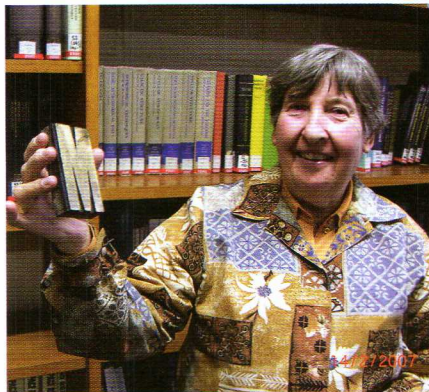


30 Years of Formatting Astronomical

February 2007 saw the 30th anniversary of a way to describe astronomical catalogue designations. This is a fundamental technique used in Astronomical Object Indexing (AOI) - not just by Inspec, but by all other information services dealing with astronomical objects.

It all began with the publication of an "Index of extragalactic radio-source catalogues" in the *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, vol.71, no.1, p.21-39 (February 1977) written by Mike Kesteven and Alan Bridle. This index presented a guide to over fifty extragalactic radiosource catalogues. The Kesteven-Bridle (KB) index included, for the first time, a "format" for each catalogue. It showed, for example, that the Arecibo Occultation list contained objects designated "AO" but also that objects bearing the abbreviation AO were followed by a positional-style format of "HHMM±DD" with four digits representing hours (HH) and minutes (MM) of right ascension followed by a plus (for northern objects) or minus (for southern objects) followed by two digits representing degrees (DD) of declination. The National Radio Astronomy Observatory list, containing 726 objects with the abbreviation "NRAO" received the format "NNN" indicating that the radiosources in this list were numbered sequentially and that you could expect numbers as high as the hundreds but not thousands (which would have been represented by "NNNN").

This formatting was a breakthrough in describing how catalogue designations work and indicated some element of control over what one could expect to find in the literature. It would also make it possible for future authors of catalogues to indicate how their designations should be cited.



Dr Marie-Claire Lortet with her letter 'M'

The year 1977 also saw the publication of Inspec's bibliography "Astronomical Catalogues 1951-1975" in which Mike Collins introduced a then unique "designation index" showing what to expect with the various catalogues. Unfortunately the KB formatting idea was published too late to be incorporated into the bibliography although a "range" was used to indicate the numbers involved (e.g. NRAO 726). At that time there was also growing interest within the International Astronomical Union (IAU) to control the way that all designations were used. In January 1978, a year on from the KB index, the Strasbourg team at the then Centre de Données Stellaires was preparing a "Liste de catalogues d'objets galactiques non stellaires" to be published in the *CDS Bulletin*. Writing to Dr. Marie-Claire Lortet at Meudon Observatory in Paris on 1st February 1978, Mike Collins pointed out that the KB index could be used in this matter and the format idea was subsequently incorporated in "The First Dictionary of the Nomenclature of Celestial Objects (Solar system excluded)" which was published in *Astronomy & Astrophysics Supplement Series*, vol.52, no.4 (the whole June 1983 issue!).

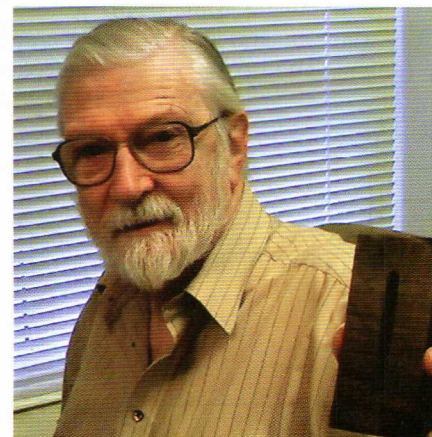
For the first time, astronomers would need "to keep a record (if not control) of all new designations which will appear in the literature". The First

Dictionary gave due credit to Kesteven and Bridle, extending their idea to the other astronomical disciplines and introducing a scheme that we use to this day.

To celebrate 30 years of formatting astronomical designations Inspec's Mike Collins has been tracking down those involved in instigating this unique but universally used scheme of notation. Four antique printing blocks representing the letters "H" (for hours of right ascension), "D" (for degrees of declination), "M" (minutes of both time and angle), and "S" (for seconds) have been suitably engraved. In February an engraved block was sent to Mike Kesteven in Australia, Alan Bridle in America, and one was presented in person to Marie-Claire Lortet at Meudon Observatory in Paris on February 14th at a small gathering - in French.

Receiving news of his letter block, Dr. Alan Bridle at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Charlottesville writes:

"What a delightful surprise! It's intriguing to realise that our "format" convention, which seemed "obvious" to us at the time, would prove so useful to others, and I am very grateful to you for this very kind acknowledgment of our original

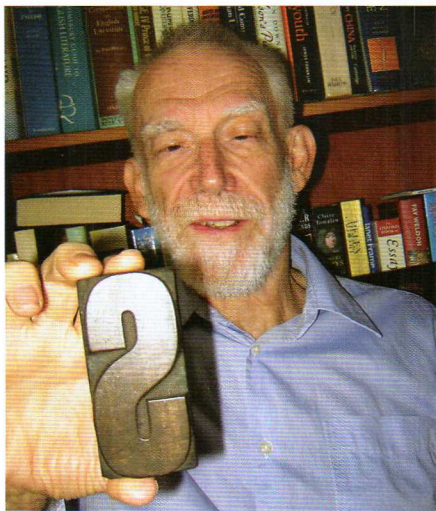


Dr Alan Bridle and his letter 'D'

Designations

suggestion. If it helped in any way to propagate more rational naming standards more widely, that is very gratifying to know!

At the time, Mike Kesteven and I were both professors in the Physics Department at Queen's University, and I recall some puzzlement from



Dr Michael Kesteven with his letter 'S' OUR

department head when I reported this particular publication as part of my research activity. It's not the sort of thing that our physicist colleagues had much affinity for.

So it is particularly gratifying to hear this from you so many years later, and to share in your celebration of the "milestones". The scale of the "Dictionary" effort was impressive indeed, and our small index was very limited by comparison with that.

Thank you very much for including me in the commemoration, I am quite touched."

Mike Collins tells us that he is keeping one of the blocks himself as a memento of what could have been a lost milestone in the history of astronomical object designation.

If you would like to see Inspec's list of astronomical object designations click on this link: www.theiet.org/astronomical



A small group of French astronomers gather at Meudon Observatory for the presentation to Dr Marie-Claire Lortet.

Standing (L-R) Suzanne Laloë, Drs Monique Spite, Giusa and Roger Cayrel, François Spite, sitting (L-R) Mike Collins and Dr Marie-Claire Lortet.

What do YOU think of Inspec?

In the early part of 2007, we were proud to celebrate the Inspec Database reaching 10 million records. This was a fantastic achievement which included the digitally enhanced abstracts in our Archive.

The Inspec database is growing at a rapid rate and we would like to know what you think about Inspec. For example, how does it assist in your field of work? Also, we would like to hear your comments and/or suggestions about our services. Please send to 'inspec@theiet.org'.

We also have an Inspec questionnaire which we would like you to fill in on line www.theiet.org/in-specsurvey. Your name will be entered into a draw to win \$200 Amazon vouchers (or equivalent in pounds sterling or Euros). For every completed questionnaire we will donate \$1 to the charity Practical Action (www.itd.org/) whose work takes place in Africa, Asia and Latin America enabling people 'to choose and use technology to improve their lives for today and generations to come'.

We look forward to receiving your responses.