

RICHARD WEST RETIRES

CLAUS MADSEN, ESO

It is hard to believe, but after 35 years of service, Richard West has retired from ESO.

Born 1941 in Copenhagen, Richard did his baccalaureate in 1959. In 1964, he obtained his degree (Mag. scient. et cand. mag.) in astronomy and astrophysics at Copenhagen University, followed by a period as Assistant Professor (Amanuensis) at Copenhagen University Observatory. In 1970, he joined ESO as Assistant Astronomer to the ESO Director General, Adriaan Blaauw.

In 1972, Richard was charged with setting up the ESO Sky Atlas Laboratory (then at the CERN premises in Geneva), and thus – together with Hans-Emil Schuster – with leading one of the first and largest scientific programmes of ESO: the systematic mapping of the southern skies by means of the 1-m ESO Schmidt Telescope at La Silla and later also involving the 1.2-m UK Schmidt Telescope at Siding Springs.

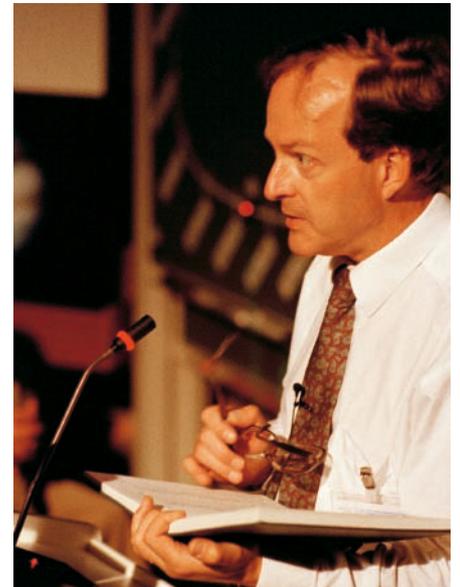
Working with the Schmidt plates gave him ample opportunity to pursue his great scientific interest, the study of minor bodies in the Solar System. Over the years, he has published 150 scientific papers, discovered numerous minor planets and four comets. The most spectacular comet, C/1975 V1 (West), was found by Richard on 5 November 1975 on a Schmidt plate. During March 1976 it became one of the brightest comets of the twentieth century, at least partly because the nucleus had broken into four or more fragments, three of which persisted for some months with distinct comae and tails. Another scientific high point for him was the 1986 passage of Comet P/Halley, which he observed from La Silla. He carried out some of the earliest observations as the comet reappeared after passing the Sun; observations that were very important for the precise determination of the orbit – and thus for the successful encounter between the comet and ESA's Giotto space probe.

SERVING THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

Besides running the Atlas project and pursuing his own scientific interests, he also found time and energy to spend on organizational matters. He served as Assistant General Secretary of the IAU in 1979–1982, followed by a term as General Secretary (1982–1985). He also presided over various IAU Commissions and was a member of the Executive Committee of ICSU.

In the wake of the political changes in eastern Europe in the early 1990's, he led the ESO support programme for central and eastern European scientists, lending a helping

Facing the press – Richard West during the Shoemaker-Levy 9 event.



hand to many a scientist in need. In this activity, ESO benefited from Richard's intimate knowledge of the scientific communities of these countries, but it was also a task, which he undertook with strong conviction and, at times, great personal courage.

SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

Richard is a gifted communicator, and already during his time in Denmark, he became known in that country as a commentator of the US Space Programme, for which he was awarded the Rosenkjær prize.

At ESO, he quickly involved himself in the ESO Messenger and became its editor in 1976–1980. In 1986 he resumed the editorship until 1993.

In 1986, ESO's Director General Lodewijk Woltjer asked him to establish an Information Service at ESO. In the time to come it would spearhead the development of professional public communication by science institutes in Europe. Richard remained head of the department until his retirement. Outreach activities are about highlights and Richard experienced many – such as the NTT first light and inauguration and the VLT first light media campaign. Yet, the moment, which stands out for those of us who had the privilege to be around was the Shoemaker-Levy 9 collision with Jupiter in 1994. At the ESO Headquarters, it began on July 16 with a densely packed ESO auditorium full of media people, including numerous camera crews. For a full week, Richard led the effort to keep journalists informed and entertained through daily press briefings, a daily in-depth news report and uncounted live interviews. In the

September 1994 issue of the Messenger (pages 47–48), Rudi Albrecht offers a vivid account of those exciting days.

Richard also oversaw ESO's engagement in education. He became the father of the great pan-European science teachers' meetings, which led to the formation of the European Association for Astronomy Education (EAAE) and have now developed into the well-known Science on Stage events. Indeed Science on Stage is EIROforum's flagship activity in the field of education, strongly supported by the European Commission and, increasingly, by the education authorities of the member states. With his own scientific interests in mind it is only fittingly, though, that the last educational activity he organized for ESO was in connection with the Transit of Venus on 8 June 2004. This activity developed into a truly global science outreach programme and provided clear evidence for the public attraction that astronomy exerts.

In spite of so many years in 'the limelight', in TV, on the radio, or in lecture theatres across the world, Richard has stayed true to himself and his values: Extreme personal modesty, tolerance and openness, rich in ideas and with an ability to think in unconventional ways.

From studying old bodies in the Solar System, he now spends his time with young buddies, his six wonderful grand children, in close orbit around him and his wife, Tamara. We wish him joy and happiness and, perhaps, with his pedagogical influence, astronomy may one day see another member of the West family observing with, who knows, the OWL telescope.