

## Star Struck on the Stargazing Trip

A report by Maxine and Chris with many thanks to Alan for organising the trip

Wrap up warm were the instructions. So, mid-afternoon, some rather overdressed people bundled onto the minibus feeling. . . rather hot!



After gathering at Stanhope station with approximately thirty other people, young and older, from around Co Durham we were encouraged to join in a tutorial about the universe and the skies at night and learned a huge amount of astronomical information - augmented and highlighted by several rather dramatic explosions and flashes of fire!

Who would have thought that the otherwise sensible Sedgefield u3a members would have spent the first part of our trip enjoying cutting out a [Star Wheel?](#) But thank goodness we did, because that's how we were prompted how we could check and find the major stars in the skies at any given time.



Then, onto the train. Woohoo! Fantastic Halloween decorations to add to the experience. An old Diesel and track so that we could count the noisy clunks as the train moves along. Quite a history blast for me, anyway! Arriving at our destination, a field?!!, we gingerly clambered down from the train.

It was still just light and we could see only one star. Within fifteen minutes it was nearly dark and we could see hundreds! After a short introductory talk when various star clusters and constellations were pointed out and named, the team from Bishop Auckland Astronomical Society were introduced and we were encouraged to visit each of their stations where their telescopes were focused on specific points in the skies. It was such a treat to see Saturn's rings, and later in the evening, the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. We could see the Andromeda constellation—all 17 trillion stars. Oh Yes! And it's only 2.5 million light years away!





The latest comet was moving rather far away but the telescope following it was linked to an i-pad and it could be very clearly seen on that. The Milky Way was sharp and clear but it was rather disturbing to become so clearly aware of the very many satellites which perpetually criss-cross our skies; to say nothing of the commercial, private and military aircraft that fly 24/7.

Fortified by hot drinks and sweet biscuits it was fascinating to move between the various points and talk with the ever enthusiastic and patient astronomers. No question was too silly and answers were always found. .

Having identified the Big Dipper and the consequent North Star, perhaps we could have found our own way home, but we were relieved when our train arrived to return us to Stanhope and our waiting mini-bus! We had had the most interesting and awe-inspiring evening. Gazing up at the millions of stars we can see and being reminded of the innumerable trillions that we can't see and about the immensity of space really reminded us just how small we are!

A stunning evening - you missed a really good one! Make sure you put your name down for our next trip.