society did not begin in Bowen Mountain. Its first home was in the Sydney suburb of Belfield, where its founder, Gordon Patston, had a large battle-axe block, and it remained there until 1970. At that time, it was known as Sydney Amateur Astronomers, and the work of its volunteers got a boost in 1957, the International Geophysical Year (IGY). The group signed up to an IGY project called "Moonwatch" which involved the accurate timing of artificial satellites ("moons") launched during the IGY.   A grant from the IGY covered the costs of erecting suitable equipment, and the Society had to train observers to carry out the work. As it happened, they did not have enough observers in the membership, so students and staff of the local Canterbury Boys High School were trained to take part.

The Society got local publicity, a badge for participation from the IGY, and a letter containing best wishes from the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow. This for a project staffed by volunteers in a suburban backyard!

The Society ran Public Viewing Nights which drew hundreds of people at a time with great interest in satellites, and they got further publicity from this. They built a clubhouse, in late 1959, which was opened by Dr Bart Bok, the Director of the Mount Stromlo observatory in Canberra. By the 1960,s public interest had declined, and despite the convenience of the Belfield site, it was not great from a dark sky point of view, and the Society, renamed the Astronomical Society of NSW, began to look for a field site. This became essential when Gordon Patston sold the Belfield property in 1970.

But why Bowen Mountain, and why is it known as the Crago Observatory?

Towards the end of the time in Belfield, the Society was joined by the husband and wife team of Jack and Marion Crago. The Crago family, of Cornish background, had come to Australia in the 1850s, and became established in the flour milling industry in NSW, with one of its mills, in Newtown, still bearing the family name. Jack Crago had retired before joining the Society, and had bought an old orchard at Grose Vale as a hobby farm. Marion's family had business links with the steel industry in Wollongong. The Society took to using the Grose Vale property as its observing site, and holding public open nights, but on a smaller scale than at Belfield.

Marion Crago, who was an active and committed member, found a spot called The Devils Hole on Bowen Mountain, which she judged would be a good site for a Society observatory. She organised an on-site meeting with Colo Shire Council, but the campaign to secure the site took some years. Jack Crago died in 1980, and Marion became less active in the Society. She died in 1983, while on a trekking holiday in Nepal. When her affairs were finalised after a few years, the Society was named as a major beneficiary in her will. Jack and Marion Crago came to the Society when its future looked bleak and changed its fortunes.
        The observatory, completed in 1993 on Bowen Mountain, is fittingly named in their memory, Crago.

The engaging Mr Flavin (HHS) Member of the Astronomical Society.
Guest Speaker at Bowen Mt *Hut* K-CHS Australia Day Breakfast 26 Jan 2017
Images: David Griffiths

CRAGO Observatory 2017

Bowen Mountain