

# William (Bill) Pickering - A century (24th of December)

On Friday it will be a hundred years since one of New Zealand's famous sons was born on 24 December 1910.

"Dr. Pickering was one of the titans of our nation's space program," said JPL Director Dr. Charles Elachi. "It was his leadership that took America into space and opened up the moon and planets to the world."

By now, those of us who are subscribed to the Royal Society's News and Alerts section will have received the following beautiful letter written by George Jones:

*I met Dr Sir William Pickering in 2002, when he came to Wellington to re-open the refurbished Gifford Observatory in Wellington College. I asked him about his school days at Wellington College, and he talked about being a pupil of my grand-uncle Charlie Gifford - Uncle Charlie to him, and exactly that to me. He told me that if a science or maths lecture was getting a bit boring, then a student question about astronomy would divert Uncle Charlie to his favourite subject, enlivening the lecture.*

*Bill later had an illustrious career in organising spaceflight as Director of Jet Propulsion Laboratories in California, starting with Explorer 1 in 1958, sent up within four months of the Russian Sputnik. He told me that deadlines were crucial, that there never could be any slippage of delivery, forced by the lineup of the planets for a space launch.*

*For the last two decades of his life till he died in 2004 at age 93 he had a second career running his company Lignetics that pioneered making pellet fuel from waste sawdust."*



*William H. Pickering, (center) director of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, presents a model of the Mariner spacecraft to President John F. Kennedy in 1961. NASA Administrator James Webb is standing directly behind the model.*

William Pickering [ONZ KBE](#) was born in [Wellington, New Zealand](#) and he attended [Havelock School](#), [Marlborough](#), and [Wellington College](#). After spending one year at [Canterbury University College](#) he completed his bachelor's degree at the [California Institute of Technology](#) and completed a [PhD](#) in [physics](#) in 1936. His specialty was in [electrical engineering](#) and he concentrated on what is now known as [telemetry](#). He is responsible for putting the first American satellite into orbit.

He headed Pasadena, California's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) for 22 years, retiring in 1976 when the Voyager Missions were about to launch in their exploration beyond our Solar System. Viking 1 was at the time on its way to land on Mars. He was a senior NASA luminary and pioneered the exploration of space.

*"More than any other individual, Bill Pickering was responsible for America's success in exploring the planets an endeavour that demanded vision, courage, dedication, expertise and the ability to inspire two generations of scientists and engineers".* - Thomas Everhart - President of Caltech University

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You could find more about Sir William Pickering by going to these links:

<http://www.beehive.govt.nz/node/19190>

<http://www.nzedge.com/heroes/pickering.html>

<http://www.rutherford.org.nz/biopickering.htm>

[http://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2004/mar/HQ\\_04094\\_pickering\\_prt.htm](http://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2004/mar/HQ_04094_pickering_prt.htm)

<http://www.transitofvenus.co.nz/astronomy/pickering.html>