

Astronomy Greats: Galileo

By Naomi Francey, Education Support Officer

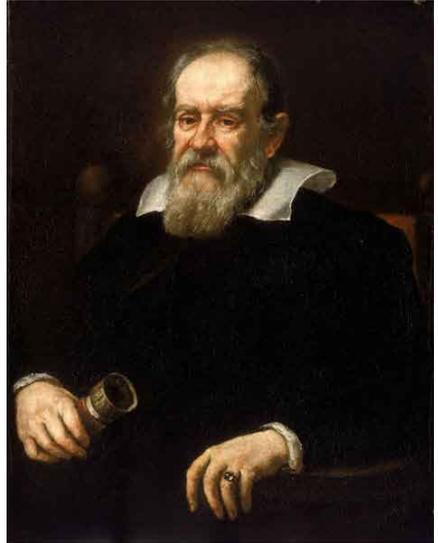
In a previous Astronotes I was explaining how all our rooms at Armagh Planetarium are named after famous Astronomers. Our main exhibition hall is called 'Galileo Hall', named after Galileo Galilei who lived in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Galileo was a very talented astronomer and experimental physicist. Born in Pisa, Italy as one of seven children, he accomplished a great deal during his lifetime. He was educated from an early age and was the most talented one of his siblings. His tertiary education began at the University of Pisa, but was cut short due to financial difficulties. He was later offered a job there teaching mathematics. He soon moved on to the University of Padua where he taught geometry, mechanics and astronomy, focusing more on science, and this is when he made most of his scientific discoveries.

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Galileo made many discoveries throughout his life and most are due to his ability to improve the telescope to observe the Solar System. It is a common misapprehension that Galileo invented the telescope; however he was one of the first to use it to look beyond the Earth. He was the first to discover the mountains and craters on the moon surface, the first to discover the phases of Venus and the rings of Saturn. Galileo discovered Jupiter's satellites Io, Europa and Callisto (in a single evening), followed by Ganymede four nights later. He was the first European scholar to recognise sunspots. In 1624 he created the first known example of the microscope. He also located Neptune but did not recognise it as a planet, seeing it as a dim star.

He had three children, two daughters and a son. His eldest daughter inherited her father's sharp mind and was Galileo's favourite child.

Image Credit: Portrait of Galileo Galilei by Justus Sustermans ca. 1639 (via Wikimedia)



“Just a poor boy, from a poor family” according to the noted scholar Freddie Mercury. Galileo was also the man who dropped balls of various masses off the leaning tower of Pisa to prove time of descent was independent of their mass

Galileo published his final book in 1638 when he was almost blind. He died on 8 January 1642. He is currently buried beside his eldest daughter in Basilica di Santa Croce di Firenze in Florence, Italy. He had a great life of unique discoveries and we owe a lot to this giant of astronomy. NASA named one of their probes after Galileo and, like Galileo, it made many original discoveries. On its way to Jupiter to explore the Galilean moons, it was the first probe to fly past an asteroid and the first to discover a moon of an asteroid!