

A rock by any other name ...

16 March 1999 Dr Colin Keay

The ten-thousandth asteroid (minor planet) has now been found and a competition to give it an appropriate name has been running among planetary astronomers.

It is barely 10 years since the five-thousandth was discovered and named IAU in honour of the International Astronomical Union.

The naming authority is the Minor Planet Centre at the Smithsonian Astro-physical Observatory which commemorated itself by giving asteroid 4999 the name MPC.

Normally the discoverer of a new asteroid has the choice of name but a special name is selected for every thousandth one.

MP 1000 is called Piazzia after the discoverer of the first asteroid Ceres, which is MP1.

Number 2000 is named after the great astronomer Herschel, 3000 is Leonardo (no explanation needed!) 4000 is called Hipparchus after the Greek astronomer.

Number 6000 is called United Nations, 7000 is Curie and 8000 is Isaac Newton. Mp 9000, like MP 10,000, has not yet been named.

Most of the first few hundred asteroids have been given classical names like Pallas (2), Juno (3), and Vesta (4). But after Hygiea (10) and Parthenope (11) personages then living became honoured, with number 12 being called Victoria. The State of the same name is not the only piece of real estate called after that great Queen of England.

However names of classical origin continued to dominate, such as Bacchus (2063), although without the naming citations to hand it is difficult to know where ancient goddesses got the shove in favour of more immediate heavenly bodies.

Those which could be either ancient or modern are Irene (14), Daphne (41), Doris (48) and Virginia (50).

I suspect Doris could be the first girl-friend (or wife) to be so honoured and Virginia might refer to the American State.

Anyway there is a steady stream of female given names throughout minor planets.

Examples are Marion (506), Fanny (821), Margo (1175), Janice (2324), Hazel (3846), Fay (4820) and Jennifer (6249). Male given names are less common, but there are a few like Peter (1716) and Paul (3525).

Patriotism was the next driving force, with Japan getting in with Nipponia (727), Chian(1125), Somalia (1430), Liberia (1816), Denmark (2117), Israel (7507), Australia (8088) and others, except most of the larger countries are missing.

A few American States have a little more territory than their boundaries suggest, such as California (341), Indiana (1602) and Massachusetts (4547).

Texas has so far missed out.

However a number of cities are honoured, from Mombasa (1428) to Peking (4025). Some Hungarian decided that it was not fair to have Buda (908) with Pest (6817).

Besides its country name, Australia has also Siding Spring (2343), Coonabarabran (2618) and Perth (3953).

Astronomers, justly, have the lion's share of asteroid names – far too many to mention here.

Then there are the Zany names.

A computer buff must have nominated ASCII (3568), maybe because a logic expert nominated NOT (2857).

Who but a surfer would want SURF (5181)?

Was someone hoping for a prize by nominating Nobel (6032)? And were bonus frequent-flyer points given for Swissair (2198)?

Perhaps Qantas could make an offer to one of Australia's impoverished asteroid hunters and earn a name in the solar system.

By the way there is an asteroid called Carr (3837)!

After Bernard Carr, the astronomer.

Sorry!

Not long after the 5000th asteroid discovery Dr Colin Keay had one named after him KEAY 5007

How Lucky is that!