Lewes Astronomical Society

Newsletter
January 2026

Happy New Year

Happy New Year and welcome to the first Lewes Astronomical Society newsletter of 2026.

The LAS is a friendly, inclusive community for people with an interest in astronomy and space science. Our membership spans all levels of experience—from complete beginners, to seasoned amateur and professional astronomers—united by a shared curiosity about the Universe. We're proud that our membership currently stands at 140 members.

We meet on the first Wednesday of each month at the Subud Centre in Lewes, where our programme of talks covers a wide range of astronomical topics, from observing the night sky and planetary science to cosmology, the history of astronomy, and related sciences. Visiting speakers and society members contribute to an engaging and accessible programme, with plenty of opportunity for questions and discussion.

Not a member yet? We'd love you to join us! The £15 membership fee offers more than just monthly talks. Members receive the Philip's month-by-month star guide for 2026 and access to our members-only WhatsApp chat group, where you can engage with like-minded people in a relaxed and supportive environment. You do not need specialist knowledge or equipment to join—just an interest in astronomy and a willingness to learn. Whether you are taking your first steps into the subject or have been looking up at the sky all your life, you will be very welcome at the LAS.

For more details about our society and how to become a member, please visit our website at www.lewesas.org.uk or contact our Membership Secretary at membership@lewesas.org.uk.

The photograph below shows our Membership Secretary, Judith Pyett, enjoying a field trip last September to the **Observatorio del Teide**, located on Mount Teide in Tenerife. It is home to the world's largest solar observatory, and is operated by the Canary Islands Institute of Astrophysics (IAC).

Outreach & Schools Observing

2025 saw our busiest outreach programme to date, with activities ranging from pop-up solar observing on Cliffe Bridge to school talks, community summer fairs, care-home visits, and participation in local science festivals. It has been tremendous fun and hugely rewarding.

Members of the committee refurbished two donated telescopes specifically for outreach use. This enabled us to run our first school observing session, which took place in December at Western Road Primary School.

Committee members Jane Penny, Robert Massey, Paul Whitmarsh and Kate Land visited the Year 5 pupils, who had been studying space throughout the term. The children already had an impressive knowledge of the Moon and planets, and were delighted to have the opportunity to observe them directly through a telescope.

Although the weather forecast was discouraging, we were fortunate on the day: the clouds parted, allowing us to observe Saturn and a bright waxing gibbous Moon. The Moon proved an ideal first target, with many surface features clearly visible.

Saturn required a steadier eye, but most of the pupils were able to see its rings — and a few even spotted some of its moons.

Deputy Headteacher Rea Hamilton said "*Thanks so much for your visit...it was a wonderful opportunity for the children!*"

She has since reported an uptake in astronomy from parents too!

The visit was a great opportunity for the LAS team, and we look forward to working with more local schools this year and beyond.

Article written by Kate Land

This photograph shows Robert Massey discussing features of the Moon with Year 5 pupils at Western Road Primary School in Lewes last month.

LAS Space Symposium 2026

Following the success of our 2024 symposium, we are thrilled to announce that the next LAS Space Symposium will take place on **Saturday 21st March 2026** at the All Saints Centre in Lewes.

We're busy inviting outstanding science communicators to Lewes for what promises to be a truly exciting, space-themed community event, open to everyone. This event is focused *entirely* on space — and we're delighted to reveal an exceptional line-up of speakers.

Joining us will be Professor Lucie Green, a brilliant solar physicist and familiar voice and face from radio and television, including *The Infinite Monkey Cage* on BBC Radio 4.

Space scientist and presenter, Professor Lucie Green will headline our Space Symposium on 21st March 2026.

We're excited to welcome Professor Sanjeev Gupta, who works with NASA's Perseverance rover on Mars, offering first-hand insight into the potential discovery of life on the planet.

Dr Penelope Wozniakiewicz will be speaking about dramatic impact events across the solar system.

We're also delighted that local musician John Hinton will open the symposium, bringing his much-loved and hilariously entertaining science-themed songs to the stage.

Please save the date, spread the word to your family and friends, and keep an eye out for more announcements in the coming weeks.

Article written by Kate Land

BBC's *The Sky at Night* presenter Professor Chris Lintott speaking at our STEM Symposium in November 2024.

Inaugural Stargazing Evening at Barcombe Village Hall

On Saturday 13th December, sixteen LAS supporters braved the indifferent weather to come along to Barcombe Village Hall for a stargazing evening. Following a very wet week the forecast suggested that it might be clear enough to get out the telescopes.

The first challenge was to gain access to the hall. When our Secretary, Jane Penny, opened the box on the wall, the keys were not there. After a phone call, the hall manager arrived and apologised for the oversight. However, it was with infinite patience that she then explained the difference between the post box that we had opened, and a key box!

In the meantime, we had walked round the back and started to set up a couple of society telescopes, replete with new power banks, as well as telescopes brought by members.

