

SALT

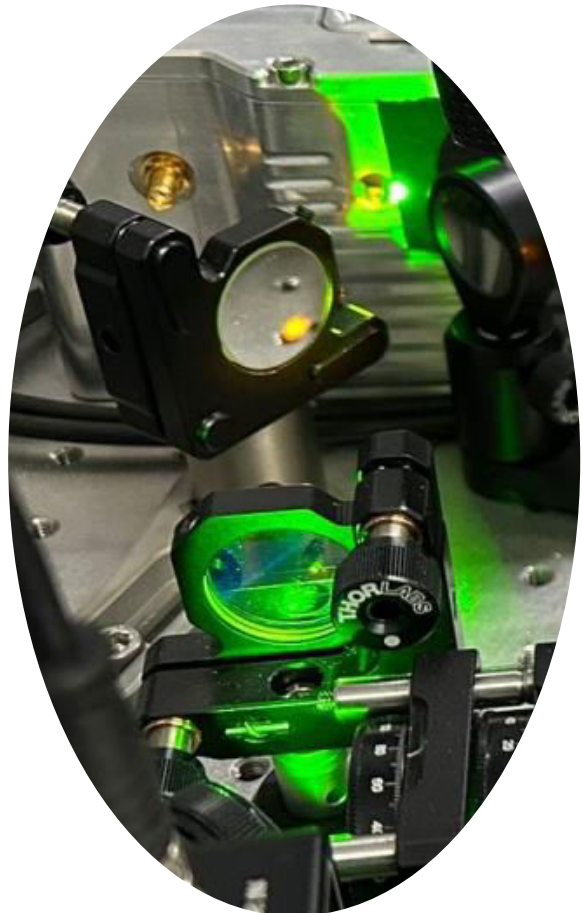
Newsletter

December 2025



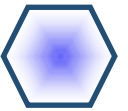
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Editor: Anja C. Schröder

Cover image: SALT under South African skies. -- Credit: Gabriel Santos



Letter from the Head of Astro-Ops



Dear SALT Community,

December has arrived, bringing with it summer and the inevitable heat of South Africa, along with the familiar pause that comes as much of the country begins winding down for the holidays.

In this packed newsletter, we share updates on several ongoing projects such as the LFC and the new Pythonised HRS-HR pipeline currently in development. This edition also contains reflections on SALT's 20th anniversary celebration. For those who were unable to join us, I encourage you to read the article to get a sense of the atmosphere, the memories, and the milestones highlighted on the day.

From my side, being part of SALT's journey over the past 12 years has shaped my career in countless ways. It is truly a privilege to be part of this team, and witnessing the impact of SALT's legacy during the celebrations was both humbling and inspiring. We so often become immersed in the day-to-day operations of the telescope that it is easy to forget just how far we have come and how profound its impact has been. As we look ahead, we will continue to serve as committed custodians of this remarkable facility for both present and future generations of astronomers, inspiring humankind to keep looking up at the night sky.

In other exciting news, SALT received a prestigious Science Diplomacy Award at the closing ceremony of the 2025 Science Forum South Africa, held in late November. Congratulations to the SALT team for this well-deserved recognition!

I would also like to highlight that the 2026-1 Call for Proposals will be issued within the next week. An important update in this call will relate to the expected timelines surrounding the RSS detector replacement.

May you have a blessed Christmas, for those celebrating, and I wish everyone a restful and safe festive season.

Until next time,
Daniël

We are currently recruiting two astronomers to join the SALT Astronomy Operations team. Both roles include opportunities for personal research and student supervision. Interested applicants should log in to <https://ess.nrf.ac.za/Account/Recruitment> and apply online. The application deadline for both positions is 10 December 2025.



SCIENCE HIGHLIGHT

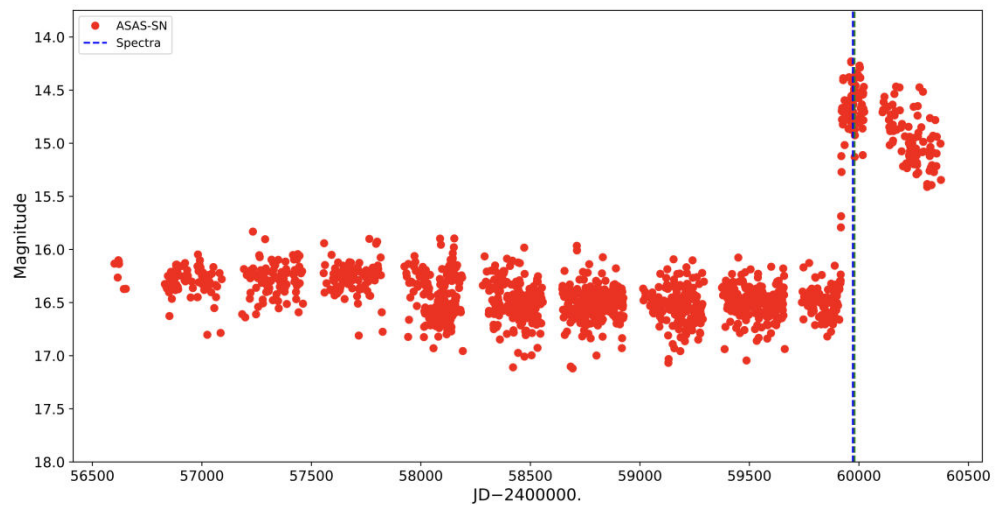
Revisit of EF Eridani during the recent high state

