

CORRESPONDENCE

Metric Chains

SIR,—You chose an unfortunate subject for your aside upon shortening cricket pitches “. . . (. . . a non-metric measure—who now knows what a chain is?)”¹.

It is unfortunate that, with the impending change to the metric system, we do not much use chains and furlongs and even the infamous rod, pole or perch, for they correspond respectively to 20 m, 200 m and 5 m with an accuracy of 0.6%.

Yours faithfully,

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¹ *Nature*, 232, 433 (1971).

Telescope Administration

SIR,—Twice each year your advertisement pages invite applications for observing time on the Isaac Newton Telescope. Lest any potential applicant be deterred by the “widespread feeling” noted in your editorial (*Nature*, 232, 289; 1971) that the Royal Greenwich Observatory exerts a detrimental influence on the running of this telescope, perhaps you would allow an informed comment.

If “running” refers to the day-to-day management and maintenance of the telescope, then indeed any neglect here would, as stated, be inimical to the progress of British astronomy. But if this is what is alleged, the proper place to complain is on the spot at the time. No such complaints are in fact made by visiting observers, and those responsible for the care of the telescope must be forgiven if they decline to notice anonymous allegations by others, especially when they are wholly unsupported by facts.

If, however, the criticism is now, as it has been in the past, of the observatory's alleged monopoly in the design and construction of ancillary equipment, it is time to reiterate that no such monopoly exists. Any successful applicant for observing time may bring his own equipment—many of them do—and the only requirement is that it shall be compatible with the telescope itself. As to the larger spectrographs, it is true that these are of RGO design. It is equally true that had the Astronomer Royal not taken the initiative to get them built, no spectrographs for common use would now exist. It is this situation that would indeed have

been inimical to the progress of British astronomy.

But maybe the rub lies in the allocation of observing time. This is done twice a year by a Science Research Council panel of six working astronomers, not all of them in the optical field and only one from the Royal Greenwich Observatory. Selection among the applications received is strictly according to the scientific merit of the programmes proposed, and I am sure the members of the panel would repudiate any suggestion that they unduly favour RGO applicants. It is true that RGO applications are in fact awarded more time than any others; but they are in a substantial majority and the panel plainly adjudges them more worthy of support.

If there are those who find the basis of allocation unfair, let them suggest a more equitable one. If they allege sinister influences by the major applicants on the process of allocation, let them produce something more substantial than hints in the scientific press.

Yours faithfully,

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SIR,—Your article on “New Astronomy” (*Nature*, 232, 289; 1971) was informative and interesting. Before commenting on points of substance, however, may I correct one misunderstanding which the article revealed?

I refer to the “widely held” criticism, attributed to “many astronomers” who see the RGO as a “white elephant”—on the grounds, according to you, that the £1.2 million which the SRC spends on the RGO, the Royal Observatory Edinburgh and on the observatories in South Africa, gives poor returns compared with the running costs of the Hale Observatories of \$1.7 million a year.

The Hale Observatories are not government observatories and have no national responsibilities. They spend nothing on the equivalent of the Nautical Almanac Office, the Time Service and the Meridian and Astrometry Departments of RGO which take up some 57% of the total RGO budget. If you then compare the remaining 43% of the RGO budget, plus the full cost of the South African Observatories and the Royal Observatory Edinburgh, the total comes out for all practical purposes the same as the cost of the Hale Observatories—in round figures, £700,000.

You were, of course, right to draw attention to the disquiet of the scientific staff of the RGO about the future of their scientific work. In part, the bad staff relations in the Science Research Council are a cause of this. The fact that they were given a categorical assurance that they would be consulted about any proposal that the Astronomer Royal post would be divorced from the directorship of the RGO, but nevertheless were not consulted about it at all, is only an unusually dramatic illustration of why the management is losing the confidence of its staff. Nor does the explanation which has now been given make things any better.

But it is the affair of the Northern Hemisphere telescope which has caused the greatest anxiety. As you point out, there have been powerful pressures in favour of creating a third administrative centre in the UK for the Northern Hemisphere telescope. This should be a scientific and administrative responsibility of the SRC as such, one of whose responsibilities it is to provide facilities for common use by a variety of university scientists. The logical site for the centre is at the RGO—or, alternatively, at the Royal Observatory Edinburgh—but it appears as if there has been tremendous opposition to this. To establish one university rather than another as a third centre for the handling of common facilities would surely be contrary to the purpose of the SRC, as well as being unnecessarily costly; and there is no point in having a third centre all by itself.

It is also the function of the SRC to do its own research at its own establishments, and a considerable number of first-rate scientists are employed on its staff for this very purpose. Collaboration with universities in the use of scarce facilities and equipment held in common by the SRC is fully accepted by the staff and by the institution. It is one of the purposes of SRC to bring about this collaboration, and such differences as there may be from time to time between the SRC's own scientists and those from universities should be concerned with nothing more than matters of balance. The affair of the Astronomer Royal has raised the question, however, of whether it is a question of balance. The policy of the Science Research Council is in the hands of the majority of university representatives on the council, and in a period in which there is keen competition for the relatively limited amount of money available, the SRC's own scientists are looking for reassurance about the long-term standing of their own research work.