

# A Dark Sky Charter For Sawston (and beyond)

Modern living has brought us many comforts but amidst all of this we have lost some of our shared experiences. One of those is something that every single person on earth, no matter colour or creed, can enjoy. One humans have enjoyed since the dawn of time. But this has become as endangered as some of our wildlife, and endangered in an entirely different way.

The night sky.

Our nights have become an incessant endless orange glow, with the stars an ever-dimming sight under the onslaught of needless light pollution. It doesn't have to be that way. We can all do our bit to curb this loss of our natural environment and return a shared wonder to our lives.

Imagine the next time the conditions are right for the aurora to be this far south but you couldn't make it out due to your neighbour's 5000 lumens floodlight wiping out any darkness. The amount of photos, and interest, that the Northern Lights generated showed there are still experiences that bind us as a community. It was definitely a special moment. While the aurora is an infrequent sight in our sky, there are plenty of other sights to see. From the majesty of the Milky Way stretching across the sky to the sparkling jewels of the Pleiades cluster.

I grew up taking deep astronomical darkness for granted, I knew no different. My mother bought me my first telescope when I was five or six (I still have it in my shed, unused as I have much better and modern equipment these days) and I recall not just marvelling at the shadows cast by the mountains on the moon, but the vibrant contrasting colours of Albireo, my favourite double star or the moons of Jupiter dancing around the largest planet in different positions from night to night. Today, due to the amount of light pollution both here and towards and into Cambridge, it takes twice the size of telescope to see the same objects as I did as a child.

And that is where the Dark Sky Charter comes in. As a call to arms for all of us to do what we can to reduce the diminishing of the wonder of the night sky. It is a framework to bring back what we have lost, and pretty much lost everywhere in this country except in some remote rural areas. If you ever get the chance to go somewhere truly dark, it is mesmerising.

It is not just for private individuals, but for councils, for businesses, for schools, in fact, for anyone anywhere that has light burning needlessly during the hours of darkness. It is not intended to be onerous, or expensive, but simple and straightforward. The charter is deliberately short and concise.

One of the instant objections that is always raised when the notion of turning off lights at night, or even just the dimming of them, is that of increased rates of crime. An emotional and valid response but one that is not borne out in reality. It has been proven time and time again that less light does not increase crime in those darkened areas. In fact the exact opposite. Academic research shows that when there is less lighting what happens is the crime moves to areas of increased visibility. Of course, that is a different problem to be addressed but the link between brightly lit areas and crime is not what it is generally perceived to be. It would be too much to give a full run down on this, but these two links are indicative of the results.

- o Less lighting prevents night time car theft <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10940-022-09539-8>

- o Less lighting has no impact on crime or collisions <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-33692675>

I also hope the idea spreads wider, and adopted by our surrounding business parks and neighbouring villages and, ultimately, by Cambridge City itself which produces a vast amount of light pollution. I can stand in my back garden in a deep winter's evening and the horizon

looks like the approach of dawn. Luckily enough, building regulations are unintentionally catching up with the problem too. There is a section that is dedicated to lighting, and I quote from it as it helps the cause for dark(er) skies.

'Installing a lamp with a capacity which does not exceed 150W per light fitting and the lighting automatically switches off both when there is enough daylight and also when it is not required at night'

It is meant as a standalone document that can be taken as a starting point without bogging it down in minutiae. While not legally enforceable outside of those previous planning regulations, I hope it will gain traction and we can all rediscover our dark skies and get that sense of wonder back. I've never lost that sense of wonder, it has just been frustrated by the pervasive light pollution we have in this part of England.

With all that said, the Dark Sky Charter for Sawston was raised as an agenda item at the Sawston Parish Council meeting on the 25th June 2024. It was put to a vote and agreed to be supported. This means it will be made available on their website, and they will support it within their capacity. It is all about awareness, and I hope this a seed that grows and thrives. I also personally thank the Parish Councillors for engaging with this, listening, and in the end supporting.

Finally, the Charter is intended to be short, simple, and easy to understand and implement. If it leads to a wider discussion, that is even better. And if more people take up the rewarding hobby of astronomy, well, that would make me happiest of all!