by Zwidofhelangani Khangale (SAAO & UCT, RSA)

EF Eridani (or EF Eri) is a well-studied and non-eclipsing CV system, which was discovered in the late 1970s with the Einstein satellite as the fourth member of a group of CVs known as polars. Today there are over 250 CV systems belonging to this group courtesy of X-rays surveys that were conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s. EF Eri has an orbital period of 81 minutes.

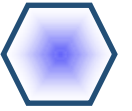
Like other polars, EF Eri shows short-term and long-term brightness variations. The short-term variations occur within the orbital period and include rapid flickering with amplitudes of 0.2 magnitude and flaring events with amplitudes ~ 0.8 magnitude. The long-term variation arises from either an increase or a decrease in mass transfer from the companion star, resulting in the high and low states of accretion we observe. During the high state, the magnitudes increase to ~ 14 magnitude, whereas during the low states the magnitudes drop to lower than 18 magnitude. A typical long-term light curve of EF Eri is shown in Figure 1 and highlights the extended low state that span almost 10 years and a high state that occurred in December 2022.

Figure 1. The long-term ASAS-SN light curve of EF Eri showing extended low state followed by a rapid increase to high state.



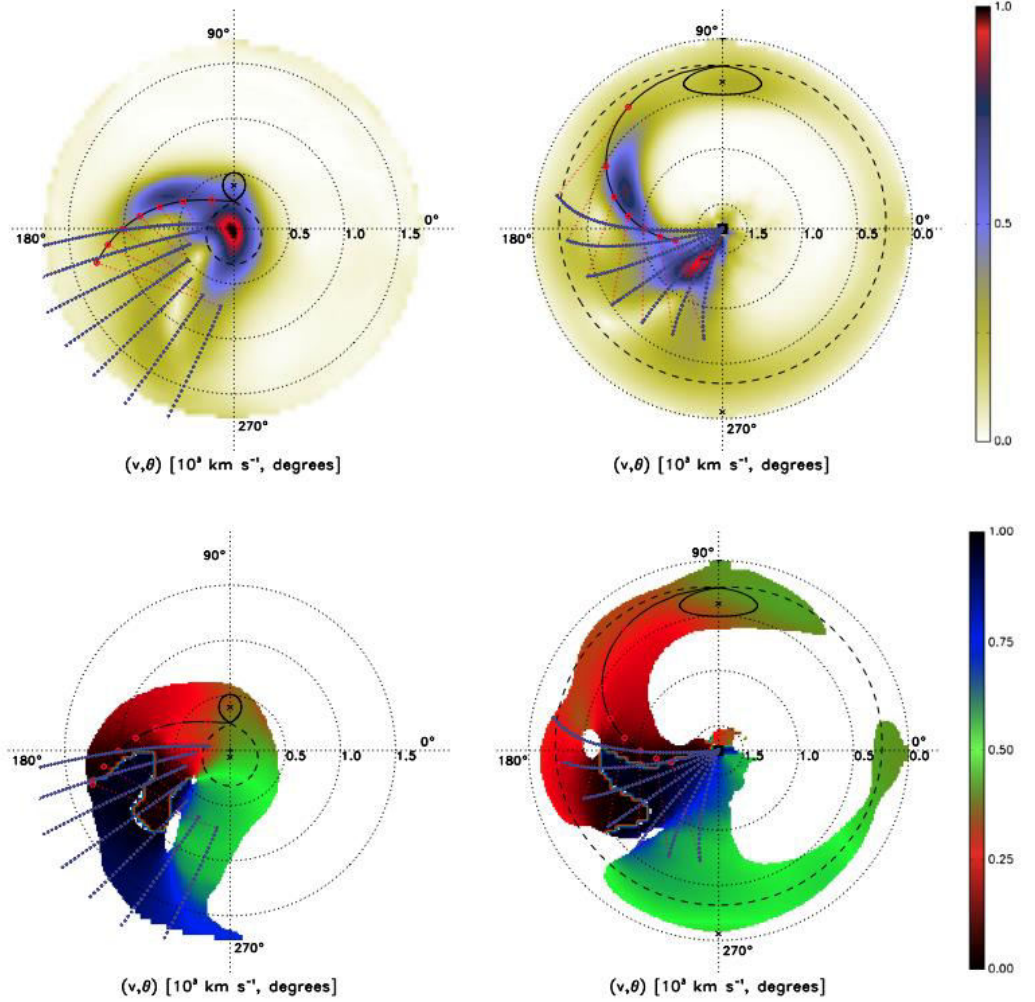
We observed EF Eri with SALT, under David Buckley's LSP on the transient Universe, on two consecutive nights at the peak of the high state as shown in Figure 1. We used the RSS in frame-transfer mode with an integration time of 30 seconds. The spectra covered 90% of the binary orbital period and were used to produce Doppler maps. Doppler tomography is an indirect imaging technique in which emission lines in the spectra are converted into velocity space to map out their origin.

