

Astronomy Talk 26th May 2020

Cassini at Saturn

This was a “Zoom” talk given by Prof. Carl Murray from Queen Mary’s College, University of London. We had 56 attendees. He has been a leader of the imaging team since 1990, 7 years before the launch date.

First Carl showed us about the background to the project and the UK involvement, which was substantial. The first 7 years from 1990 were spent preparing the project. After launch it took another 7 years before it reached Saturn on July 1st 2004. The team spent the interval working out all the orbital details of how to arrange the tour. By using Titan’s gravity, they were able to conserve fuel and keep Cassini going until 15th September 2015. The 4-year plan hence ended up as an 11-year activity.

Carl showed us lots of details of the rings: he was the principal expert on the extraordinarily complex F-ring. He also showed us lots of small moons which were discovered, some by him, mostly embedded in the rings.

At the end he showed a video NASA had made, that showed what the last descent of Cassini into Saturn’s atmosphere would have looked like.

His favourite picture is the one taken from behind Saturn that shows Earth as a tiny blue dot.

The talk lasted about 45 minutes and was a good example of how effective Zoom can be. It was followed by many questions, and was much appreciated, based on the feedback we have had.