The sky was challenging for the 'computerised' telescopes, which need initialising by being aimed at two stars in different parts of the sky since thick banks of cloud were moving briskly across the sky. The ground underfoot was boggy following the previous wet week. I guess the surrounding area must have been wet too as a fog/mist rose from the ground, obscuring much of the sky. But, mysteriously, after 10 minutes, or so, it disappeared again.

The second unforeseen problem with the society telescopes was that we had overlooked the need to secure the power banks to the telescopes. Several times, as the telescopes moved to the target, the power banks slipped off and disconnected. We had to start again with aligning the telescopes.

Despite this, we were able to get the telescopes working as well as helping other attendees with theirs. We got to see several objects, including Saturn, Jupiter, Uranus and Orion's Nebula. Towards the end of the evening, as an unexpected bonus, we were treated to a fine display of the Geminid meteor shower.

Article written by Jason Wye

Our next stargazing evenings this year at Barcombe Village Hall are planned for **Friday 23rd January** and on **Friday 27th March**. Everyone is welcome.

Previous meeting

On Wednesday 3rd December, Dr Sian Prosser from the Royal Astronomical Society gave a fascinating talk at the Subud Centre in Lewes about **Historical Women in Astronomy.** She highlighted many of the pioneering women who contributed to our understanding of the universe, starting with **Caroline Herschel** and **Mary Somerville**, and moving on to lesser-known but significant women in the history of astronomy and astrophysics.

Our Membership Secretary, Judith Pyett, also presented a heart-rending eulogy for member **Richie Jarvis**, who sadly passed away, aged 53, in November.

Dr Sian Prosser shown above is the Archivist and Librarian at the Royal Astronomical Society.

Next meeting

On Wednesday 7th January, PhD researcher and LAS committee member, Carina Garland, will give an **Introduction to Archaeoastronomy** at the Subud Centre in Lewes.

Ancient monuments throughout the world are aligned to celestial events. How and why did people in the past go to such lengths?

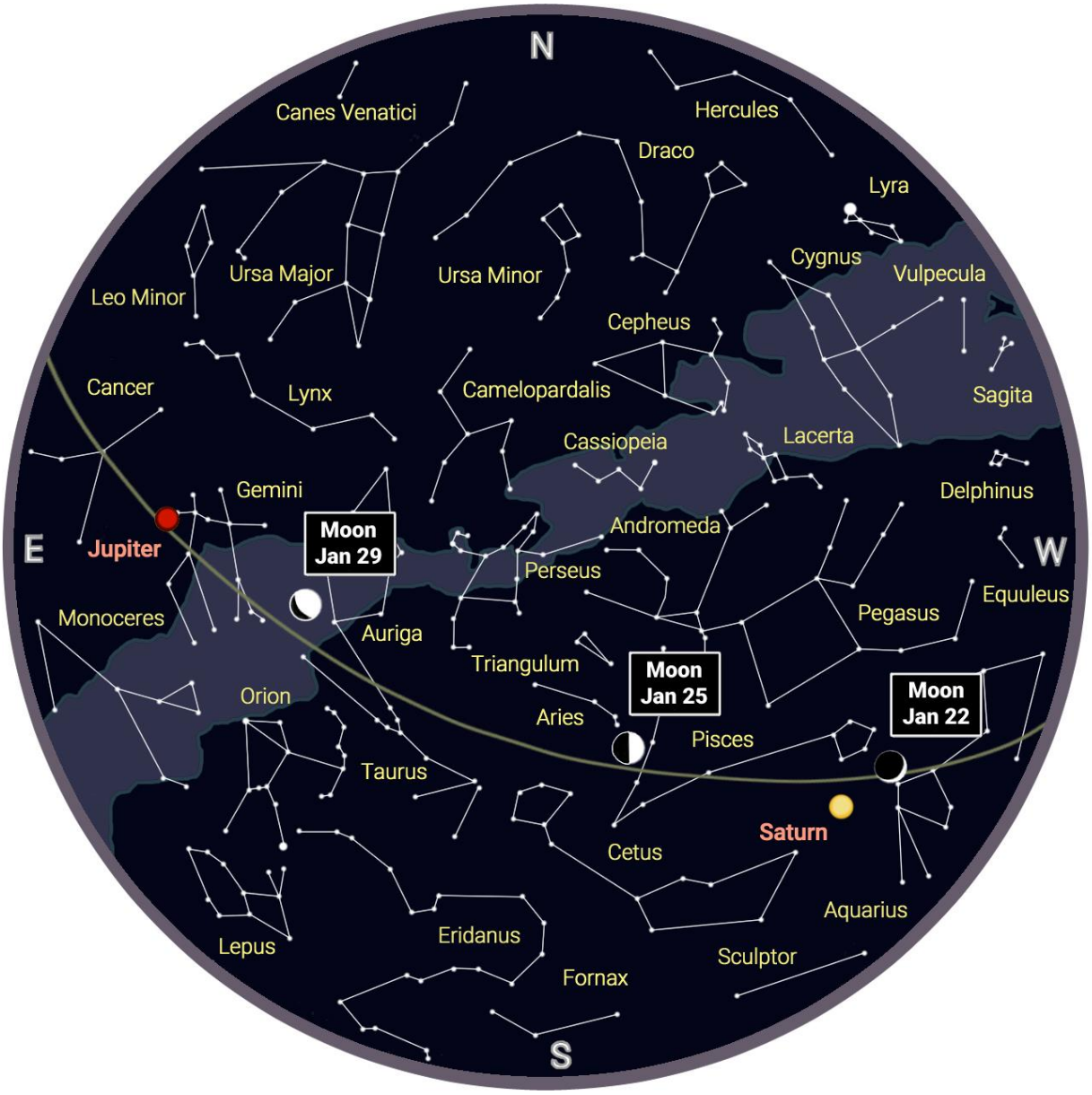
Travel back in time and uncover how ancient skywatchers built monuments that mirrored the movements of the Sun, Moon, and stars.

