AP PHOTO / PAUL WHITFIELD

The Skylark's final launch carried five experiments that required microgravity.

Lament for a Skylark

Last May, a Skylark sounding rocket leaped off a launch pad near Kiruna, Sweden, on its 441st launch, ending with a bang the 50-year run of Great Britain's most launched space vehicle. Sounding Rocket Services Ltd., the operators of the Skylark for the last seven years, have been trying to drum up interest in establishing a permanent Skylark exhibition. They've tried the British National Space Centre and the aerospace companies whose antecedents produced the Skylark but to no avail. Says Hugh Whitfield, managing director of SRS, "There is no other project that can hang [its] hat on a 50-year space program, but there is just no interest in a memorial—albeit all involved in British Space activities today, including the [British National Space Centre], owe their existence to the Skylark."

The Skylark grew out of an early 1950s requirement for an inexpensive rocket with which to carry out very-high-altitude research and, critically for Britain's Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile program, reentry research. The Royal Aeronautical Establishment began design work in 1955, with the first launch in 1957, the International Geophysical Year.

The first Skylark was an unguided single-stage rocket with a lone solid-rocket motor. The early models accelerated so gently that they required a 150-foot launch rail, but the design evolved into a more powerful multi-stager. The rocket was popular with young researchers in the 1960s, for within three years a doctorate student could design an experiment, launch it on a Skylark, and write up the results. "It was where people cut their teeth in aerospace," says design engineer John Turner, who began work on the program in the mid-1960s.

Although government funding ceased in 1977, the program continued commercially, with SRS taking over from Matra Marconi in the mid-1990s. Production of the motors ended in 1994, but a stockpile allowed SRS to make about a launch a year. With a success rate of 91.6 percent and only 37 failures, "Skylark is one of the most successful British rocket programs of all time," Whitfield says.

—Robin Hague