

The area ringed in red on the map above is Observatory Hill. The Durham School grounds are private. The area highlighted yellow on the map is used by the public, incl. the field between the Observatory and Observatory House. The paths marked by heavy black dots are Public Rights of Way 23 and 24. The paths marked by lighter grey dashes are permissive paths. The black dots indicate the viewpoints at the top of the ridge.



Aerial photo of Observatory Hill and Observatory 1940



Aerial photo 2001 showing roughly the same view

Up until the middle of the 20th century farming stretched right into the heart of Durham City. As the city expanded fields were gradually turned into housing developments. Since 2000 approximately 300+ additional houses and flats (in Chevallier Court, Westhouse Avenue, Sheraton Park, the Downs & Monument Court, and Mt Oswald) and 5 student accommodation blocks (Ustinov College, Ward Court, Duresme Court, South College and John Snow College) have been built within 1km of Observatory Hill. They house approximately 3,000+ additional people. The map shows how the built-up neighbourhood makes the hill look less like a section of a 'green finger' stretching from the countryside into the city, and more like a 'green lung' in a built-up area.

Yet Observatory Hill retains its magic. The Nobel Prize winning writer Jane Smiley wrote in a June 2014 article in the New York Times: *"For real Anglophilia, I thought, you should be driving from the Durham railway station, just before twilight, up North Road, Potters Bank and Elvet Hill Road, narrow, green, damp, mysterious, arriving at the top in time for one last look at the ancient world that still lives in the landscape there."* Durham University students from the cohort who graduated in 2022 wrote about their favourite memories, including: *"sunrises on Observatory Hill and building a snowman on Observatory Hill"*.

Many thanks to everyone who has helped with the research. We hope to produce a follow up briefing later in 2023.

Observatory Hill Research Group

Research Briefing (February 2023)

The aim of this briefing is to:

- reflect on the changes on and near Observatory Hill in Durham during 2022-2023.
- stimulate a discussion about how the local community could help the landowner and tenant farmer balance their three stated aims - access to green space, sustainable farming and strengthened natural habitats.
- sound out opinions about three additional possibilities – Observatory Hill as a wildflower meadow and public viewpoint, and the Observatory building as a science outreach centre.

Observatory Hill is one of the picturesque green slopes surrounding Durham's historic city centre. The name Observatory Hill comes from the scientific observatory built on the hilltop 175 years ago. However, we can imagine that the awe-inspiring views have been treasured since Durham Cathedral was built over 900 years ago.

Observatory Hill is owned by Durham Cathedral. It is divided into two areas – the private grounds of the Durham Cathedral School Foundation, and 4 fields tenanted by a farmer. The largest field is flanked on one side by a steep road, Potters Bank. Additionally, there is also a flat field at the top of the hill on which the Observatory and Observatory House sit. This field and the Observatory are owned by Durham University. Observatory House is in private hands. The fields are spanned by official, unofficial, and permissive footpaths (see map on the back page).

Between 2001 and 2022 Observatory Hill was left as fallow rough pasture. On 1 March 2022 the largest field was ploughed up, much to the dismay of the surrounding residents. They use it for recreation, dog-walking, access to the city and university and as a glorious viewpoint of the World Heritage Site (Durham Cathedral and Castle and the buildings in between). A week earlier access to the hill via the footpaths across the flat field next to the Observatory had been blocked off by a fence erected by Durham University's Estates and Buildings Team.

Local parish councillors intervened. A gap was created in the fence to allow walkers to continue to use the permissive footpath over the flat field to the Observatory and hillside. Access to the largest field through the copse of trees was not blocked. Residents and visitors continued to walk past the Observatory, through the copse and up, down and around the slopes, recreating the paths every time the field was ploughed, harrowed & sown.

Broadly speaking there seem to be two perspectives on Observatory Hill:

- The landowner and tenant are the rightful sole decision-makers and responsible stewards of the land. They are under no obligation to consult the surrounding community or tell them what the plans are for 2023. They have to make the site profitable. One way to do that is to grow crops. Another is to enhance habitats and biodiversity with the support of government grants and payments. Some residents and students cause problems by walking all over the site, disturbing plant life and birdlife, dropping litter, building fires and other anti-social behaviour. The landowner and tenant will not restrict access, but want people to stick to the public rights of way 23 & 24, rather than access the largest field.
- Observatory Hill has been used by the local community and visitors since time immemorial. As the city has expanded, and more housing and student accommodation erected, the use of the hill has increased. Photo sharing on Instagram brings in visitors enthralled by the views. When litter is discarded good citizens acting as 'neighbourhood guardians' pick it up. The clay soil and steep slopes lend themselves better to grazing, wildflowers, butterflies and public viewpoints than heavy ploughing. The largest field is more accessible for people with mobility issues than Public Right of Way 23 with its stiles. It makes sense to inform and involve the community, to create designated paths, and to acknowledge that people and biodiversity can co-exist.



WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD?