Figure 2 shows the standard (left panels) and inside-out (right panels) Doppler maps of EF Eri based on the HeII $\lambda 4686$ emission line. These maps reveal emission from the ballistic and magnetically confined accretion streams as well as low-level emission from the companion star. Of notable interest is the evidence of the splitting of the magnetically confined accretion stream into two components in the bottom left quadrant. We interpret this as evidence of two



unambiguous magnetic accretion flows, consistent with the presence of multiple magnetic accretion regions on the surface of the white dwarf. While multiple magnetic accretion flows have been reported in literature for different systems (*e.g.*, HU Aqr), none of them showed such clear separation of the magnetic streams into several components.

Figure 2. Standard (left panels) and inside-out (right panels) Doppler maps of EF Eri based on the H ϵ λ 4686 emission line.



Cataclysmic variable stars (CVs) are binary star systems where two very different stars interact in a dramatic way. One star is a white dwarf — a small but incredibly dense stellar remnant — and the other is a star that still burns its fuel. Because they orbit extremely close together — few to tens of hours — the white dwarf pulls gas from its companion. This stolen gas heats up and produces sudden flashes or long-lasting brightening events, which make the system appear to “vary” in brightness. These eruptions can be so strong that they can be seen across our galaxy and make CVs interesting to astronomers as they offer a natural laboratory for studying explosions, strong magnetic fields, and how stars evolve over time.



SALT celebrates 20 years of science, community and collaboration

The South African Large Telescope (SALT) marked a remarkable milestone in November, celebrating 20 years of scientific discovery, partnership, and shared vision. The anniversary events, hosted in Sutherland, brought together members of the SALT and SAAO teams, representatives from partner institutions, members of the SALT and NRF Boards, visiting speakers, dignitaries, students, and the local community to reflect on two decades of progress and to look ahead to the future.

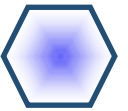
Since its inauguration in 2005, SALT has stood as the largest optical telescope in the Southern Hemisphere and a flagship of African astronomy. Over the years, it has enabled wide-ranging scientific research, supported the training of hundreds of students and early-career researchers, and strengthened South Africa's position in the global astronomical community. Many of these achievements were reflected in the talks and discussions held during the celebration, with speakers from across the SALT partnership highlighting both scientific outcomes and the collaborative spirit that has underpinned them.

The anniversary programme took place over the weekend of 8 – 9 November, with community activities starting on Saturday and official engagements continuing through the weekend. The formal celebration was held on Monday, the 10th. The programme saw strong participation from representatives across the SALT and NRF Boards, along with partner institutions. Their presence was a powerful reminder that SALT has always been – and continues to be – a truly international effort, built on shared investment, trust, and cooperation. Alongside the formal programme, many attendees commented on the sense of connection and pride in seeing the project's journey brought together in one space, from its early beginnings to future ambitions.

SALT's 20-year journey speaks to a long-term vision, steady perseverance, and a deep commitment to excellence. The observatory has grown into a beacon for African science, uniting research, education, and innovation in ways that extend far beyond astronomy alone. It stands as an example of how large-scale science initiatives can contribute to national development — inspiring young people, creating opportunities, and strengthening South Africa's links to the global research community. Perhaps most importantly, SALT's legacy is measured not only in discoveries made, but in the people it has impacted and the possibilities it continues to create.

The public celebration on 8 November highlighted SALT's strong and lasting connection with the Sutherland community. Activities included school engagements, prize-giving events, the donation of books to the community library, and the official opening of a new special children's room at the local police station to help comfort young people who have suffered abuse and/or trauma. The Sutherland community choir added warmth and local spirit to the day's proceedings, and evening stargazing on the plateau gave visitors a memorable opportunity to experience the night sky from one of the world's premier observing sites.

