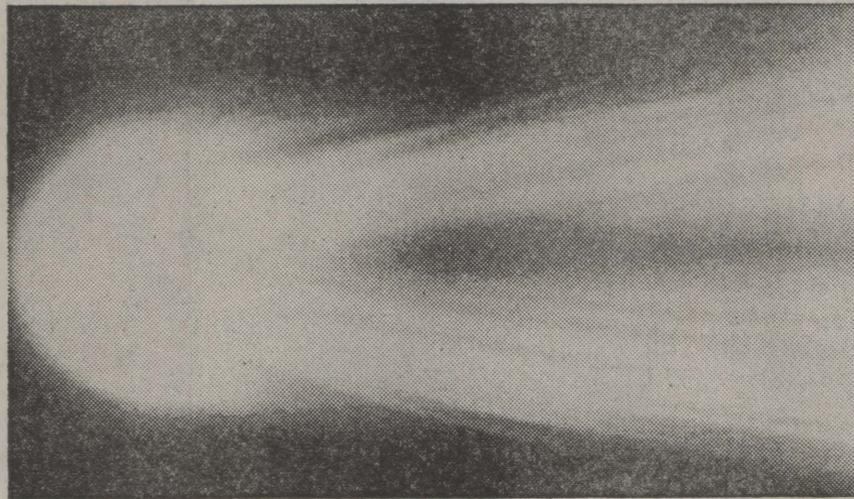


Silliness in the comet season

Western Mail
23/9/85

By MIKE JAMIESON



● Flash Halley . . . a photograph of the comet taken in 1910.

THE HEAVENS will smite the world with "comet fever" as Halley's Comet looms into view for the first time in 75 years this autumn.

That anyway is the prediction of Brian Harpur, founder of the Halley's Comet Society and author of *The Official Halley's Comet Book* (Hodder and Stoughton, £8.95).

"I will be surprised," he writes "if, just as in centuries past, the soothsayers are not out saying their sooths. The humble sandwich-board message 'Prepare to meet thy doom' will no doubt be enhanced by laser displays.

"An air of unnatural tension will pervade the population, providing extremes of behaviour. There will be suicides. There will be solemn religious cults and prophets introducing 'Second Comings' and quoting from the Book of Revelation.

"On the other hand there will be much gaiety, characterised by comet parties, stargazing safaris, comet music, comet products and comet fashions."

He's no doubt right. But whether, as he seems to think, there will be quite the "emotional maelstrom" surrounding its last appearance in 1910 seems doubtful.

For in that year it was announced that the Earth would pass through the comet's tail.

"The resulting speculation by experts and others about what would happen included exploding gas, meteoric showers, terrible electric storms, the earth colliding with the comet, millions being poisoned by the cyanide mixture in the particles of the tail, a display of light in the upper atmosphere which would literally blind every spectator, and great forebodings of just about every conceivable catastrophe." Including the "possible extinction of life."

The reaction to such speculation was in places dramatic, to say the least.

Some people committed suicide and others took one look at the comet and died of fright. Others went mad and one of them crucified himself in California.

He had "nailed his feet and one hand to a crude cross which he had erected," reported a newspaper.

"Although he was suffering intense agony, he pleaded with his rescuers to let him remain on his cross. He believed that the end of the

world was at hand."

In Milwaukee it was reported that thousands rushed to make wills, and the bar, restaurant and hotel business went dead because people were staying at home to be with their loved ones and families — just in case.

"Family reunions on a scale which normally take place only with births, deaths and marriages were evident everywhere."

Among those expecting the comet to smash the world to atoms were inhabitants of a Hungarian village.

When their watchman spotted the night-time glow from a big fire in a neighbouring village, he deduced the worst and roused the locals by blowing his horn and shouting "The last day has come!"

Interestingly, the villagers reacted by deciding that all provisions should be eaten. They built a large fire in the square in front of the church and "joined in a hurried orgy, while hasty prayers were made between bites for the salvation of their souls."

