

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

© 2007 Springer

Fallows, Fearon

Born Cockermouth, (Cumbria), England, 4 July 1789

Died Cape Town, (South Africa), 25 July 1831

Fearon Fallows, a mathematician by training, was appointed as the director of the Royal Cape Observatory in South Africa, but died prior to being able to accomplish a great deal as an astronomer. Fearon Fallows was born to John Fallows (died 1826), a weaver, and Rebecca Fallas (died 1828). Fallows was born literally next door to "Wordsworth House," the mansion-house birthplace of the famous Romantic poet William Wordsworth, though it is unlikely the two ever met; a commemorative plaque mounted on Fallows's cottage wall incorrectly states the year of his birth as 1788. Fallows was initially tutored at home by his father, and then sent to a private mathematics tutor, Mr. Cooper, at the nearby village of Brigham.

Various other private tutors followed. In 1809, Fallows began to study mathematics at Saint John's College, Cambridge, paid for by local benefactors and supporters. He

entered Saint John's College at the same time as fellow astronomers John Herschel and George Peacock, and graduated as third wrangler in 1813, behind Herschel and Peacock. After his graduation, Fallows spent several years lecturing on mathematics at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; in 1816, he became an examiner, and in 1818, moderator (chief examiner) of mathematics, Saint John's College. Around that time, he took on assignments in the Church of England. Fallows married Mary Anne Hervey, daughter of Reverend H. A. Hervey (one of Fallows's tutors and supporters), on 1 January 1821. All of their known offspring died at an early age at the Cape of Good Hope, where Fallows himself died, probably of scarlet fever; he is buried on the Royal Cape Observatory grounds

Fallows was elected as a member of the Astronomical Society of London in 1820. Despite having almost no practical astronomical observing experience, Fallows was selected on 26 October 1820 by the British Admiralty Board to travel to the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, to establish an astronomical observatory and take the position as its director. There, his task was, among other things, to map the southern stars, to attempt to rediscover a comet last seen in 1819, and to make observations capable of improving the current theory of atmospheric refraction. Fallows accepted and was given the title "His Majesty's Astronomer." Fallows picked up much knowledge through observatory visits and correspondence prior to his departure

On 4 May 1821, Fallows and his wife set out for Cape Town, where they arrived on 12 August. There, he selected the site for the establishment of the Royal Observatory at Slangkop (Snake Hill), at the confluence of the Liesbeek and Black rivers, and oversaw its construction. From the start, Fallows was frustrated by bureaucracy, wrangles over land rights, a lack of good-quality instruments and support staff, poor support from the Admiralty back in England, and more, including snakes. His health soon began to suffer.

While waiting for the construction of the observatory to begin, Fallows used his own telescope to measure the exact positions of almost 300 southern stars from his temporary home in the gardens of a Cape Town house. In 1826, Fallows's professional-quality astronomical instruments finally arrived from England, along with his delayed assistant, Captain Ronald The following year, observatory construction finally ended, five years after Fallows's arrival! It wasn't until 1829 that the observatory instruments were finally installed. As the observatory's director, Fallows quickly completed observations of 2,000 stars with a transit telescope, but an essential mural circle was found to have been damaged during unloading two years earlier. Again, no support came from the Admiralty Board back in England. By 1830, Fallows was so sick and weak that he needed to be carried in a blanket to work at the observatory. His last letter was received on June 30, 1831; he died the following month.

Fallows assisted in the funding and construction of the first Anglican chapel in South Africa.

Stuart Atkinson

Selected References

Gill, Sir David (1913). *A History and Description of the Royal Observatory, Cape of Good Hope*. London: H. M. Stationer's Office

Laing, J. D. (ed.) (1970). *The Royal Observatory at the Cape of Good Hope, 1820–1970: A Sesquicentennial Offering*. Cape Town: Royal Observatory.

Lonsdale, Henry (1875). *The Worthies of Cumberland*. London

Moore, Patrick, and Pete Collins (1977). *The Astronomy of Southern Africa*. London: Robert Hale, p. 44.

Smits, P. *A Brief History of Astronomy in Southern Africa*. (Unpublished.)

Warner, Brian (1978). "Cape of Good Hope Royal Observatory Papers in the Archives of the Royal Greenwich Observatory." *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 9: 74-75.

—— (1995). *Royal Observatory, Cape of Good Hope, 1820-1831: The Founding of a Colonial Observatory*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, Academic Publishers. (Incorporates a biography of Fearon Fallows.)

—— (1997). "The Age of Fallows." *Monthly Notes of the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa* 56, nos. 11 and 12: 107-108