On 9 November, the Deputy Minister of the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, Honourable Dr Nomalungelo Gina, was welcomed to Sutherland alongside members of the SALT and NRF Boards. A special dinner was hosted in honour of the visiting delegates, followed by a guided tour of the telescope. SALT Operator Nomzamo Mokoena and SALT Astronomer Moses Mogotsi, who were on duty that week, walked the guests through the



workings of the telescope and the science being carried out, offering an insider's view of life at the sharp end of discovery — and confirming that SALT is even more impressive up close.

The official celebration took place on 10 November, with SAAO and SALT staff members braving the early-morning bus ride from Cape Town to Sutherland. On arrival, everyone was warmly welcomed by the organising committee, with much-needed refreshments and the happy buzz of reunions as past and present colleagues caught up — in some cases for the first time in years. The proceedings opened with remarks from the SALT Board Chair, Prof. Brian Chaboyer. The Executive Mayor of the Namakwa District Municipality, Councillor Mervin Cloete, then offered reflections and perspectives from the local community. This was followed by remarks from the NRF Board Chairperson, Prof. Mosa Moshabela, and from the SALT Director, Dr Encarni Romero Colmenero, who highlighted the NRF's and SALT's continued commitment to advancing science.

Prof. Saurabh Jha, from Rutgers University and a long-time SALT user, shared some of the scientific highlights drawn from SALT data, giving the SALT Astronomers the welcome opportunity to finally put a face to a very familiar name. He was followed by Dr Itumeleng Monangeng, who reflected on how SALT shaped his journey from high school to a career in astronomy — a story that resonated strongly with many in the audience. Contributions from Drs David Buckley and Takalani Nemaungani followed, recognising the vital role played by SALT's international partners, both past and present.

Mr Sivuyile Manxoyi, manager of the SALT Collateral Benefits Programme, highlighted the educational outreach efforts led by SAAO and SALT, from training science teachers in schools across South Africa to hosting science and astronomy workshops for learners, offering insight and inspiration to the next generation of scientists. The keynote address, delivered by the Deputy Minister, emphasised SALT's impact not only as a scientific flagship, but also as a meaningful presence within the local community. Closing remarks were delivered by the NRF's Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Dr Angus Paterson.

A tour of the facility, more refreshments, and — of course — birthday cake rounded off the day, because no birthday celebration is complete without one. As guests departed, there was a shared sense of how far SALT has come, from a bold idea to a world-class observatory, and of how many hands and hearts helped bring that vision to life.

Behind the scenes, the success of the anniversary events was made possible by months of planning and coordination by SALT and SAAO staff across multiple departments. From logistics and technical support to communications, outreach, hosting, and safety, a great deal of dedication and teamwork ensured that the celebration ran smoothly and reflected the importance of the occasion. The anniversary was as much a testament to this ongoing work as it was to the telescope itself.

As we celebrate this milestone, SALT continues to look forward — strengthening scientific infrastructure, expanding engagement with the public and schools, and supporting the next generation of scientists, engineers, and innovators. Twenty years on, SALT remains not only a world-class scientific facility, but a shared achievement belonging to everyone who has contributed to its journey.

Daniël Groenewald & Pran Govender.—



Public celebration 8 November

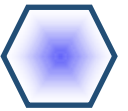


The public event was held at the Primary School in Sutherland, with activities for children and adults.

SALT's Business Manager Lizette Labuschagne gives out the prizes.



Chair of the SALT Board, Brian Chaboyer, and Takalani Nemaungani from DSTI relaxing between speeches.



Dinner 9 November



Official dinner at the hostel.

Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Nomalungelo Gina, visits SALT's control room. SALT Operator Nomzamo Mokoena explains how the telescope is being controlled.



The official delegation admires the huge telescope.



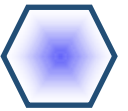
Official ceremony 10 November



The official event started at 13:00 with several speeches. A special tent was set up on the plateau to accommodate the invited guests.



The show included a presentation of local dances.



An excellent opportunity: Past and Present directors of SAAO. From left: Phil Charles (2004 - 2011 and former member of the SALT board for UKSC), Patricia Whitelock (Acting director and director 2011 - 2013), current director Ros Skelton (since 2024, SALT board member for the NRF and former SALT Astronomer), Petri Väisänen (2018 - 2024 and former SALT Astronomer), Ted Williams (2013 - 2018, former SALT board chair and former SALT board member for Rutgers University).



