



Helen Walker

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The world of both professional and amateur astronomy has lost an enthusiastic and dedicated supporter of research, outreach, and opportunities for women in science.

Helen Walker's career in professional astronomy started in the field of infrared, when having gained both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at St Andrews, she made a major contribution to the Infrared Astronomical Satellite (IRAS) programme whilst also undertaking her own research at both Leiden University and NASA Ames. In 1981, she moved to the IRAS control centre, which was the start of a long and distinguished time with the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL). She then went on to hold mission support and planning roles on Mars Express. Later the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) and the Mid Infrared Instrument (MIRI) which involved many hours of night-shift work at RAL and three lengthy and arduous testing

periods at Goddard Space Flight Centre in the USA to support the cryogenic testing of the instruments.

More recently, Helen also held senior positions in the Cluster Joint Science Operations Centre (JSOC) and became the JSOC Deputy Project Scientist. In addition, she developed a great interest in and enthusiasm for

Cubesats and spent much time at the ground station at Chilbolton, working long days and nights trouble-shooting and supporting the UK Space Agency's first scientific Cubesat programme.

Helen became a Council member of the Royal Astronomical Society, and went on to become Secretary in 2001 and then Senior Secretary until



► Helen and John Zarnecki (then Vice-President of the SPA) with one of the telescopes the SPA gave away to schools in the SPA's IYA2009 "Telescopes for Schools" initiative. Credit: Margaret Penston (2009).



▲ Judging time. After nearly three years of planning and immense hard work it was time to judge the schools' Moon artwork competition which was the culmination of the SPA's "Telescopes for Schools" initiative. It was the initial idea of running a schools' competition that led Helen to say "If we are going to ask schools to send in drawings of the Moon, let's give them something to observe the Moon with!" and so the project was born. Helen is pictured here with fellow judges John Zarnecki (OU), Guy Fennimore (SPA), Margaret Penston (SPA) and Vic Pearson (OU). Credit: Margret Penston (2009).

2011. Away from professional astronomy, she devoted much time to astronomy outreach, accepting invitations to speak to many societies and local groups.

On account of Helen's interest in championing opportunities for women in science and astronomy, she was personally invited by the President of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) to lead "She is an Astronomer". This was a major working group for the International Year of Astronomy in 2009, and which resulted in Helen delivering an address to the plenary session of the IAU in Brazil.

Helen was very active in the SPA, as President in 2008-2009 and Treasurer from 2011 until she passed away. By chance, her term as President coincided with IYA2009 and she led what was to become the UK's flagship initiative: Telescopes for Schools. Co-funded by the SPA and STFC, 1000 telescopes were awarded to

► Helen took great delight in presenting SPA IYA2009 teddy bears to Ian Robson from STFC and Steve Owens, who was the UK's Single Point of Contact (SPoC) for IYA2009 in recognition of their help in making "Telescopes for Schools" possible. Credit: Margaret Penston (2009).

UK secondary schools and it is highly rewarding to know that quite a number are currently still in use. The SPA's IYA2009 working party spent many hours planning, creating support materials (which were themselves partly funded by the RAS), sourcing the telescopes and ploughing through all the applications submitted by schools keen to be given a telescope. The sight of 1000 boxes in the warehouse was something to behold! The project encountered some difficulties



along the way, but Helen's leadership and unwillingness to give up resulted in a tremendous success, so much so that it created a lot of interest at the 2009 General Assembly of the IAU in Brazil.

As President and Treasurer, Helen contributed much to the SPA. She managed to obtain agreement from RAL to host what was an extremely successful regional SPA meeting which included some rare glimpses behind the scenes; she worked closely with other Council members in the planning of the event and was invaluable in liaising with RAL.

We will all miss Helen, and will fondly remember her as a colleague on the SPA Council. Those of us with her at the SPA regional meeting in Stirling in 2008 will never forget how, after a meal at which she told us all about her love of spicy Mexican food and Mexican beer, we were walking with her for several miles on the way back to her hotel when she suddenly announced that she had no idea where we were nor where she was staying! After returning to the centre of town, we eventually found the right address. There was also the vision of her in a boiler suit climbing into a dismantled steam train! However, above all we remember the twinkle in Helen's eyes and the wicked sense of humour that sometimes emerged.

*Guy Fennimore
SPA Secretary*