



# PRESS RELEASE

6th February 2021

## Major First for Planetarium as Star Shows Go Online

**In an exciting and innovative move the South Downs Planetarium in Chichester is set to bring the winter night sky direct into people's homes as part of the 2021 South Downs Dark Skies Festival. The Festival, which will be an entirely online event this year, is running between 12th and 28th February and the Planetarium is putting on a total of four free virtual events during this time.**

During the long periods of lockdown, many people have found that taking an interest in Nature or the natural world in general has helped them to cope with anxiety and stress. Indeed, many studies have demonstrated the positive effects of the natural world on our mental health at this time. This has led many people to take up an interest in the night sky, but the Planetarium has been forced to close for most of the past year due to Government restrictions and outdoor stargazing sessions for the public have had to be put on hold. In addition, when everyone has to stay home, it is not possible to travel out to a really clear, dark site to view the stars.

So the astronomers at the South Downs Planetarium decided that they would find a way to bring the night sky right into people's living rooms – using the magnificent star projector, which is the centrepiece of the Planetarium, to take people on a virtual guided tour of the magnificent winter night sky.

"It has been a very challenging project," said the Planetarium's Principal Lecturer, Dr John Mason, who is presenting all of the online shows. "When audiences come into our Planetarium, we turn off all of the lights so it is completely dark and they can then view the projected stars and other celestial objects just as they would if they were outside on a really clear, dark night. This makes it very hard to film."

In the Planetarium the stars and other objects in the night sky are projected onto the inside of a large hemispherical dome and the audience are seated inside the dome with the stars all around them. It isn't possible to capture this all-round immersive experience in a format that can be streamed on the internet so they have split the tour into two halves. First they look at the northern sky and then they turn their attention to the South.

"Filming inside the Planetarium has been one of the most difficult tasks I have ever been asked to do," said Film Cameraman and Editor, Clive Hand, one of the Planetarium's enthusiastic band of volunteers. "We have had to use special low light video cameras and very fast lenses to record the stars, star patterns and other celestial objects that are projected onto the dome, and then add in the constellation outlines and the movements of the presenter's red laser pointer," he continued.

"I really can't believe how successful it has been," exclaimed Dr Mason. "It really is like standing outside under the stars – but you don't have to wrap up really warm to experience it," he added

The free virtual night sky tours will take place on Friday, 12th February, Wednesday, 17th February and Wednesday, 24th February. All begin at 7pm. The tour on the 17th will include a detailed look at the Red Planet, Mars, which is also on view this month, and the landing of the Mars Rover *Perseverance* the following day. The tour on the 24th will include an in-depth look at our nearest celestial neighbour, the Moon, which will be shining brightly in our skies at the time.

In addition, on Friday, 19th February at 6pm, Dr Mason will be taking part in a Facebook Live Question and Answer session, giving you a chance to ask questions about the Mars landing and any other astronomy-related subjects.

All the details for the 2021 South Downs Dark Skies Festival and how to take part are available at: [www.southdowns.gov.uk/dark-night-skies/festival/](http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/dark-night-skies/festival/)

You can also join in on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

For more information contact:

Dr John Mason, Trustee and Principal Lecturer

South Downs Planetarium & Science Centre

Mobile: 07901 890061, Email: [docjohn@dircon.co.uk](mailto:docjohn@dircon.co.uk)

[www.southdowns.org.uk](http://www.southdowns.org.uk)