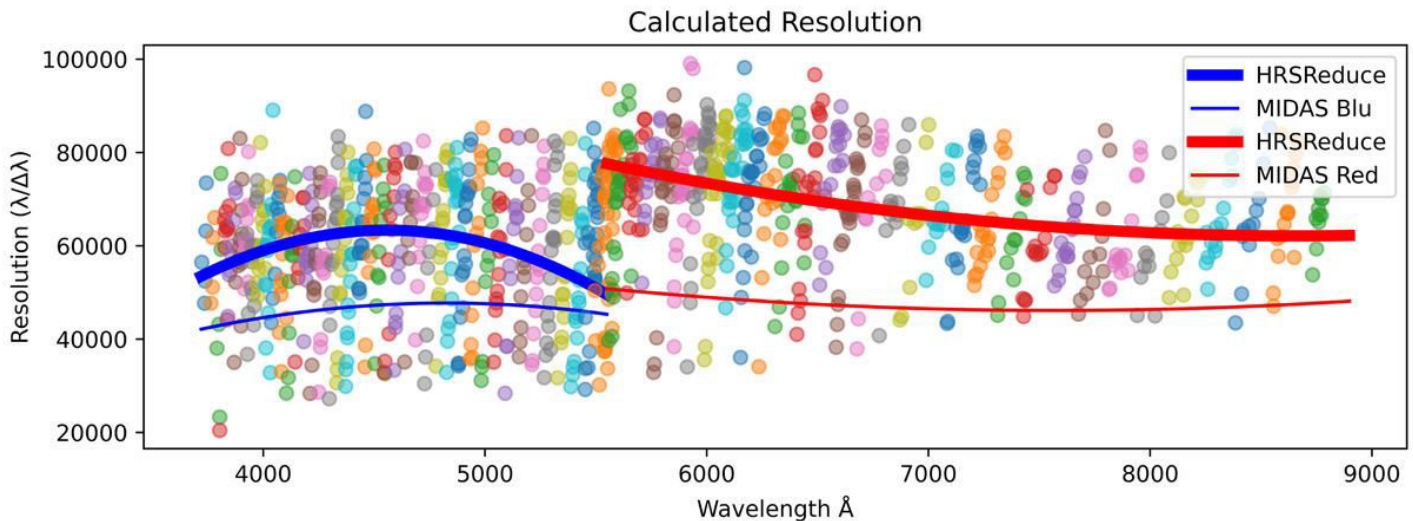
The best comes last: Brian Chaboyer and Encarni Romero Colmenero cut the birthday cake.



HRS-HR pipeline

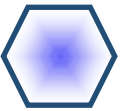
The initial version of HRSReduce, the new python reduction pipeline for HRS, has been completed. This version deals with data collected in the High Resolution (HR) mode. We are currently integrating the pipeline into the SALT data reduction ecosystem, which will be followed by further extensive testing before data products are made available to users. We are pleased to report that the major upgrade to the data products will be the spectral resolution obtained in the data. As demonstrated in the figure below, HRSReduce produces data that are close to, or beyond, the stated instrument resolution (as given in the Call for Proposals). This allows higher precision science to be conducted with data products the user will receive.

Determination of the HR Resolving power



A comparison of the resulting powers achieved by the current MIDAS pipeline (thin lines) and the new HRSReduce pipeline (thick lines). The faint circles show the measurements of individual ThAr emission lines, with each colour referencing a different order (plotted for HRSReduce only). The same lines and method have been used to measure both MIDAS and HRSReduce results.

Daniel Holdsworth.--



LFC installation complete at last!

During the run-up to the SALT 20th birthday celebration, we had an intensive campaign to complete the installation of the laser frequency comb (LFC) for SALT's high-resolution spectrograph (HRS). Four members of the team of laser physicists from Heriot-Watt University (HWU) in Edinburgh came out to SALT over a three week period, bearing various large crates of fragile equipment! First up were the regulars, Richard McCracken and Shan Cheng, who arrived on 19 October. Richard was only here for a week, and an extremely busy week it was, replacing a module that's proven problematic over time with a home-built system, and getting the various locking loops working reliably. He left on Sunday the 26th, then postdoc Jake Charley and PhD student William Newman (who already has years of experience working in the laser industry) arrived on Monday the 27th, hugely excited about their first ever trip to SALT. Shan left on 2 November, but not before they had tidied up, organised all of the equipment, and given us a walk-through of the GUI for running the comb. The three of them also enjoyed staying up extremely late various mornings to soak up the magnificent Karoo sky after the moon had set.

Jake and William were later joined by the high-stability mode's pipeline developer Daniel Holdsworth, who visited during their last week at the telescope to help out wherever possible. The two of them had brought along the spectral flattener, the last piece of the LFC puzzle, along with a couple of other amazing tools that they've been building and testing in their lab. One of these suffered potentially devastating damage during the trip across from Scotland, but thankfully they were able to recover the mangled hardware and get through much of the testing they had planned to do. The guys



Shan, Jake and William (from left).

