

Astronomy Talk 12th September 2023

Astronomy in Prehistory

This hybrid talk was given by Kate Earl, and was mostly based on her experience as a geologist in Australia. 20 attended in the hall, and 35 online.

There are a lot of stone, bronze and iron age constructions in the UK, and we can be sure the ancients were very intelligent, but that they lacked the acquired knowledge we have. An example in Australia is the winter solstice which one aboriginal tribe saw as the Sun going away because it was cold rather than vice versa. So maybe the Sun wouldn't come back? Much ritual needed to encourage it!

Wildlife was connected to the stars, e.g. the Torres Straits islanders saw what we see as the plough as a shark, and when it sank into the sea, don't go in the water. They also used it as a seasonal indicator for crop planting.

Weather prediction was another art: if a star twinkles it forecasts cold, if it flickers it forecasts hot. Flood prediction used Centaurus and the Southern Cross. The Polynesians had many indicators like this to help them at sea.

Wilgie Ochre mine in Western Australia was a meeting point that aboriginals travelled many hundreds of miles to attend, using the stars for guidance.

Finally, Kate mentioned the use of the Sun and Moon for measuring time, tides, travel and planting seasons.

A very different talk from the usual astronomy, and with many questions it clearly engaged the audience very well.