

First Woman Appointed UK Astronomer Royal After 350 Years

July 30, 2025

— Categories: General News



Professor Michele Dougherty has been appointed Astronomer Royal, the first woman to hold the post since its creation in 1675, over 350 years ago. She did not study science at secondary school in South Africa; her early fascination began with a homemade telescope built with her father, which led her into space science.

In her honorary role advising the monarch, Professor Dougherty has said she hopes her appointment will inspire more women and young people to pursue careers in science. She said she wished to “enthuse and excite people” about astronomy and stress how important it is to the UK economy.

Professor Dougherty is the principal investigator for a magnetometer on ESA’s JUICE mission, which launched in April 2023 and will explore Jupiter’s icy moons, particularly Ganymede, to assess habitability. At age ten, she first observed Jupiter and its moons through the homemade

She did not take formal science classes at her girls’ school and only studied mathematics; despite this, her aptitude allowed her to enter a university science degree programme, a transition she described as challenging. She said, “The first couple of years were hard. It was like learning a new language” when adjusting to science degrees at university.

She led the Department of Physics at Imperial College London from 2018 to December 2024; female undergraduate enrolment rose from around 19per cent to about 25per cent during her tenure.

The Astronomer Royal post was created in 1675 for John Flamsteed; since 1972, it has been an honorary role advising the monarch. Professor Dougherty becomes the first woman in the position, joining Catherine Heymans as Astronomer Royal for Scotland, appointed in 2021.

She has said that while she does not want to be seen only as the first woman in the role, she believes representation matters: “When young children see someone that looks like them doing a job, they never thought they could, it changes their mindset a little.”