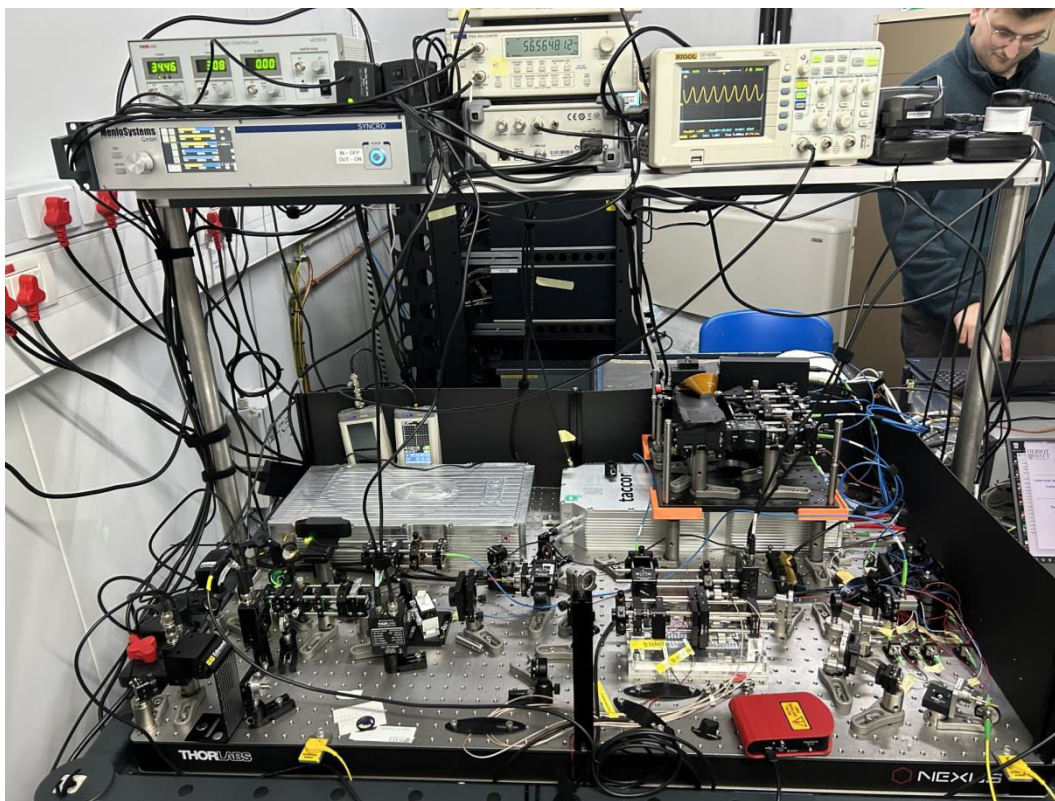
put in ridiculously long days/nights, and at times had to be physically persuaded out of the HRS room where the comb lives, or they would literally have worked around the clock.

The comb has evolved dramatically since Richard and Shan's last visit that ended in early December 2024. The main laser has even acquired a second storey, as there was no more space on the optical bench to accommodate the new flattener module! We were fortunate to have bad weather on the last night, which allowed us to get the LFC into a workable form that we can now iterate on to refine its performance. The timing of all this could not have been better, since the HWU guys finished up the morning of Saturday 8 November, the same day that the SALT festivities kicked off. On the Sunday and Monday we got to share the spectacularly beautiful LFC with members of the original SALT project team that built the telescope, past and present members of the SALT Board, the Deputy Minister of the DSTI, the chair of the NRF Board, as well as various colleagues from UCT, SARAO, SAAO and SALT.



We have yet another LFC-related run underway at the moment, with two other members of the HWU team working on a compact version of an LFC and testing it on the HRS. This is extremely exciting work that offers significant opportunities for ongoing development. Along the way we discovered a problematic component within the SALT comb that will need to be replaced & so members of the team now plan to return in March to install that. After that we should be able to get on with optimising & characterising the performance of the LFC, getting it ready for commissioning & on-sky testing.

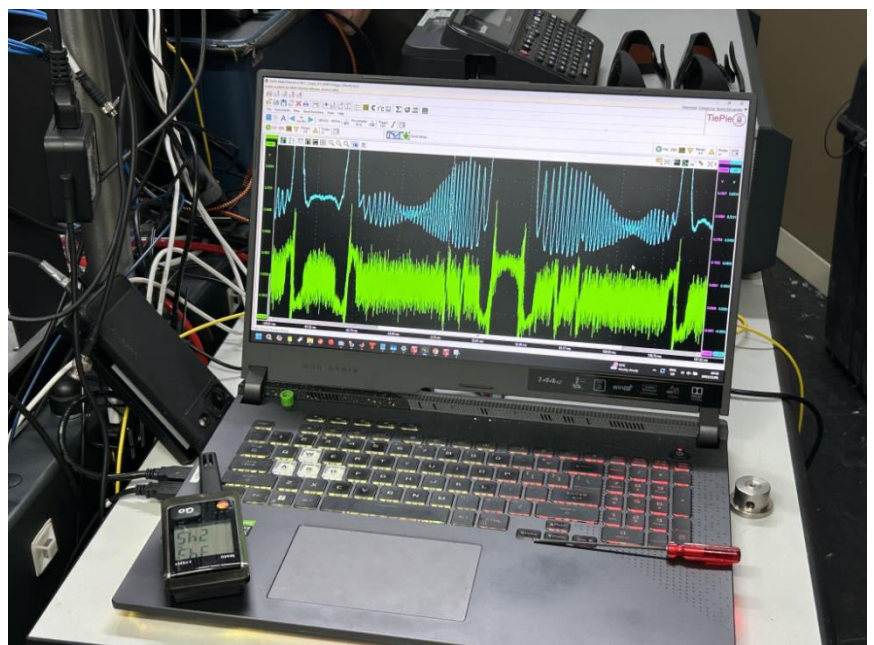
It remains a privilege to work with such amazing people on cutting-edge technology that supports the challenging field of extreme precision radial velocity science. Long may this wonderful collaboration continue!

