

British team plans to reestablish contact with 1970's era satellite

September 6 2011, by Bob Yirka

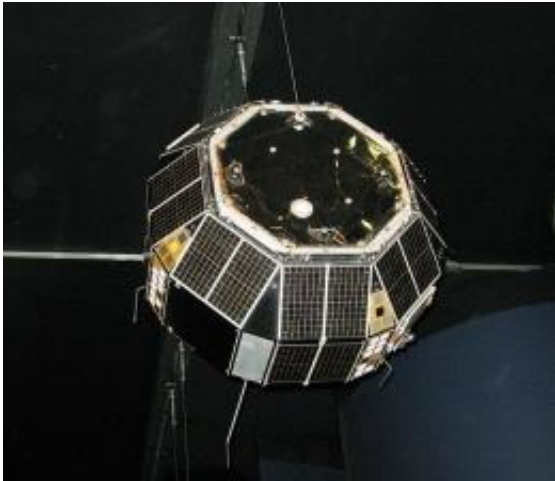


Photo of a model of the Prospero X-3 satellite in London's Science Museum.
Image: GFDL CC-BY-SA

(PhysOrg.com) -- A group of academic space scientists has decided to try to open a channel with a British satellite launched in 1971, but not heard from since 1996. The team, headed by Roger Duthie, a PhD student in London, hopes to overcome many obstacles in reestablishing contact with the satellite to celebrate the 40th anniversary of its launch.

The satellite, called [Prospero X3](#) (from Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who was made to relinquish his powers, an obvious dig at the government's decision to end the program) was and is the only satellite ever launched aboard an all British rocket (the *Black Arrow*). It was sent

up shortly after the British rocketry program was ended October 28, 1971, with the purpose of learning more about the [space](#) environment.

The first challenge was finding the original codes used to communicate with Prospero, difficult because the agency that had sent up the satellite had been broken apart and been superseded by other agencies. They eventually found them in the National Archives in London.

Next, the team will need to build a system to actually communicate with the satellite since the equipment originally used is long gone. But before they can do that they'll have to obtain permission to use the necessary radio frequency from Ofcom (the British agency that regulates electronic communications) as it's been usurped by other satellites.

The first step, once given the go-ahead, would be of course to determine if Prospero is still active, which seems unlikely given the length of time it's been orbiting. If the [satellite](#) is still alive though and the team manages to communicate with it, they plan an as yet undetermined public demonstration, on or around October 28.

The United Kingdom is in the middle of a bit of a space exploration resurgence after abandoning most efforts to [launch](#) rockets (other than for military purposes) after the cancellation of its program in the early 1970's and vowing to avoid manned flights into space altogether. Since that time it has relied on other programs to send it's satellites aloft, though it has been a part of the other projects such as the doomed Beagle 2 sent to Mars last year. Also, in a move designed to remove barriers to government investment in private projects, the British Government established the UK Space Agency, (replacing the British National Space Centre) and this year enacted legislation to reduce the liabilities that can be incurred in space operations to help boost competitiveness.

More information: via [BBC](#)

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