Astronomy Talk 11th June 2019
Astronomical Paris: the Celestial, the Occult and the Macabre

David Arditti came down from London to give us this talk. He started by comparing the Paris observatory with Greenwich. Greenwich is now just a museum, whereas the Paris observatory is still a research centre as well as a museum. Its original purpose was establishing longitude for navigation. The building has no wood (may catch fire) or metal (may affect magnetic effects) in its construction.

There were 3 principal meridians, Greenwich, Paris and Washington. In 1884 Greenwich was established as the prime meridian, but Paris continued to be used for many years. The observatory also has a basement that connects to the Paris catacombs.

The original directors were 4 Cassinis, but after them many of France's greatest astronomers held this position, including Le Verrier of Neptune fame. There is still a huge amount of ancient equipment on show.

Meudon in the suburbs has some huge instruments, including a 33" refractor "La Grande Lunette" which Antoniadi used in Mars's opposition of 1909 to demonstrate the lack of canals. It also has a solar observatory.

David then talked about the flamboyant Camille Flammarion who was dismissed by the observatory, mainly it's thought for having spiritualistic views about our souls going to the other planets. He was a diligent astronomer, and a great populariser of astronomy – the Patrick Moore of his day. His house has a huge collection of his things, including a shrunken head…

Elsewhere there are astronomical odds and ends, e.g. at the Sorbonne, at the Panthéon (a Foucault pendulum), Messier's house (now the Musée National du Moyen Age with no memorial to him).

François Arago had the task of defining the metre, and was briefly prime minister for about a month in 1848. He also demonstrated the wave nature of light. There's an Arago memorial of 135 small bronze medallions set in the ground which mark the meridian through Paris.

A fascinating and rather different talk from our usual ones.