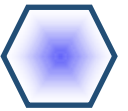


The near-complete LFC optical bench and associated electronics.

The screen shows various oscilloscope outputs for the different electronic locking signals during the alignment of the system.

Lisa Crause.--





SALT Science Data archive reminder

SALT's data archive can be accessed at <https://ssda.sao.ac.za/>. It allows you to query and download public and your own proprietary data. Also, if you are a user of Virtual Observatory tools such as Topcat or astroquery, we would love to hear what tools you'd like to use for querying SALT data. You can reach the software team at SALT's helpdesk address, salthelp@salt.ac.za.

PyAstroSALT 0.1.0 released

Version 0.1.0 of PyAstroSALT has been released. This Python library is a wrapper around SALT's Application Programming Interface (API). As an example, here is a script you could use for getting details about the accepted observations in a proposal:

```
from getpass import getpass
from pprint import pprint

from pyastrosalt.session import Session

def main():
    session = Session.get_instance()
    username = input("Web Manager username: ")
    password = getpass("Web Manager password: ")
    proposal = input("Proposal (such as 2025-2-SCI-042): ")
    session.login(username=username, password=password)
    response = session.get(f"/proposals/{proposal}")
    proposal = response.json()
    accepted_observations = [
        o for o in proposal["block_visits"] if o["status"] == "Accepted"
    ]
    pprint(accepted_observations)

if __name__ == "__main__":
    main()
```

You can find out more about SALT's API at <https://api.salt.ac.za/docs>.

PyAstroSALT also provides a method for submitting zip files containing a proposal or individual blocks. While zip files may not be the most intuitive way of submitting your proposal, an improvement is on the horizon. Work is underway to include SALT in the [AEONlib](#) library. This will allow users to create and submit proposals as simple Python objects.

PyAstroSALT is available on PyPI and can be installed in the usual way:

```
pip install pyastrosalt
```

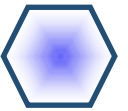


“Old” Web Manager retired

After long years of service the “old” Web Manager has finally been retired (apart from some bits which currently the PIPT still is using). This is a good opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to the Web Manager, in particular its original developer, Tim-Oliver Husser from the University of Göttingen.

Please let us know if you encounter any issues with the “new” Web Manager, or if you have any suggestions for improvement.

Christian Hettlage.—



SALT scholarships

The Stobie-SALT Scholarship initiative was launched in 2003 and continued until 2013 as part of the SALT Collateral Benefits Plan. Its goal was to train the next generation of astronomers by providing South African students the opportunity to pursue doctoral studies at SALT consortium institutions. The programme successfully trained ten students, most of whom now hold leadership positions in astronomy worldwide. Additionally, this initiative strengthened the connections between SALT partners and South African astronomers.

To further support the development of emerging researchers in South Africa, the National Research Foundation (NRF) has funded a programme that allows postgraduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and early-career researchers to spend time at SALT partner institutions. This programme aims to maintain and enhance collaborations within the SALT partnership, enabling these institutions to engage with exceptional young researchers. It also provides emerging researchers with opportunities for international exposure and assists them in building professional networks early in their careers.

In the latest call for proposals, researchers at SALT partner institutions are invited to submit potential projects to host South African researchers. The submitted projects will be advertised to the South African community, encouraging applicants to connect with potential hosts to discuss project details and collaborate on their applications. The deadline for submitting potential projects is 28 February 2026, for visits scheduled between June and December 2026.

For more information about the application process, please visit: <https://www.salt.ac.za/jobs/scholarships-and-visits/>. Any inquiries can be sent to: scholarshipsandvisits@salt.ac.za.

Itu Monageng.--



SALT receives Science Diplomacy Award

SALT has added another wonderful milestone to its long list of achievements, receiving a prestigious Science Diplomacy Award at the closing ceremony of the 2025 Science Forum South Africa (SFSa), held from 24 - 28 November at the CSIR International Convention Centre in Pretoria.

