



Mike Cripps

1959–2011

Fellow of the RAS, inspirational teacher and passionate amateur astronomer.

Michael (Mike) Cripps was an outstanding teacher and Head of Science at Neatherd High School, Dereham, Norfolk, and a keen astronomer who blended these passions to enthuse and inspire both students and colleagues.

After an ISSET training placement at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida in 2003, Mike instigated and ran several large-scale astronomy projects, working with scientists and astronomers worldwide to promote the enjoyment of science at his school, nationally and on other continents.

In 2004, he worked with Dr Helen Mason (Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics at University of Cambridge) through a Royal Society partnership called “Our Star”, which featured in the Royal Society Summer Exhibition. Many students at his school took part and Mike even had the opportunity to teach Prince Charles a thing or two about the Sun. Following this he worked with Helen on Suntrek, an internet site providing valuable classroom projects for students and schools worldwide.

Also that year, Mike created and developed a project named “Space Observatories in Schools”. He worked hard to obtain funding and sponsors to enable himself and mathematics teacher colleague Graham Colman to work with Hubble Space Telescope astronomers in Baltimore, and with Solar & Heliospheric Observatory scientists at the Goddard Space Flight Centre. They produced online astronomy and mathematics teaching materials for pupils in schools worldwide.

In a yet more ambitious programme, and with support this time from both Helen and Graham, Mike took a group of boys from Dereham Sixth Form College to work on astronomy projects with the Southern African Large Telescope. The team worked with teachers and learners to support and inspire science clubs in schools in former townships in South Africa. This project was named simply “North & South” and was an amazing experience for everyone, especially the South African and UK students.

He also ran workshops in the UK for teachers, to teach them how to use astronomy as a tool for encouraging interest and progress in science and

science-based careers. For this he linked effectively with the East of England Science Learning Centre and others, again sharing his expertise and learning from others.

All of these projects were inspired by and originated from Mike, who seemed to have boundless energy. They typified his infectious enthusiasm for astronomy and desire to inspire others. Through these projects, not only was he able to support and develop an interest in astronomy at his own school, but also to do the same for colleagues teaching different subjects at other schools and hence reach their pupils also. He was a strong, patient and knowledgeable colleague who was happy to devote time to his work to ensure its success.

Long-lasting impact

North & South, in particular, is an example of Mike’s determination to have a significant and long-lasting impact upon his own students. But he was also driven by his passion to touch lives further afield, in this case reaching many disadvantaged students in several township schools on another continent.

Mike’s success was evident in all his projects, not least at his beloved Neatherd High School Astronomy website. The homepage shows images of South African students enjoying the science clubs that he helped to create through the North & South project. The Space Observatories in Schools resources remain available for teachers and students worldwide – including one activity requested by NASA for inclusion in their own education materials.

Mike was an individual who seemed to have no distinction between “work” and “play”. Astronomy and science teaching was his joy and it was this passion that kept him at work when most people would have stopped. He passed on to his students and colleagues a valuable legacy: a love for astronomy. His premature death is a great sadness to those who knew him. It is sad that it took his untimely death in order to fully appreciate the breadth and depth of the impact of Mike’s dedication to astronomy education.

Let the final word come from one of Mike’s students, Michael King: “It was from the opportunities he gave us in that after-school



Mike Cripps (right) meets Prince Charles at the Our Sun exhibit at the Royal Society in 2004. This school exhibit allowed students from Neatherd School shared their knowledge and enthusiasm.

astronomy club that I was able to go to the Royal Society and help host our exhibit, then fly all the way to South Africa. He inspired me to go to university, where I now have an MPhys in Astronomy, Space Science, and Astrophysics with a year at UC Berkeley to my name. Isn’t it strange how these small windows can lead to great things? He showed us the heavens. At the time however, all the club meetings, the stargazing and the projects felt like a pale blue dot in the vast void of the cosmos. It is only when we look back at the dot we realize the entire world was open to us. Mr Cripps died suddenly last week of cancer, and we heed his last words: to look up with open eyes.”

Graham Colman

Further information

You can see Mike’s work on the following sites:

<http://astronomy.neatherd.org/SOS/SOShome.htm>

<http://astronomy.neatherd.org/northandsouth>

<http://royalsociety.org/Our-star>

<http://www.suntrek.org/classroom-projects/Science-projects.shtml>

Deaths of Fellows

Eric Burgess

Born: 30 May 1920

Elected: 12 May 1950

Died: March 2005

Prof. George H A Cole

Born: 12 January 1928

Elected: 11 December 1953

Died: 25 July 2011

Michael Cripps

Born: 20 July 1959

Elected: 10 December 2004

Died: July 2011

Dr John Critchley

Born: 30 January 1943

Elected: 11 April 1969

Died: 2011

Leslie W Olding

Born: 25 March 1922

Elected: 11 December 1964

Died: 7 June 2011