



Take a peek at the stars

A STARGAZING couple who recently moved to north-west Sutherland are erecting a £30,000 observatory in their garden with a state-of-the-art telescope, which they plan to make available for community educational use.

Mark Washer and Monica Shaw, Culkein, hope to establish an astronomy club and hold events and activities tied in with their observatory, in what is thought to be a first for the area.

The couple have already linked with the North West Highlands Geopark to hold an astronomy event on November 23 as part of the Wester Ross Dark Skies Festival 2023.

Mark, who credits his father for his life-long interest in astronomy and astrophotography, is hoping to similarly inspire people in the area to reach for the stars.

He can remember the thrill it gave him to first look through the telescope and see solar system features such as the rings of Saturn, the ice cap on Mars and the individual craters of the moon.

"I remember being desperate to visit an observatory but there are very few of them around. Astrophotography is expensive and it is almost impossible to get a start as a child," he said.

"If it inspires just one person to try it themselves, it will have served a purpose."

Mark, a consultant architect, and Monica, a mountain guide, met two years ago and found an instant link – Monica studied astronomy in her first year of a degree at the University of Illinois. They moved to Assynt from Argyll, partly because north-west Sutherland is a dark sky area.

"This part of Scotland has the darkest skies you can get anywhere in the UK. The



Mark Washer with his state-of-the-art camera.

area is a Bortle 1 site (the Bortle scale measures the level of light pollution of the night skies in a particular location)," said Mark. "Assynt also has good horizons and huge skies."

Mark's father, Colin Washer, an engineer, was "obsessed" with deep space photography in the pre-digital age when it was particularly difficult. He succeeded in capturing amazing photographs despite only being able to afford a "cheap" telescope from Argos.

"My dad used to lecture at a couple of astronomy clubs in the south of England," said Mark. "He had to wait until he was 60 before he got a research-grade telescope – my mum and I bought it for his birthday. He always wanted an observatory."



Delivery of the reinforced plastic observatory is expected imminently.

Mark is setting up the observatory as a tribute to his father, who died two years ago, and using funding left to him.

"For me it will always be my dad's, but I will not name it the Colin Washer Observatory because he was a private man and would not have wanted anything named after him," he said.

He has purchased a reinforced plastic, research-grade observatory from a firm in England. Measuring 3m wide by 3m high, it will be delivered in sections to be bolted together. A local builder, Leodhas Macdonald, has already laid a plinth for it.

Mark has also bought a state-of-the-art telescope which will be permanently located on an anti-vibration "pier" inside the observatory – a pier is a heavy metal tube bolted into concrete.

"If you just have a telescope, every time you take it outdoors you have to set it up and do a Polar alignment, which is a real drag" explained Mark. "By having it permanently mounted in the observatory, you have no set up time at all. You can open the shutter and start viewing or imaging immediately.

"The telescope has two functions. It is an observing telescope and it is an imaging telescope. You can put an eyepiece in it and look through – that is what most people want to do. But just by putting a camera on the back of it, you can start taking photographs."

Mark and Monica, who run an outdoors business Eat Sleep Wild (eatsleepwild.com), have become ambassadors for the geopark.

Their Dark Sky Evening: Astronomy and Telescope Night will be held in their observatory from 6pm-9pm on November 23. Booking is required (pete@nwhgeopark.com). There is a byre beside the observatory where refreshments will be served to mark Thanksgiving.

Mark said: "We have launched a website, astronomy.scot on the back of that and will possibly hold a monthly astro club. There

has been a favourable response on social media. Club nights would have to be weather dependent, and we envisaged that we would post on Facebook on the day to say 'the club is going to open, come on down!'

"Also people can join a mailing list through our website and we will then post details of events being held, either monthly or tied in with what is happening in the sky."

OUR WEE SHOP

OPEN DAILY

Winter Hours Mon – Sat: 8am – 5pm and Sunday: 9am – 3pm

Handmade Local Crafts and Cards
(can be personalised)

Pre-order *Christmas* Trees
(arriving last week of November)

Pre-Order *Christmas* Hampers

Pre-Order *Christmas* Wooden Garden
Ornaments (Snowmen etc)

Gift Vouchers **Available**
(to be used in Shop or Logs)

Gifts for **Him and Her**

Enjoy Hot and Cold Food
in our seating area

Enjoy Our Carraro Italian Ground Coffee
Home Baking

Our Wee Kitchen

It's advised to Pre-Order your food and we can have it ready for collection

07752 092735

Open daily Mon – Sat: 7.30 – 3pm and Sunday: 9am – 3pm

Daily Special and Hot soup Available

Try our latest addition to Our Menu "The Westfield Burger"

Pre-Order Afternoon Tea (by 12 pm every Friday)
Pre-Order Afternoon Takeaway (12pm day before)