Less doom-laden nosh-ups were

much more prevalent around the world as thousands made the comet's arrival an "excuse to have one hell of a party."

There were, for instance "Comet suppers" in Paris, "animated scenes" in Rome with restaurants open 24 hours as at New Year, "celebrations with great joy" throughout Spain,

comet clubs, comet dances, comet-watching parties and excursions and a Comet Cocktail.

The Daily Mail reported, "America is reading, talking and joking about little else than Halley's Comet. Scores of men are giving breakfast parties at the leading hotels in overcoats 'on the tiles' with appro-

Making the most of Halley's

HALLEY'S COMET travels nearly 300 miles in the time the world's fastest sprinter covers 100 metres. But it will be difficult to detect it moving even when it's closest to Earth next April — for it will be nearly 40 million miles away.

To detect it at all with the naked eye from Britain is not likely to be easy — improbable in November and December this year and next March and April, just possible in January, writes Brian Harpur. It will be impossible from anywhere in the world during February when the Earth is on the wrong side of the sun and the comet is lost in the solar glare.

"As a general guide Halley's Comet will be seen through small telescopes during the autumn of 1985.

"In late November and December it will be seen, using binoculars, about half-way between the horizon and zenith in the south-west about one to one-and-a-half hours after sunset."

During the few weeks before it gets lost in the solar glare at the end of January it will be seen lower in the sky and more towards due west each night at the end of twilight. It will develop a tail as it gets closer to the sun.

"At the beginning of March, it will reappear in the morning sky at about

due east and low on the horizon" — about one-to-one-and-a-half hours before dawn. The tail will now be bigger. During March the comet climbs higher in the morning sky and moves further to the south" and keeps getting brighter.

In late March and early April, when it's closest to Earth, it will be at its brightest and show the greatest length of tail.

"But it will be seen only low in the south-east and moving further towards the south daily. This will cause distortion by the Earth's atmosphere. (This is why people in the southern hemisphere will get the best viewing).

"During the last two weeks of April, the comet might just be seen with the naked eye in the south-east after evening twilight.

"It will start to rise higher in the sky daily but the tail will be decreasing all the time and from May onwards it can only be traced with the aid of binoculars and telescopes as it gradually returns to the deep freeze of the outer solar system."

Among viewing tips from Brian Harpur: To check the comet's position telephone the Halley Hotline, Leeds (0532)-8013 or London (01)-790 3424.

priate orchestral accompaniment.

"In one or two of the more elaborate affairs small silver telescopes were given to each guest as souvenirs." As Brian Harpur points out, "The emergence of telegraphy, photography and high-speed distribution of mass-circulation newspapers were crucial in enabling comet fever in 1910 to be shared for the first time simultaneously in all continents."

Inevitably, the business world cashed in on the "hairy star" as it was known, and it adorned adverts, cigarette cards, postcards, waistcoats, neckties, handkerchiefs and socks.

There were comet marches, two-steps, waltzes and rags and even a song, *The Comet and The Earth*, for the famous Ziegfield Follies. It was also a favourite subject for cartoonists.

Meanwhile in Towaco, New Jersey, two well-dressed young "scientists" offered a reward in gold pieces to farmers for the best description of the comet which would, they said, be visible at 3am Friday.

"By 2am" said a newspaper, "Everybody in Towaco was on the mountain top. Not a glimpse did they get. In their absence practically every chicken coop in Towaco had been raided."

Use a small telescope or powerful binoculars with achromatic lenses and by a reputable maker.

Try to find a place completely dark, away from city lights and areas where there could be mist, haze or dust. Anything like bright moonlight or atmospheric pollution will interfere with comet-gazing.

When moving from light to darkness give your eyes 15 to 20 minutes to adjust.

— To photograph the comet use "any camera whose shutter can be locked open. Some automatic cameras that make exposures of reasonably long duration will also do the trick."