

# Meeting Report – Ipswich

Dr David Dewhirst of the Cambridge University Observatories once saw a newspaper placard: Cambridge Astronomer Discovers New Planet. Intrigued, he bought a copy – and found that *he* was supposed to have discovered the planet. The story, he told the JAS provincial meeting at Ipswich, was soon picked up by news agencies ‘from Tokyo to Tomsk to Timbuktu’, and the Observatory telephone lines were jammed for two solid days. Of course, the story was a mistake – but Dr Dewhirst, who asked in his talk *Are There Any More Planets Out There?*, has always been intrigued by the newsworthy search for new members of the solar system.

Though Clyde Tombaugh, who searched for Pluto, should have found any planets the size of the Earth out to a distance of 100 astronomical units, Dr Dewhirst confessed to a sneaking suspicion that something might have been missed. So when a young mathematician came to Cambridge five years ago and announced that he thought the motion of Uranus revealed the existence of a new planet at the edge of the solar system, some search photographs were taken.

Though, in the end, the search proved fruitless, it was the origin of the story in the Cambridge newspaper. Somehow, the reporter confused this search with tales of the legendary anti-Earth. The story read: ‘It is thought that the new planet is on the opposite side of the Sun to the Earth and on a direct axis revolving around the Sun at a speed that makes it invisible from the Earth.’

Any astronomer knows that this is rubbish, said Dr Dewhirst – but astrologers were quick to claim the ‘new’ planet as the reason why their forecasts had not always been accurate. . . .

Then Dr Dewhirst asked: Are there any more satellites out there? He believes that new techniques might well reveal additional satellites of the planets. But what of the Earth? ‘Faint Earth satellites could exist,’ said Dr Dewhirst – but they would move quickly across the sky like artificial Earth satellites. A search for such objects by Clyde Tombaugh would, Dr Dewhirst revealed, have shown up ‘a garden shed at the distance of the Moon’. But the fact that there are none visible at present does not mean that they did not exist in the past – or could be captured in the future.