

WG, Preservation & Digitization of Photographic Plates (PDPP)

Report to Commission B2, 2022 March 31

This Working Group was first established in 2000, in response to the stormy passage, and ultimate acceptance by GA 2000, of IAU Resolution B3, *Safeguarding the information in photographic plates*.

Early WG members were mainly observational astronomers who had spent many years carrying out and perfecting techniques for handling plates as required specifically for their own research. The WG produced a Newsletter (on an irregular timescale), “SCAN-IT”, which carried reports from observatories with plate-vaults, described experiments with different types of digitizing engines, plus snippets of interest to the group, notices of relevant papers in the literature, etc. It ran to six editions.

In due course a number of members retired, or withdrew from activities in retirement, and the group’s output slowed down, mainly as it awaited an injection of younger members to join. That injection has now happened, rather unexpectedly. Many observatories or university departments, not having a clear guide as to the potential of their plate vaults, or any experienced guides, had bequeathed their collections to a physical archive in the care of their librarian or archivist, leaving the librarians to seek help and advice by starting a *Glass Plates Group*. A few professional astronomers learned about this initiative and joined the Group, and one of the first recommendations was that the Group align itself with the WG PDPP, thereby endowing it with a recognition that could quickly prove valuable.

A mandate, timetable and sub-groups were to be discussed by the *Glass Plates Group* at an in-person conference to be held in 2022 May in Chicago–Yerkes. Unfortunately the complications of COVID19 regulations had not receded sufficiently for the meeting to go ahead, so it has been postponed until 2023, but we are now consolidating the plans (given this different category of new members), and have offered a co-Chair to one of the professional astronomers who recently joined. Because a complete generation of research astronomers and technicians has now gone through the system without any experience of working with data on photographic plates, it has become the more important, and urgent, that the PDPP WG define and pursue clear guidelines for proceeding with (a) educating and (b) assisting researchers, and not necessarily historians, regarding understanding, appreciating, and using data from plates in a way that particularly enhances the potential of long-term time-domain studies, especially (but not exclusively) as applied to bright or Galactic objects. This is to become the immediate goal of a re-energized WG. One practical plan is to display posters to this end at appropriate astronomy meetings.

The WG warmly welcomes new members, particularly among those with professional interests in managing photographic plates for science. IAU membership is an advantage but is not a requirement.

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