

Community-built outreach: “Park in the Dark”

The “Park in the Dark” series began 3.5 years ago following a request from a local community group, Heavitree Squilometre (part of Interwoven Productions CIC), for an event that would celebrate the dark of their local park. Support and appreciation of that first event amongst Exeter’s Community Builders and other local Community Interest Companies (CICs) has resulted in the emergence of twice-yearly stargazing events held across Exeter.



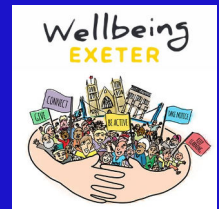
- 1: Heavitree (Jan & Aug '17)
- 2: Digby (Aug & Nov '18)
- 3: Newtown & St Leonards (Feb '19)
- 4: Pennsylvania (Nov '19)
- 5: St Loyes (Zoom broadcast, Aug '20)

Not shown: Exmouth (scheduled for Mar '20 but cancelled due to COVID-19)

Dr Claire L. Davies



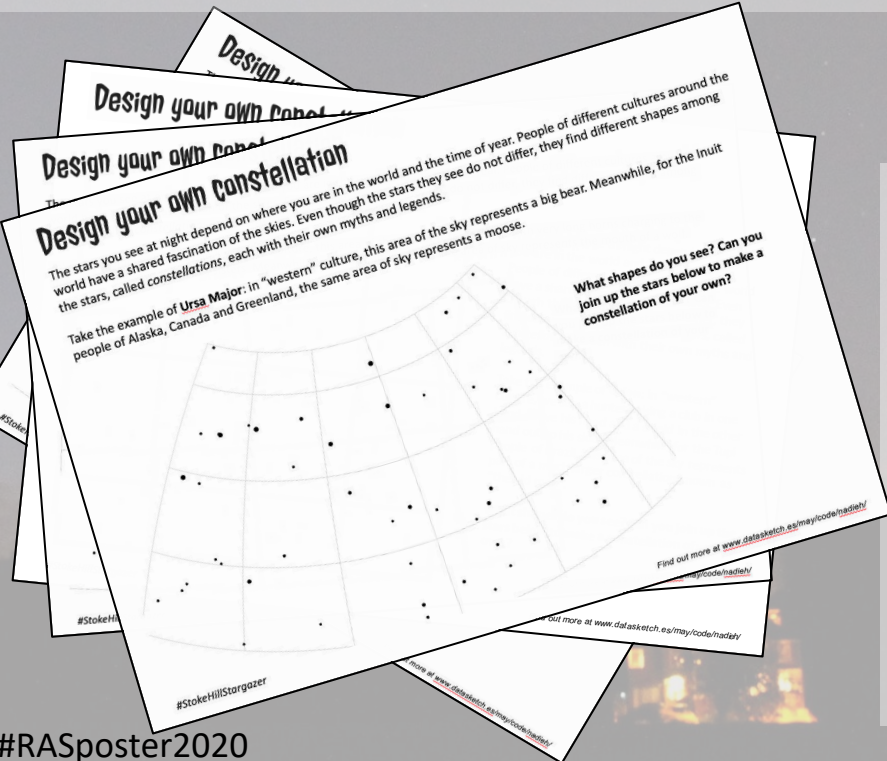
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Focus #1: Astronomy and Astrophysics

The events aim to encourage attendees to look up more. They're held close to people's homes so that (i) we discuss the limitations imposed by light pollution rather than travelling out of the city to mitigate for it; (ii) local landmarks can be used as directional pointers to increase familiarity with where to look.

Attendees are shown constellations, how to navigate the sky using stars in Ursa Major, and informed about how University of Exeter astrophysics research relates to what they're seeing (e.g. link Orion's belt and sword to star formation; link Jupiter & Saturn to exoplanetary atmospheres). Summer events are also organised to coincide with the annual Perseid meteor shower. Table-top activities are available with hands-on demonstrations of telescope optics and magnetism in the Solar System.



Focus #2: Diversity and Inclusion

Attendees are told stories from predominantly western star-lore but I've made clear from the outset that these reflect just one culture's interaction with the night's sky. Recent events have included star-lore from other cultures and discussions of how culture and folklore influences our view of the sky.

At the table-top activities, children are encouraged to find their own constellations using star maps and generate their own stories surrounding them.

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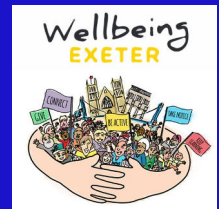
 @Tuffers_c

 c.davies3@exeter.ac.uk

 cldaviesastro.github.io

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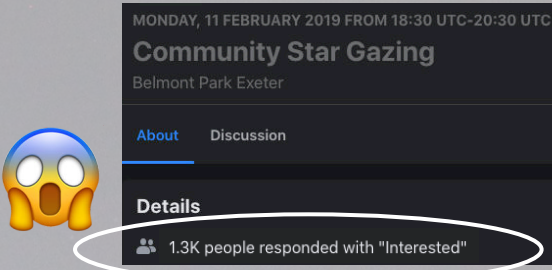
These events have been a challenge at times...



