Happy 40th birthday to the AAT

The first historians of the Anglo-Australian Telescope described October 1974 as “a vintage month for British astronomers” – and with good reason, writes Fred Watson.

A British–American X-ray astronomy satellite, Ariel 5, had been launched on 15 October; on the same day the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded Martin Ryle and Antony Hewish the 1974 Nobel Prize in Physics (Gascoigne et al. 1990). And HRH Prince Charles inaugurated the 3.9 m Anglo-Australian Telescope at Siding Spring Observatory by “declaring this aperture open”.

The Prince arrived at the telescope amid the bone-rattling gales that have become familiar to generations of Anglo-Australian astronomers. Protocol demanded three flags: the Prince’s standard highest, the Australian flag next, and the banner of the Australian National University lowest. Somehow, the university flag always seemed to be at the top, despite identical flagpoles and repeated adjustments. History reveals that the clandestine flag-raiser was Olin Egg, director of the ANU’s Mount Stromlo Observatory, who had previously campaigned vigorously in favour of ANU proprietorship of the new telescope. By the time the Prince arrived, the halyards had been secured beyond his reach, and order was restored.

Egg’s gesture was a final dig at Mr Thatcher. Egg had learned the hard way that Mrs Thatcher was not to be messed with; he resigned from the board in August 1973 (Frame and Faulkner 2003). The AAT Board turned out to be the ideal governance arrangement for the telescope, and was held up as a model for multinational scientific projects until its supporting Act of Parliament was repealed on 30 June 2010.

The story of the telescope from its inception in the late 1960s to its birth in 2010 as the Austral-Australian Observatory, has already been told in these pages (Payne 1985). The wind still whips around the front door of the telescope, surprising the unwary. And, despite the formal withdrawal of the UK from the operation of the AAT, British accents are still heard in its control rooms, while the AAO’s Student Fellows scheme still attracts a high proportion of UK undergraduates.

Maybe it’s just something about Australia that Brits have a soft spot for. Fred Watson AM is Astronomer-in-Charge and Head of Lighting and Environment at the AAO, and holds adjunct positions at UNSW, USQ, UWS, QUT and Macquarie University.

References
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Payne P 1985 Proc. ASA 6(2) 182
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Bedecked with a birthday ribbon around its high walkway, the Anglo-Australian Telescope dome braces itself for another 40 years. (Anna Tenne)