

# Soviet-Chinese Forum 2015



Participants at the Soviet-Chinese Technical Forum who met 19-21 June at their 35<sup>th</sup> annual gathering, absented only in 2010.

Alistair Scott

**T**he BIS held its 35<sup>th</sup> annual Soviet space conference, now widened in scope as the Soviet-Chinese Technical Forum, at its London headquarters from 19 to 21 June. It has been 36 years since the first such event in 1980, as the one planned for 2010 was cancelled following the untimely death of Rex Hall.

With co-ordinator David Shayler and Brian Harvey announcing last minute absences due to illness, Bert Vis valiantly stepped up to the lectern and took over as facilitator to introduce and chair the event.

The forum started early on Friday evening with welcomes from BIS President Alistair Scott, then a lively talk from our keynote speakers, the first British astronaut Helen Sharman and her launch commander Anatoly Artsebarskiy. She recalled some of the highlights of her flight to the Mir space station on Soyuz TM-12 in 1991, and some less serious moments.

Helen was persuaded to smuggle a pink frilly dress into orbit inside her spacesuit and participate in a dinner party with her crew mates, as Sergei Krikalev wore a tie which floated straight out in front of him! A reception and dinner followed the inaugural talks at the nearby *Fentiman Arms*.

Saturday started with Bert Vis presenting

Dave Shayler's overview of the forum's history, followed by a Q&A with Anatoliy, while Phil Mills put on a display of Soviet and Chinese space models, some scratch built, in an adjacent room.

Andrew Knight then gave a comprehensive review of the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project. This summer marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the joint US-Soviet flight, and he humorously recalled the role of movie 'Marooned' in its genesis, and the disappointment of the residents of Bognor Regis when the historic handshake in space failed to occur over their town.

Richard Williams also chose Apollo-Soyuz as the theme of his talk on space postage stamps. It was curious how many were issued by African countries, and some of the francophone countries re-issued the stamps after the docking over-franked with the words 'Jonction' and the date.

After coffee, George Spiteri gave a fascinating account of the troubled flight of Soyuz 23 in 1976 (*which we will publish in the November issue of Spaceflight – Ed*). Following an abortive attempt to dock with Salyut 5, the craft returned to earth and made the only splashdown in the Soviet space programme. After floating in icy Lake Tengiz and spending all night on board the crew were finally extracted in a dangerous operation

which cost the lives of some rescuers.

Next, Oleg Sokolov of Commercial Space Technologies (CST) of London spoke about the use of Russian launchers converted from ballistic missiles. Oleg has inside knowledge of the subject, having worked as an engineer on the L3-N1 launch system, Proton rocket and the Topol ICBM.

After lunch, Bart Hendrickx gave a meticulously researched presentation on the Naryad anti-satellite system. Our cosmonaut guest, Anatoliy, seemed genuinely taken aback by the depth of investigation and once-classified facts uncovered by modern sleuthing. When Bart showed a photo of Military Unit 55056, Anatoly's eyes widened and he was heard to mutter: 'That is state secret!'

Sven Grahn revealed that the famous Russian centrifuge used to subject cosmonauts to g-loads at TsPK, which features in many documentaries of Soviet space flight, was one of several built in Sweden. Then Tony Quine took us through some old-fashioned sleuthing and name puzzles to build up a fuller picture of the two groups of mostly unknown female candidates from which Valentina Tereshkova was selected. Using social media, Tony tracked down the daughter of one candidate to get direct confirmation of his findings.

Next, Gurbir Singh and Dominic Phelan stepped in at short notice and to fill gaps left by illness. Gurbir reviewed the new race to Mars between India and China, and it was speculated that we might have to add India to this forum in future. Dominic talked about the purge of Alexander Schershevsky, a Russian emigré writer based in Berlin in the 1920s who was responsible for introducing the works of space pioneer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky to a new German audience. Unfortunately he made the fateful decision to return to his motherland just in time for the start of Stalin's purges.

Saturday was rounded off by Phil Clark. Rejecting all modern presentation aids such as laser pointers, he gave his erudite illustrated lecture on the new series of Russian military satellites by pointing with a metal stick.

The forum concluded with a final session on Sunday morning, and Anatoliy Artsebarskiy was so interested in the proceedings that he returned unscheduled.

Bert Vis gave two related presentations, firstly taking us through the taikonaut selection process and then profiling China's pathfinder astronauts. Phil Mills also spoke twice, first on Russian designs and innovations taken up by the US commercial space industry, and then gave us an overview of Lin Industrial, a new Russian space company.

Ken MacTaggart then talked about the mystery of two Soviet medals left on the lunar surface during the first Moon landing. At the request of their two widows, medals of Yuri

Along with BIS President Alistair Scott, the forum was honoured with the distinguished presence of Anatoliy Artsebarskiy and Helen Sharman, crew members on the Juno mission.



Dinner at the Fentiman Arms on the evening of 19 June providing conviviality and conversation.

Alistair Scott

Gagarin and Vladimir Komarov were conveyed from Moscow to Cape Canaveral and stowed aboard Apollo 11 at the last minute, without being recorded on any paperwork. Buzz Aldrin remembered he had them in a pocket in his spacesuit when he was at the top of the ladder about to re-enter the lunar module. He and Armstrong had a cryptic conversation about 'that package', whose meaning was lost on those listening in, and it was then dropped to the surface at Armstrong's feet. Still lying there on the dusty Sea of Tranquility are those two Soviet medals, no images of which are known to exist.

Phil Clark gave a fascinating reminder of

how limited was our state of knowledge of the Soviet space programme at the time the forum started in 1980, and how many questions were then unanswered. Finally, there was the opportunity for some last questions to Anatoliy before Bert Vis closed what had been a fascinating, varied and lively conference.

Building on the current interest around Tim Peake's forthcoming Soyuz flight to the ISS and the historical parallels with Helen Sharman's flight, we hope to involve her and Anatoliy Artsebarskiy in a commemorative event in London next year for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their flight to Mir.

Ken MacTaggart

Alistair Scott