Issue #1: The weather

The events are advertised as happening one evening during a particular week. In this way, I can select the evening which is forecast to be most ideal. The table-top activities also provide some fallback options in case of cloudy conditions.

 Author
Heavitree Squilometre
Hi folks - we're rapidly reaching capacity now, even with extra post-grad support. Please note that we need you to book so that we can send you the relevant H&S info and make sure that we've enough volunteers to look after you all.

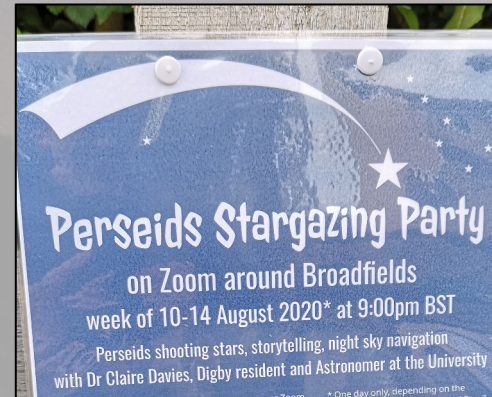


Issue #2: Advertising

Working with the Community Builders is ideal as they have ready-made networks to easily and rapidly distribute information and updates regarding the event. However, controlling the numbers (and having a handle on how many people are likely to attend) has been an unexpected problem. For the February 2019 event in Newtown & St Leonards (the districts closest to the city centre), between 200 and 300 people joined us in the space of 1 hour. Since then, the events have been advertised a little more quietly to limit numbers to more manageable levels.

Issue #2: COVID-19 and social distancing

The St Lloyes-based CIC were keen to ensure that the event to coincide with this summer's Perseid meteor shower went ahead. The usual format of having large groups of people all together in a park was not suitable under social distancing regulations. Instead, attendees joined us from their own homes via Zoom. I used sunset to help orientate everyone in the same direction and shared my view of the Stellarium mobile app to draw out constellations while conducting a tour of the sky as an audio broadcast.



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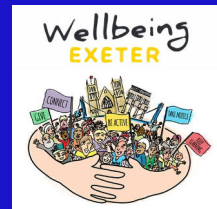
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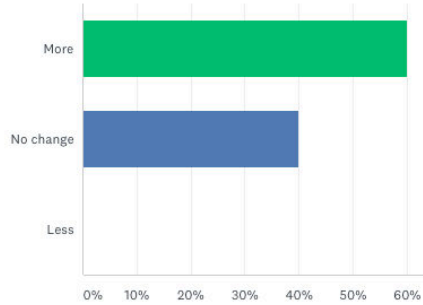
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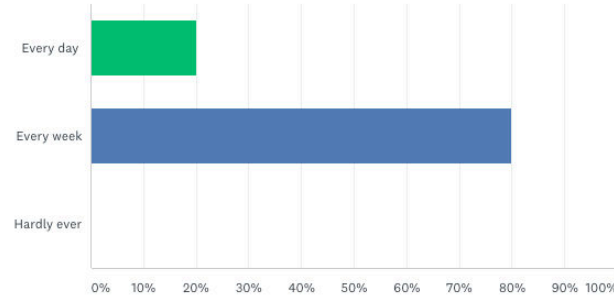


...But the feedback has been great!

Do you look up more or less than you did a week ago?



How often do you look up?



Thanks to all. Really enjoyed it.

Thank you, it was fab xxx

Thanks 😊 fun evening & I learnt a lot about the night sky 🌌

Had a great time at the Broadfields stargazing party last night. Wouldn't have been able to join without Zoom. Thanks to everyone for organising

Thank you for hosting this, I dipped in for short times via Zoom, as I couldn't join in the park after all. What I heard was very interesting and I was very excited to see a shooting star seconds before Claire mentioned it! Thank you

Thanks for a brilliant evening, folks!

Thanks for organising

Thank you for a amazing night. It was fun, and very educational. That first one about 9.15pm when it was flaming across the sky was my highlight. I stayed until about 11.30pm

Thank you , it was great. So informative

It was lovely up on the hill. Thank you for organising this: it was great 🌌🪐🌟

Joined via zoom....shame about the clouds but really interesting. Thanks to those who organised.

Thank you so much to everyone involved, was a wonderful evening, with some spectacular meteors.

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@Tuffers_c

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