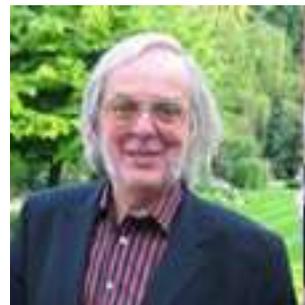


Aston Medal 2003

Colin Pillinger



Colin Pillinger is probably best known as the leader of the Beagle 2 project, the attempt to land a British built spacecraft on Mars on Christmas day 2003, to search for evidence of life on the Red planet. He has been called one of the 100 most influential people (Sunday Times), the 50 most important scientists, and the 10 best known geologists, as well as one of the “Makers of the 20th Century”. He has been involved in space exploration for nearly 40 years since he joined the NASA Apollo programme in 1968, as part of the great lunar adventure to put the first man on the moon. He joined this programme by accident – getting the job because someone else turned it down saying ‘he couldn’t see it had any long term prospects’.

Colin’s academic career has also spanned the time from 1968 with posts of; Research Associate at the University of Bristol (1968-1976), Senior Research Associate at the University of Cambridge (1976-1984) Senior Research Fellow at the Open University (1984-1993), then Professor of Planetary Sciences at the Open University since 1993. He is also Emeritus Professor of Astronomy at Gresham College (2007-), and Founder and first Head of the Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute at the Open University - a group of 70 scientists housed in a purpose built building paid for by the Government’s Strategic Investment Fund .

His research work progressed in the fields of astronomy and he has developed and worked with many projects on Interstellar Grains, Meteorite collecting programmes and has also been involved in analysing geological deposits to try to establish why the dinosaurs died. Colin has also been involved in numerous space missions – The Apollo Lunar Programme, Beagle 2, Back to the Moon with Beagle 2, Rosetta Comet Chaser, Genesis, and Flying Stones.

However, in terms of mass spectrometry two of Colin’s major achievements were pioneering methods that allowed measurements to be made on a thousand times smaller samples than anyone else, and building a mass spectrometer which was light weight yet could survive the rigours of a rocket launch and could then operate semi autonomously consuming minimal power. Such a mass spectrometer has potential spin-offs in everyday life but is best known for being used for the Beagle 2 space project.

Colin was both consortium leader and lead scientist for Beagle 2. The project was to search for water on Mars, analyse rocks, measure their ages and study the environment. Beagle 2 was launched on 2nd June 2003 and was due to land on Christmas Day 2003. However, no radio signals were ever received from the tiny lander and the search for its whereabouts still continues. Colin is working for ESA on an idea for a European mission to the Lunar polar regions in 2018 as a prelude to having a permanent Astronaut base on the Moon.

His honours and medals are numerous and include a CBE and FRS. They also include a Gold Medal (in conjunction with Hadlow College) awarded by the Royal Horticultural Society at the Chelsea Flower Show, and the 2011 Faraday Prize by the Royal Society for Public Understanding of Science. In addition the British Interplanetary Society have published his autobiography "My life on Mars - the Beagle 2 diaries".

Colin also has the honour of having an asteroid named after him - number 15614 named Pillinger.



Updated from AKU June 2010