Join Carina as she guides us through the celestial alignments of two major archaeological monuments from British Prehistory.

Complimentary refreshments will be available. Everyone is welcome, non-members £4. Doors open at 7pm. The talk begins at 7:30pm.

The postcode for the Subud Centre is BN7 2DS. All the municipal car parks in Lewes are free after 5pm, with the nearest being a short walk from the Subud Centre in Brook Street.

Star Guide for January 2026



The chart depicts how the night sky will appear at 8pm at the start of January, 7pm mid-month, and 6pm at the end of January. The position and phase of the Moon are shown for the 22nd, 25th, and 29th of January. The centre of the chart represents the point directly overhead, known as the Zenith, and the edge of the chart represents the horizon with the directions for North, East, South and West indicated.

If you received a telescope or binoculars for Christmas and want to learn how to get the most from them, join one of our monthly meetings—we'll be happy to advise you.

Saturn is low in the southwest and will soon disappear from the evening skies. If you have access to a telescope, take the opportunity to view the ringed planet while its rings are still almost edge-on.

On 10th January, Jupiter reaches opposition (directly opposite the Sun in our sky). This means it will be due south in the sky at midnight and visible all night.

The largest planet in the solar system, Jupiter emits more heat than it receives from the Sun. It glows in infrared light from heat generated by gravity, not nuclear fusion like the Sun. Gravity constantly tries to compress the planet, while the resulting pressure and heat push back, holding Jupiter in the shape of an oblate sphere. Think of a bicycle pump: if you block the end and push, the compressed air resists, and the pump warms up. Jupiter behaves similarly, with gravity squeezing from all sides, compressing and heating its gases.

Binoculars will reveal Jupiter's oblate shape and its four largest moons—Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto—first discovered by Galileo 416 years ago. Small telescopes show horizontal bands in Jupiter's atmosphere, while larger instruments reveal the Great Red Spot, a centuries-old storm larger than Earth. This storm has been shrinking for decades, and astronomers are uncertain about its future.

If you own binoculars, the winter sky offers many treasures. Hanging below the three stars of Orion's Belt is his Sword, a star-forming region of gas and dust visible as a misty patch.

There are also glorious star clusters that sparkle like diamonds on velvet. Look halfway between Perseus and Cassiopeia for the Double Cluster—two groups of stars so close they appear together in the same binocular field.

In the east, find the constellation Auriga. Between the two bright stars that face Gemini, scan with binoculars along the line toward the constellation's centre to discover three beautiful clusters of stars.

The Quadrantids meteor shower peaks on 4th January. Unfortunately, this coincides with the full Moon, so only the brightest meteors will be visible. The shower is active from 28th December to 12th January, offering chances to see meteors when the Moon is less intrusive.

On 27th January, between 7pm and midnight, the Moon will occult the Pleiades. With the Moon 70% illuminated, binoculars will help you enjoy both the star cluster and the Moon together.

Star chart produced by Sarah Carson
Article written by Paul Whitmarsh

Oddments

- It was great to see space scientist and science educator Dame Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock presenting the 200-year anniversary lecture of the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures. You can watch her 3-part lecture on the BBC iPlayer.
- Maggie has co-presented the BBC's *The Sky at Night* television show alongside Professor Chris Lintott since February 2014, following Sir Patrick Moore's passing.

- Toy creator Mattel now produce a Barbie doll version of Maggie, in honour of her work promoting science careers to girls. The doll has a starry dress and comes with a telescope!
- Maggie has also become a stalwart of the BBC's annual Jools Holland Hootenanny show, making an appearance every year. The show is broadcast to 'welcome in' each new year but is actually pre-recorded.

Thanks to Lewes Town Council

Many of our events are made possible thanks to two grants we have been awarded from the Lewes Town Council Community Grants Scheme.

A grant in early 2024 allowed us to purchase a professional-grade video projector befitting the amazing astronomical images of the cosmos that are shown at many of our meetings.

Another grant last year enabled us to buy a solar scope, which is proving to be an invaluable resource for outreach activities during daylight hours, such as at schools.

We are proud to display the Lewes Town Council logo on our website and other media for their generous support of our society.

Lewes Town Council