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 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 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. She managed to obtain agreement from RAL to host the SPA’s IYA2009 “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: 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: Margaret Penston (2009).

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