



The amateur astronomer's forum

FIELD OF VIEW

One giant leap... for Bristol

Having been fascinated by Apollo 11, a combination of luck, letter-writing and impulse helped **Richard Phillips** meet his hero, the astronaut Neil Armstrong



Richard Phillips shares his fascination for the Apollo Moon landings with group talks to young and old alike. Find out more at www.apollotalks.co.uk

The Apollo Moon landings have always inspired me, no more so than when I was nine years old and my father gently coaxed me out of bed in the early hours of the morning, to watch our black and white television set as

Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the Moon.

Some 40 years later, after work one day and on a whim and a prayer, I drove from Bristol for three hours and 300km to a US airbase in Suffolk, in the hope that I would see the first man on the Moon. Once I had managed to blag my way past a cluster of machine-gun wielding security guards, I found myself standing in a room looking at Neil Armstrong.

He was there to deliver a motivational talk to the American service personnel. And then, without any real planning, I got lucky: I had somehow managed

to position myself in the exact spot where Neil was to exit the room. As I held out my hand, he was gracious enough to shake it.

That was in March 2010. In the months following, I thought how great it would be to spend a whole day with him – this time without having to drive so far. By November I had a plan and so, taking direction from James Hansen's biography *First Man*, I wrote him a letter.

"Dear Mr Armstrong," it began. "On the understanding that first and foremost you are an engineer, you may well be interested in a visit to Bristol to..." The letter went on to invite him to my home city of Bristol for the day to see Isambard Kingdom Brunel's iconic steam ship, the *SS Great Britain*, followed by a visit to the building next door to meet the team behind Bloodhound SSC (Super Sonic Car), the project to break the world land speed record, which was based there at the time.

I crafted the letter to appeal to a reserved and unassuming 80-year-old man, assuring him of his complete privacy: "There will be no involvement from the press whatsoever and no expectation for autographs or indeed any pressure for photos during the visit." I kept my word to Neil.

I was very surprised that he read the letter, which was posted to a PO Box in Lebanon, Ohio on 2 November 2010. And it was surreal, to say the least, that just 26 days later on 28 November, my elder son Charles and I spent the whole day with him on Bristol's Floating Harbour.

Little did I realise that I would be introducing Neil to his hero. As we walked around the *SS Great Britain* and the museum, Neil would refer to him as Isambard, and he reeled off numerous facts and figures about his other achievements: "Did you know, Richard, that Isambard's other ship, the *SS Great Eastern*, was 692 feet long and..." Clearly Neil greatly admired the great engineer.

I imagine that if they had actually met one another, Neil and Isambard would have become great friends. It is great to know that at least in spirit, on that day in Bristol in November 2010, Neil Armstrong met his very own hero. 🌟