

PUBLIC OPEN EVENINGS AT THE INSTITUTE OF ASTRONOMY WEDNESDAY 14TH JANUARY 2009

Institute of Astronomy

<http://www.ast.cam.ac.uk>

Cambridge Astronomical Association <http://www.caa-cya.org/home/index.php>

All comments, enquiries or suggestions please to **Carolin Crawford** (csc@ast.cam.ac.uk)

Welcome to our Wednesday public open evenings, which will now run till the end of March. Tonight's 30 minute talk starts at 7.15pm and is followed by an opportunity to observe with both modern and historical telescopes *if* the weather is clear. We are *still* hoping for some clear weather soon...

This week's talk : Kostas Gourgouliatios is explaining those enigmatic **Gamma-ray bursts**

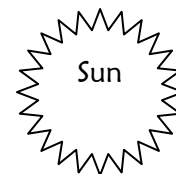
Next week : In a slight departure from astronomical tradition, Helen Russell will be showing you some **Atmospheric Illusions**

The schedule for this term's talks can be found at:

http://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/public/public_observing/0809/timetable.html

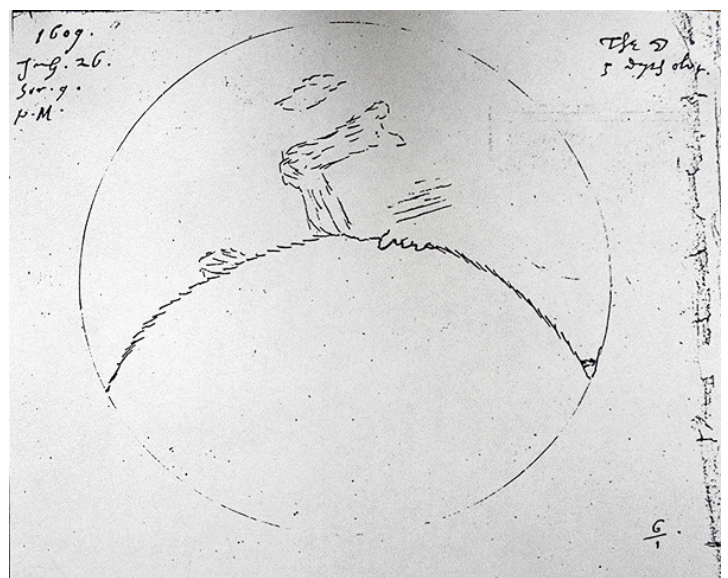
Venus is brilliant, currently unmissable (modulo any cloud cover!) in the early evenings to the south-west, setting about 3 hours after the Sun. Tonight it reaches its furthest apparent distance ('maximum elongation' in astronomy-speak) from the Sun. If you have a small telescope it's worth looking at the planet – you should find it's only about half-full, as Venus has phases like the moon:

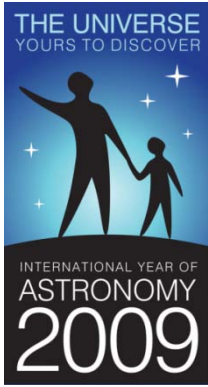
Venus



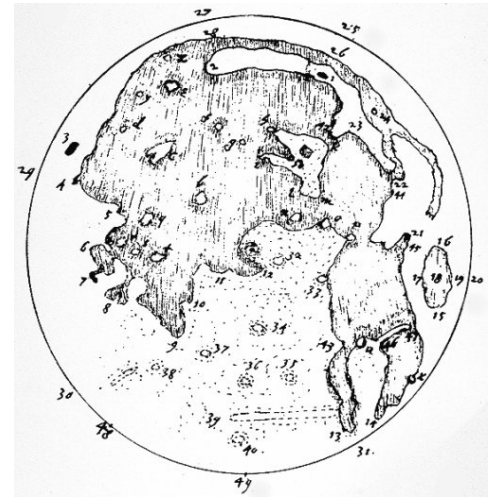
There's a new comet in the skies, **comet Lulin**, discovered in 2007 by astronomers from Taiwan and China. At the moment it's still quite faint and can only be seen at dawn through a telescope. But it's swinging into the Solar System and as it gets closer to the Sun it should warm up, and brighten as gas and dust sublimate from the icy surface. So hopefully, by the time it makes its closest approach to the Earth (in about 5 weeks' time) it will be a lot more impressive. Its orbit indicates that it may be its first pass through the inner part of the Solar System, so hopefully the solar heating could produce more spectacular brightening than expected. Watch this space, we'll keep you posted if there's anything easily visible through simple binoculars or to the unaided eye.

Tomorrow there will be a grand opening to mark 2009 as the **International Year of Astronomy**, at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. 2009 was chosen as it marks 400 years since Galileo first used a telescope for astronomical observations. Of course, if you've seen the papers this morning, you may have noticed that there is a counter-claim that the Englishman **Thomas Harriot** made observations of the craters on the moon several months before Galileo. The evidence is a single sketch (shown right) dated 26 July 1609; I don't know about you, but I'm not convinced you need to have seen the moon through a telescope to have made that drawing... However, it is true that Harriot later made some beautiful and detailed charts of the Moon's surface (see top right overleaf...) that certainly did require telescopic observations – and it's possible that he was more cautious than Galileo about keeping his observations to himself, as he was already under suspicion of being an 'unbeliever'.





