



Astronomy

People have always gazed at the stars but perhaps Astronomy could be said to have begun when the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Chinese formed the stars into constellations. Astronomy provided a calendar for ancient civilisations. This allowed them to predict when to sow and harvest their crops and formed an impor-

tant part of their religion and life.

The accurate measurement of size and distance started with Eratosthenes of Cyrene who obtained excellent values for the radius of the Earth.

Various schemes involving how the planets and stars (!) moved around the Earth were thought up, most of them involving the Earth at the centre of the universe (for religious reasons, not sci-



entific). Little progress was made until 1500 A.D. When Copernicus suggested a model for the Solar System with the Sun at the centre.

Tycho Brahe made some excellent observations of the night sky, and these were used by Kepler to show the planets orbit in ellipses (flattened circles). This was helped by the theories of Isaac Newton.

Galileo Galilei made a series of spectacular discoveries by observing the sky through his telescope around 1610.

Astronomy then improved in leaps and bounds in the 1800's and 1900's as Spectroscopy allowed astronomers to study the stars in more detail and more powerful telescopes improved our view of the universe.



Today we can look at the universe through powerful telescopes and we send probes and spacecraft to visit other objects in the Solar System. We can look at objects at the extreme edge of the universe, and see them as they were billions of years ago. We have set foot on the Moon and we can trace the origins of the universe back to just a few billionths of a second since it began.

Astronomy is a varied and interesting subject, and you can start studying astronomy just by looking up at the night sky with your own eyes!