As the largest single optical telescope in the Southern Hemisphere — and one of the largest in the world — SALT was recognised in the category of International STI Partnership Achieving Excellence in Global Science. Affectionately known as Africa's Giant Eye on the Sky, SALT is a powerful symbol of what international collaboration can achieve. Today, SALT is supported by eight shareholder partners, including universities, science organisations, and funding agencies across Africa, India, Europe, and North America, and is based at Sutherland in the Northern Cape at the NRF-South African Astronomical Observatory.



This award comes hot on the heels of SALT's 20th anniversary celebrations on 10 November and is a fitting tribute to more than two decades of ground breaking science. Over the years, SALT has contributed to more than 600 peer-reviewed publications, with over 80 papers published in 2024 alone — a remarkable testament to its ongoing scientific impact.

One of SALT's most notable moments came in August 2017, when it captured one of the first optical spectra linked to a gravitational wave event. This historic observation marked the dawn of multi-messenger astronomy and continues to shape scientific priorities in South Africa and beyond.

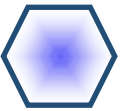
Beyond its scientific achievements, SALT has also made a lasting impact through education, skills development, and outreach. Through the SALT Collateral Benefits Programme, teacher training initiatives, student workshops, and exchange programmes, the telescope has helped inspire a new generation of scientists, engineers, and data specialists across the continent.

Receiving the award, Prof. Rosalind Skelton, SALT Board Member and Managing Director of NRF-SAAO, described SALT as a catalyst for South Africa's leadership in astronomy and a shining example of the power of international scientific partnership. The project's success also played a role in securing South Africa's position as host of the SKA-Mid telescope, further strengthening the country's standing in global big-science initiatives.

This recognition is not only a celebration of an extraordinary telescope, but of the many people, institutions, and nations who have worked together to turn a bold idea in the Karoo into a world-class scientific landmark.



Ros Skelton, Anja Schröder, Dumile Mlambo, Bongani Nkosi.—



SALT SCIENCE PAPERS

August 2025 – November 2025

Below is the list of SALT publications since our last newsletter (for our full list of publications, please visit <http://astronomers.salt.ac.za/data/publications/>). We encourage SALT users to inform us of any papers making use of SALT data, and to double check the link above after publication.

- Arcodia, R., Baldini, P., Merloni, A., et al. 08/2025: SRG/eROSITA No. 5: Discovery of Quasiperiodic Eruptions Every ~ 3.7 days from a Galaxy at $z > 0.1$, ApJ 989, 13 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025ApJ...989...13A>
- Kwok, L. A., Singh, M., Jha, S. W., et al. 08/2025: JWST and Ground-based Observations of the Type Iax Supernovae SN 2024pxl and SN 2024vjm: Evidence for Weak Deflagration Explosions, ApJL 989, L33 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025ApJ...989L...33K>
- Galbany, L., Gutiérrez, C. P., Piscarreta, L., et al. 08/2025: Rapid follow-up observations of infant supernovae with the Gran Telescopio Canarias, JCAP 2025, 053 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025JCAP...08..053G>
- Baldini, P., Rau, A., Arcodia, R., et al. 09/2025: A new Bowen fluorescence flare and extreme coronal line emitter discovered by SRG/eROSITA, A&A 701, A224 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025A&A...701A.224B>
- Aromal, P., Srianand, R., Gallagher, S. C., Vivek, M., & Petitjean, P. 09/2025: Transient LoBALs at High Velocities: A Case of Extreme Broad Absorption Line Variability in J115636.82+085628.9, ApJ 990, 146 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025ApJ...990..146A>
- Hu, L., Cabrera, T., Palmese, A., et al. 09/2025: Kilonova Constraints for the LIGO/Virgo/KAGRA Neutron Star Merger Candidate S250206dm: GW-MMADS Observations, ApJL 990, L46 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025ApJ...990L...46H>
- Subrayan, B. M., Sand, D. J., Bostroem, K. A., et al. 09/2025: Early Shock Cooling Observations and Progenitor Constraints of Type IIb Supernova SN 2024uwq, ApJL 990, L68 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025ApJ...990L...68S>
- Park, J., An, H., Kim, C., et al. 09/2025: Multiwavelength Study of HESS J0632+057: New Insights into Pulsar-Disk Interaction, ApJ 991, 28 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025ApJ...991...28P>
- Dileep, A., Joshi, S., Alexeeva, S., et al. 09/2025: Chemical abundances and Doppler imaging of the Ap Si/He-wk star HD 100357, MNRAS 542, 747 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025MNRAS.542..747D>
- Saha, T., Markowitz, A., Homan, D., et al. 10/2025: Multiwavelength study of extreme variability in LEDA 1154204: A changing-look event in a type 1.9 Seyfert, A&A 702, A28 -- <https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2025A&A...702A..28S>
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