Anyway, there'll be plenty of events occurring across the country this year to raise the profile of Astronomy, and many opportunities to enjoy and learn about the wonders of the night sky. We'll be doing some special events here at the Institute later on in the year, including a couple of 'Moonwatch' weeks in April and October. Find out more about what's going on nationally at <http://www.astronomy2009.co.uk/>, and I'll keep you apprised of the IoA's plans nearer the time (or keep an eye on <http://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/public/>).

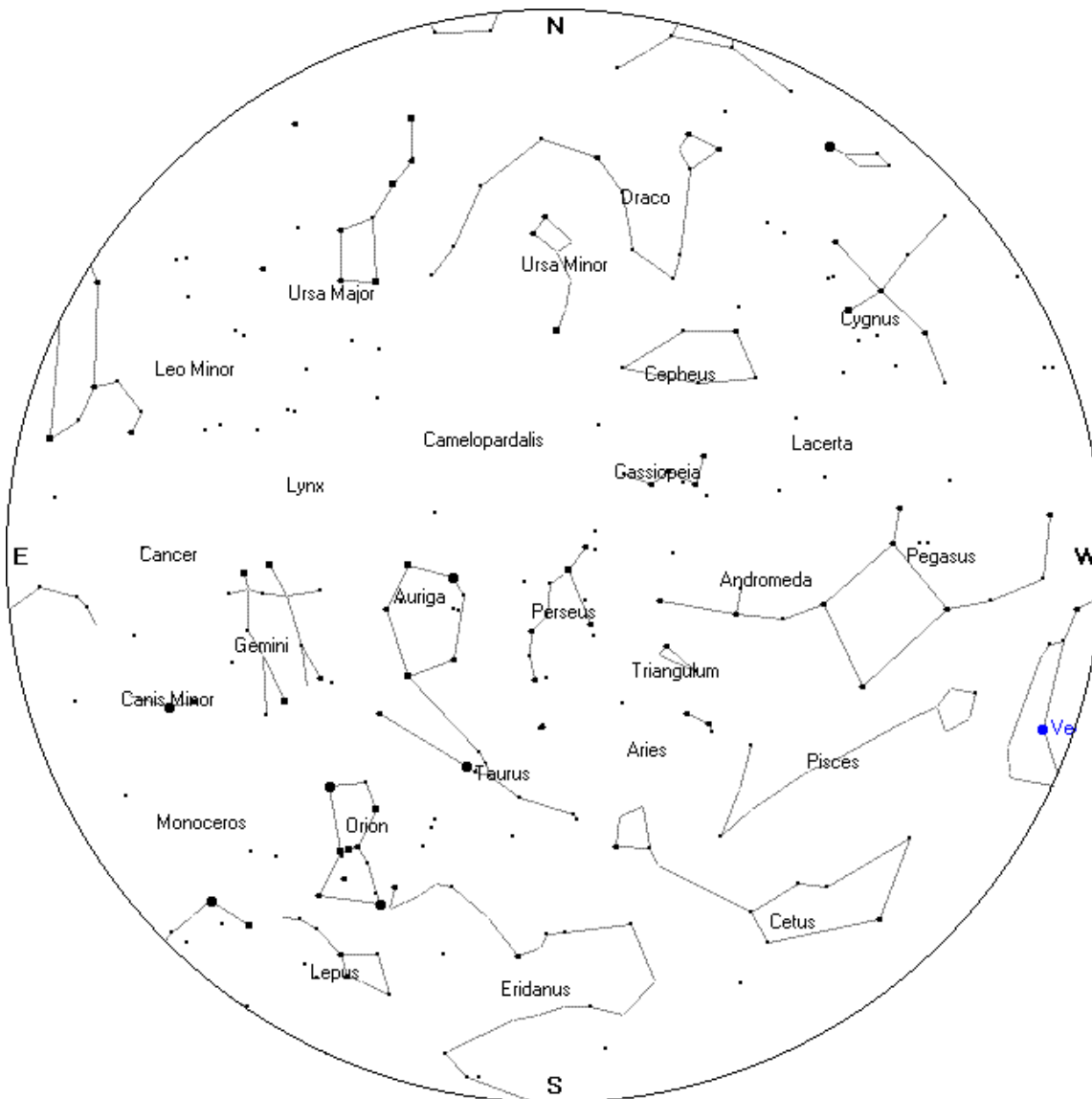


Finally, if you're the kind of person who's up out and about later on of an evening, keep an eye out for the planet **Saturn**, which starts getting high enough to be observable after about 11pm. It's also easy to find at the moment: tonight (the 14th) it'll be about 7° due East (ie left) of the bright Moon, moving to about 12° directly North (ie above) the Moon tomorrow night (15th).

THE NIGHT SKY AT 8PM ON 14TH JANUARY 2009

To use the map, hold it above your head to match the sky...

Sky map courtesy of <http://www.heavens-above.com/>



SITE SAFETY

Please be aware that we have a major construction site in our midst over the winter, while the exciting new Kavli Institute of Cosmology is added to the IoA grounds. The building work is safely fenced off, but still please don't tempt fate by exploring too far in the dark unless you know where you're going! There is also now digging in the observatory lawn which limits the space available to us outside tonight. If you need orientation, the red rope light marks out a safe path between the observing and Madingley Rise, but please ask any of the staff if you need further directions or assistance.