

## FLOATING IN MY TIN CAN

Today is the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1981. Back on Earth this is just another day, but up here in Capsule One as I focus my telescope on the green world of Uranus, I am thinking of Mr Herschel in his garden in Bath two hundred years ago this very evening. On my shelf is a volume of his observation papers submitted to the Royal Society, London, and lurking in this volume is one titled *Account of a Comet*. I am alone here in Capsule One with only an intercom linking me to Earth. I have days when I just want to detach from Earth's orbit and drift away into the depths of space.

'Ground Control to Major Abel. Are you receiving? Over.'

'This is Major Abel. Over'

'You've not reported today. Is everything ok? Over.'

'Everything is fine Ground Control. I am listening to Bach and observing Uranus. Do you know what day it is Ground Control? Over.'

'Friday 13<sup>th</sup>, unlucky for some. Why? What is your reason for asking and why are you observing Uranus? We have requested an observational programme linked to the Cambridge deep-sky survey. Over.'

'Today is Mr Herschel's day. Two hundred years ago from his garden at 19 New King Street, Bath, he discovered what he thought was a Comet but in fact was an unknown Planet. Over.'

'I didn't know that Major Abel. Forgive my ignorance. Well, enjoy Uranus but see that you complete today's log and resume the survey. Over.'

There was a crackle of static radio interference and just at that moment I heard another voice.

'I'm just venturing out into the garden Caroline. I think tonight's observing should be fine. The clouds appear to be clearing. The telescope is ready.'

‘Brother William, it is cold out there, so do wrap up. You have not been well of late. I worry you are spending too much time at your telescope. This damn review of the heavens is taking over your life and Mr Sheridan at the Pump Room is concerned you are neglecting your professional duties. You haven’t composed any new music in weeks.’

‘Oh, don’t go on Caroline. I must continue my quest. The Royal Society awaits my results.’

After a brief interlude that allowed me time for a coffee and realign my telescope on the Orion Nebula, the voice returned.

‘Caroline! Caroline! Come quick! I believe I have a new Comet in my sight. Look!’

Caroline stepped up to the eyepiece of the telescope and gazed. ‘Gosh! It appears greenish and has a disk. I shall write all this down for you. Have you checked the constellation?’

‘It’s a Comet I tell you. What else can it be?’

‘Check the constellation William.’

‘Gemini. It’s between a small set of stars in the area of H Geminorum. The green colour could be a gas tail and the disk is its nucleus.’

There was a crackle on the intercom.

‘Ground Control to Major Abel. Come in please. Over.’

I cut loose.