

# Ulster astro boffins

## bag time on mega telescope

### Space exploration sting for Queen's

**AN Ulster astronomer is co-ordinating a major project which could allow thousands of new planets to be studied for the first time.**

WASP — wide angle search for planets — is the name of the massive scheme, which is being managed by Dr Don Pollacco of Queen's University.

Construction has just begun in the Canary Islands on WASP, with the building of the first of three new cameras which will be designed to look for planets outside our own solar system.

"WASP is the most ambitious ground-based planet detection project currently in planning or construction," said Dr Pollacco.

To date, hundreds of planets have been found outside our Solar System by teams of scientists from around the world using various techniques.

However, WASP hopes to find over a thousand new planets similar to Jupiter.

Dr Pollacco, of the Department of Pure and Applied Physics at Queen's, designed and built the prototype WASP camera at the Belfast university.

WASP will be formed from a network of at least three cameras, which will accurately measure the brightness of a million stars every night.

Astronomers will look for variations in the brightness of stars, which can indicate a planet passing in front of the star.

The easiest sorts of planets to see are large Jupiter-sized objects, close to the star they orbit, known as "hot Jupiters".

They also hope to detect variations due to asteroids and giant explosions known as novae or supernovae.

Explained Dr Pollacco: "Unusually,



**AMBITIOUS: Dr Don Pollacco**

much of the equipment being used in WASP is similar to that used by amateur astronomers, but is of research quality and used in a novel way.

"It is also innovative in its operation, as the system requires little supervision.

"Each camera in WASP is designed to run under robotic control with minimal human interaction."

The first camera will generate an incredible 30 Gigabytes of data per night — the equivalent to 40 CDs.

Said Dr Pollacco: "Our network is one of the first big data 'gatherers' in UK optical astronomy and it is advances in computing that have made dealing with this data feasible.

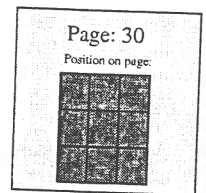
"One season of observation with just one of the cameras is expected to produce more candidate systems than has been achieved with a decade of observations with the largest telescopes".

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Publication from  
Region 13:  
Northern Ireland

Page & Position



Media

**Sunday Life (Belfast)**

Date: 03/08/2003

Type: General Consumer

Frequency: 52/Per year

Circulation: 96,072

MediaDisk Ref: 67C-58