NOTES ON A MEMORIAL TO ALFRED BARRETT BIGGS, ASTRONOMER.

By

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The latitude of Launceston is officially given as 41° 26′ 1″ south and the longitude as 147° 7′ 49·5″ east, but there is at present not the slightest indication of the position from which those calculations were determined. It is proposed by the Northern Branch of the Royal Society to mark the position adequately and fittingly by the erection of a pillar suitably inscribed. The observations were made by the late Mr. Alfred Barrett Biggs, F.R.S., who for many years had an observatory in what was then called the Depot Grounds, but which to-day is termed Royal Park. Mr. Biggs was one of that noble band of amateur scientists to whom the world owes so much. He was born in London on the 10th of April, 1825, and was the eldest son of Mr. Abraham Biggs, builder and contractor. He arrived in Hobart Town with his parents in 1833. As a youth he joined the staff of the Commercial Bank of Tasmania at Hobart, but subsequently resigned in favour of teaching. He held good positions in the State Departments of Victoria and Tasmania for over 27 years. In 1880 he entered the Launceston Bank for Savings as accountant, a position which he filled with distinction until a few weeks before his death on the 19th of December, 1900.

Seismology and astronomy were the subjects that lay nearest to his heart. On a convenient site in Royal Park he set up a freestone pillar, and built over it an octagonal observatory with a revolving roof. When the American astronomical expedition visited Tasmania in 1874, to observe the Transit of Venus on December 9th of that year, it was natural that Alfred Biggs should become intimate with the astronomers. So highly did they think of his work that on their departure they presented him with the transit house used by them. This he set up beside his observatory. Here in Royal Park he did splendid work, winning international repute. In 1884 he contributed his first astronomical paper

to the Royal Society—" Spectroscopic Observations of Comet 'Pons'." From then on he was a regular contributor. His papers—" Report of Spectroscopic Observations of the Twilight Glows during February and March " (1884), " Tasmanian Earth Tremors " (1885), " The Star 'Alpha Centauri' " (1887), " The Occultation of Jupiter," " Is Jupiter Self Luminous?" (1886), " A New Dark-field Micrometer for Double-star Measurement," " Observations of Comet of July and August " (1889), " Recent Measures of 'A Centauri' " (1889), " The Eclipse of the Moon " (1891), " The Transit of Mercury " (1891), " The Possibilities of the Telescope " (1891)—show to some extent his activities. The main telescope he used was a fine instrument, an 8¼-inch reflector (Newtonian), which at his death he bequeathed to the Royal Society.

He took a keen interest in mechanics generally, showing remarkable skill in both theory and practice. One of the transit instruments used in his observations was made entirely with his own hands; his microscope was entirely his own work, even the lenses and eye-pieces being ground by him.

When Alexander Graham Bell discovered the principle of the telephone in 1876, he described his invention at length in " The British Mechanic." Alfred Biggs read this with interest. At once he constructed sets. Keeping one set at Launceston, he forwarded another to Campbell Town, and tried out the invention. It was a complete success, the reception and transmission being equal to those of any modern instrument. This was, I think, the first telephone used in Australia. Such an experiment exemplifies his technical skill and his keen interest in general scientific pursuits. Among other examples may be mentioned a master electric clock, 6 feet high, and accurate to the second, which drove other clocks minute by minute.