ESO, the European Southern Observatory, was created in 1962 to establish and operate an astronomical observatory in the southern hemisphere, equipped with powerful instruments, with the aim of furthering and organizing collaboration in astronomy. It is supported by eight countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It operates the La Silla Observatory in the Atacama desert, 600 km north of Santiago de Chile, at 2,400 m altitude, where fourteen optical telescopes with diameters up to 3.6 m and a 15-m submillimetre radio telescope (SEST) are now in operation. The 3.5-m New Technology Telescope (NTT) became operational in 1990, and a giant telescope (VLT = Very Large Telescope), consisting of four 8-m telescopes (equivalent aperture = 16 m) is under construction. It will be erected on Paranal, a 2,600 m high mountain in northern Chile, approximately 150 km south of the city of Antofagasta. Eight hundred scientists make proposals each year for the use of the telescopes at La Silla. The ESO Headquarters are located in Garching, near Munich, Germany. It is the scientific-technical and administrative centre of ESO where technical development programmes are carried out to provide the La Silla observatory with the most advanced instruments. There are also extensive facilities which enable the scientists to analyze their data. In Europe ESO employs about 200 international Staff members, Fellows and Associates; at La Silla about 50 and, in addition, 150 local Staff members.

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R.M. West, H.-H. Heyer, J. Quebats: A Minor Planet with a Tail 69, 40
R.M. West: ESO to Help Central and Eastern European Astronomers 70, 8
R.M. West: ESO, CNRS and MPG Sign Agreement on Enhancement of the VLT Interferometer 71, 1
R.M. West: The ESO C&EE Programme Begins 71, 9
R.M. West: Relations Between the Republic of Chile and ESO 72, 3
R.M. West: ESO C&EE Programme: a Progress Report 72, 6
R.M. West: The ESO-Portugal Cooperation 72, 8
R.M. West: Change of Editor 72, 10
B. Wolf et al.: High-Resolution Spectroscopy at the ESO 50-cm Telescope: Spectroscopic Monitoring of Galactic Luminous Blue Variables 74, 19
N. Whyborn, L.-A. Nyman, W. Wild, G. Delgado: 350 GHz SIS Receiver Installed at SEST 68, 45

Z
L. Zago: The Choice of the Telescope Enclosures for the VLT 70, 17
L. Zago: The VLT Enclosure from the User's Standpoint 70, 19
H. Zodet: A Panorama of La Silla 68, 28
H. Zodet: ESO in Milan. Some Notes on the Assembly of an ESO Exhibition 70, 26

Contents

TELESCOPES AND INSTRUMENTATION

News from Council ........................................ 1
M. Tarenghi: VLT News from the VLT Division ........ 1
T.R. Bedding et al.: First Light from the NTT Interferometer ................................. 2
H. Dahlemann et al.: Optical Gyro Encoder Tested on the NTT ............................ 5
A. Moorwood and G. Finger: Infrared Astronomy with Arrays: the Next Generation .................................................. 6
O. Iwert: Current CCD Projects at ESO and Their Relation to the VLT Instruments ........................................... 7

SCIENCE WITH THE VLT

R. Fosbury et al.: The Limits of Faint-Object Polarimetry ........................................ 11

REPORTS FROM OBSERVERS

C.G. Tinney: CCD Astrometry .................................. 16
B. Wolf et al.: High-Resolution Spectroscopy at the ESO 50-cm Telescope: Spectroscopic Monitoring of Galactic Luminous Blue Variables 19
P. Dubath et al.: Probing the Kinematics in the Core of the Globular Cluster M15 with EMMI at the NTT .............................................. 23

OTHER ASTRONOMICAL NEWS

J. Breysacher and J. Andersen: Proposal Statistics ........................................ 30
ESO Image Processing Group: The 93NOV Release of ESO-MIDAS .................. 33
C. Guirao: An ESO-MIDAS Implementation for PC/Linux ............................. 34
D. Hofstadt et al.: DDS/DAT Tape Cartridges as New ESO Tape Standard ........ 35
B. Binggeli et al.: ESO/OHP Workshop on Dwarf Galaxies 36

ANNOUNCEMENTS

4th ESO/OHP Summer School in Astrophysical Observations ............. 37
ESO Workshop on "The Bottom of the Main Sequence – And Beyond" .... 37
ESO Libraries On-Line Catalogue ..................................... 37
New ESO Publications ........................................ 37
Staff Movements ........................................ 38

MESSENGER INDEX 1992–1993 (Nos. 67–74) ........................................ 39