

NEWS AND VIEWS

150 Years of Astronomy

ASTROPHILATELISTS will be delighted that the 150th birthday of the Royal Astronomical Society has not gone unnoticed by the British Post Office. A commemorative stamp is to be issued on April 1, believed to be at a value of 1s 9d. What the design will be remains, by Post Office tradition, a closely guarded secret until about a month in advance, but those guessing which astronomers or what telescopes are likely to get star billing will remember that the photographic Mark 1 telescope at Jodrell Bank has already featured on a special issue. At a value of 1s 9d the stamp will not be publicizing the society on letters within Britain, but it will have a select circulation on first-class parcels weighing 1 lb and air-mailed letters to the United States. Thus the anniversary rates with Sir Francis Chichester's voyage round the world—the society could not have hoped for more.

Astronomers are fond of saying that they are the last gentlemen scientists, and it is true that the monthly meetings of the Royal Astronomical Society provide some of the more delightful moments of the London scientific scene. The gathering of members and fellows for tea in Burlington House beforehand is one of science's social occasions, and often rivals the meeting itself for interest, although this is not likely to be so at the next meeting. This is on February 13 (a Friday, but astronomers are not the type to worry about that) and is to be the official anniversary meeting. As well as a sentimental retrospective of the society's history, there will be the presidential address by Sir Bernard Lovell. The anniversary could hardly have happened at a more exciting time for British astronomy, and no doubt Sir Bernard will have a lot of interesting things to say about the future in his address on the prospects for British astronomy. As well as the upheavals which are going on in our understanding of the universe—the way the theory of supernovae has been stood on its head by the discovery of pulsars, for example—astronomy in Britain is going through an appraisal of priorities which will decide how the subject is to develop for the next few years at least. This is the review of astronomy in the northern hemisphere which the Science Research Council is conducting, and it is pleasing that the Royal Astronomical Society is now taking part. At the pace at which astronomy is going there seems good reason for making the review a frequent event.

Now that the old lecture room with its rogues' gallery of past presidents is being partitioned into smaller rooms, the society meets in the opposite corner of the courtyard of Burlington House in the rooms of the British Academy. There is no denying that this is far from ideal. For one thing, it is now clear that the British Academy room does not make a good lecture

theatre. What is more, members are attending meetings without stepping foot inside the society's cramped quarters, and this is a problem which is no doubt exercising the society's council. Unfortunately there is not likely to be a solution until the societies which still inhabit the Burlington House warren are better housed. It is also a shame that although the financial position of the society has been in an encouraging state it is apparently not strong enough to see through the alterations at Burlington House as quickly as might have been hoped. An astronomy society is not the sort of venture which attracts money from industry unfortunately.

With astronomy advancing rapidly on diverse fronts, the Royal Astronomical Society has an important job to do. Astronomy has somehow become fragmented into classifications depending on what techniques are used—there are microwave astronomers, gamma ray astronomers and so on—and the society could be invaluable in bringing them together. The same goes for the new band of lunar scientists, dispersed among departments of physics, chemistry and geology, and waiting for new paths of communication to be established. Clearly there is a lot to be said for more meetings devoted to a particular topic, such as the recent meeting on Mars, where the different disciplines would rub shoulders. Astronomers might well find meetings along these lines more useful than the usual format—generally a hotchpotch of readings from papers accepted for *Monthly Notices*. In any case, with the General Assembly of the International Astronomical Union meeting in Britain this summer for the first time in forty-five years, and with British astronomy booming, the society has a lot to do.

RNA STRUCTURE

Codon and Nodoc

from our Molecular Biology Correspondent

WHEREAS several spectroscopic methods are available which will give the proportion of paired bases in an RNA chain, and with luck also a good estimate of the relative amounts of A·U and G·C pairs, there has been no dependable way of determining the distribution of paired and unpaired segments along a chain of known sequence. Chemical methods based on the expectation that the paired bases will in general be less reactive than the unpaired have given fragmentary information, but most activity has centred on tortured attempts to deduce unique pairing schemes by earnest contemplation of the sequence, by computer analysis and by some rather desperate model building.

On page 508 of this issue of *Nature* is recorded the birth of a new technique, evolved by Doty and his associates, and based on their studies of base-pair