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Wednesday, May 21, 2003 | Updated: 03:16 IST

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British scientists seek missing WIMPs of universe

Jeremy Lovell (Reuters)
London, April 30

British scientists equipped with state-of-the-art detectors deep underground in northern England have begun a search for one of the most tantalising secrets of the universe -- known as Dark Matter.

"If we are successful in our quest then we are looking at a place in the history books," Neil Spooner of Sheffield University said on Tuesday. "This will be one of the great discoveries of our time."

Teams of scientists around the world are racing to be the first to discover the truth about Dark Matter, which cannot be seen because it does not emit light. They believe it makes up the vast majority of the universe.

Scientists say stars account for less than one per cent of the mass of the universe, with gas clouds and other objects accounting for close to another five percent.

No one is quite sure what makes up the missing remainder, which has been dubbed Dark Matter.

In a bid to identify the prime suspect known as Weakly Interacting Massive Particles or WIMPs, British scientists have installed highly sensitive detectors 1,100 metres down a salt mine at Boulby on the North Yorkshire moors.

They are buried deep underground in an area of low natural radioactivity where intervening rock should shield them from

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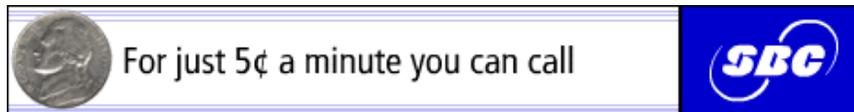
interference and filter out cosmic bombardment.

"This is an outstanding research facility equipped with some of the world's most sensitive Dark Matter detectors," Ian Halliday, chief executive of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council, said in a statement.

"It is a crucial addition to the UK's resources in a research field where British scientists are playing a world-leading role -- the race by physicists around the globe to discover these exotic, as yet undetected, Dark Matter particles," he added.

The theory is that although billions of sub-atomic particles called WIMPs are passing through the atmosphere and the earth every second they only rarely encounter the nucleus of an atom, making it judder slightly.

The detectors are designed to be able to detect these tiny collisions which are so rare that scientists calculate that in a one kg (2.2 pound) block of material less than one WIMP a day will strike the nucleus of an atom and make it move.



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