

HELEN SHARMAN

On 18 May 1991, a 27-year-old Brit from Sheffield sat on top of a Soviet Soyuz rocket in modern-day Kazakhstan, ready to launch into space. Her name was Helen Sharman. On that day she made history by becoming Britain's first astronaut, pre-dating astronaut Tim Peake by 24 years.

Helen Sharman doesn't fit the historical mould of a fighter-pilot-turned-astronaut, and wonderfully so. She grew up in Sheffield and studied chemistry at Birkbeck College, London. In 1987 she became a food chemist for Mars Wrigley Confectionery in Slough where she worked on the chemistry of ice cream and chocolate! Not a bad job, but in 1989 when Helen chanced to hear a job advert on the radio saying "astronaut wanted: no experience necessary" she immediately applied.

The space mission, called Project Juno, was a unique collaboration between the Soviet Union and private British companies. The goal was to foster UK-Soviet relations by flying a British astronaut on the Mir space station.

Despite the simple advert, the selection process for a Project Juno astronaut wasn't a mere lottery. Helen's scientific background, her aptitude for foreign languages, and her high level of fitness helped her beat nearly 13,000 other applicants. She was selected as one of only two candidates to undertake the full-time astronaut training at Star City near Moscow.

After a rigorous 18 months of training, Helen launched on 18 May 1991 and spent eight days on the Mir space station. While in space, she ran various biological experiments and investigated crystal growth in microgravity as well as chatted with British school children over amateur radio and, like Tim Peake did 24 years later, Helen also carried some seeds into space for comparison with Earth-based seeds in British schools.

Until Tim Peake launched in 2015, Helen was the only British astronaut to fly under the UK flag. Other Brits, such as Michael Foale and Piers Sellers, have flown as NASA astronauts because they held dual US-UK citizenship.

Helen will always hold a special place in British spaceflight history. Here at the National Space Centre, we are honoured to look after some of Helen's personal effects from her mission.

One of the crown jewel artefacts at the National Space Centre is Helen's launch couch, which she sat in during her Soyuz trip to and from the Mir space station. This Kazbek-UM Shock Absorbing Couch has actually flown in space four times on different missions, making it one of the most flown artefacts at the National Space Centre. Helen's couch is custom-lined for her body to prevent injury from the strong forces in launch and landing. It's displayed along with Helen's training Sokol KV-2 Rescue Spacesuit to give a sense of just how cramped the couch can be.

On display you can also find Helen's PK-14 Cosmonaut Flight-suit, which she wore during her eight days on Mir. If you look carefully, you can see a small brown stain on the right-hand chest of the blue suit from when Helen spilled some hot chocolate - easy to do in the microgravity of space! The jacket was rarely worn, as it was usually too hot.

Finally, you can check out Helen's Mir hygiene kit containing the toothpicks, comb, hairbrush and nail file that she used in space.