The briefing has been pulled together by an informal group of volunteer researchers who treasure Observatory Hill and Durham as 'a city of views'. They are trying to create an evidence base; gauge public opinion; encourage all the stakeholders to work together; and find constructive ways forward. To share your thoughts, memories and photos, and any corrections to this briefing, email the Nevilles Cross Community Association nxresidents@hotmail.com.

Observatory Hill - past present and future

Past	Present 2023	Future possibilities
<p>Historic maps and aerial photos on Durham County Council’s website indicate that the largest field has probably been mainly pasture since medieval times. A trough is marked on the 1860s maps. Aerial photos show that the largest field was cultivated in 1940 and 2001 but fallow from 2002-2022. During this period common grasses, clover, buttercups and orchids thrived.</p>  <p>The three smaller fields were grazed by cattle during the summer.</p> <p>More research is needed into the historical ownership of Observatory Hill. As part of the hill is known as Bellasis, some of it may have been owned by the Bellasis family. Records from the 16th century onwards show it was owned by the Bishop of Durham and Church Commissioners. In 1844 part of the site was taken over by what is now known as the Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation.</p> <p>More research is needed into how important Observatory Hill was for pilgrims. The 1847 painting below by John Wilson Carmichael suggests that it was a recognised viewpoint during the Victorian era.</p>  <p>Internet searches show that numerous panoramic paintings and photos have been taken over recent years by residents, students, and visitors, and shared on social media.</p>	<p>There are two public rights of way and a network of viewpoints and footpaths criss-crossing the slopes (and private playing fields and paths belonging to Durham School.) Observatory Hill is not on any of the new Northern Saints Trails pilgrimage routes, but is on the Seven Hills Trail.</p> <p>More research is needed into the flora and fauna on the slopes. The overgrown flowering and fruiting hedgerows between the fields appear to be havens for birdlife. Some of the hedging gaps have been filled with tree branches and bales covered in black plastic. A bale has been used to keep a metal gate at the top of the hill unopened.</p>  <p>In 2023 a wild bird seed mix called AB9 Winter Bird Food was planted in the largest field as part of the farmer’s Countryside Stewardship Agreement with Natural England. Patches of brassicas, linseed and quinoa emerged. Also a few red poppies, blue cornflowers, purple fiddleneck, pink fumitory and yellow shepherd’s purse. Also, thistles and pink rosebay willowherb. The three smaller fields were not used for grazing.</p> <p>It is unclear if any formal species monitoring is being carried out in 2023 as part of any management plan, and if there are any records from the past to use for comparison.</p>	<p>Land use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ cultivation of crops such as wheat in order to improve UK food self-sufficiency. ○ slopes revert to fallow grassland. ○ grassland management in order to develop a natural wildflower meadow and thicker hedges which would improve biodiversity. ○ division of slopes into part cultivated farmland/part grassy meadow for viewing Durham Cathedral. <p>Visitor destination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ individuals continue to promote views informally through photo-sharing. ○ development of a well-publicised skyline walk around the city (like the National Trust’s skyline walk around Bath). ○ information boards. ○ removal of unsightly bales covered in black plastic. <p>Community resource</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ recognition of value of the informal civic guardians who pick up litter, chat to visitors, solve problems. ○ setting up of Friends of Observatory Hill group (like the Friends of Flass Vale and Friends of Pelaw Wood). ○ biodiversity and ‘green infrastructure’ partnerships with eg: Durham Wildlife Trust, Durham University Biosciences, National Trust or Woodland Trust. Involve students/community as citizen scientists. 

The Observatory - past, present and future

Past	Present 2023	Future possibilities
<p>The Observatory is a Grade 2 listed building built by Anthony Salvin in 1839 with a dome used for astronomical observations and meteorological readings. Observations ceased in the 1930s but the weather station continued. The full story is in a new book ‘Durham Weather and Climate since 1841’.</p> <p>For years it was possible to see a 90ft Obelisk built by William Wharton in 1850 a mile away on the top of Western Hill. His aim was to help astronomers identify ‘true north’ from the Observatory.</p> <p>Observatory House was built in an Arts and Crafts style on a spacious plot in 1897. It became home to academics, such as the naturalist David Bellamy. The landowner, Durham University, sold the house and garden in 2011 to private owners. As part of the deal access to the single-track road up to the Observatory was restricted to university maintenance workers. Keep out signs erected on road.</p>	<p>The Observatory is used for recreation, music and gardening by the postgraduate students living nearby in Ustinov College. It is accessed on foot. After a period of benign neglect, essential repairs were carried out in 2022.</p>  <p>The weather station at the front of the building is run by the Met Office and Durham Geography Dept. It boasts the UK’s second longest unbroken series of meteorological records.</p> <p>The view of the abandoned obelisk has been blocked by trees. The flat field next to the Observatory is currently let out to East Durham College (Houghall campus) and used for growing grass and animal feed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ongoing sharing of the Observatory between Ustinov College and research scientists. ○ Conversion of part of the Observatory into the Arnold Wolfendale Science Outreach Centre (named after an eminent Durham University astronomer who was the 14th Astronomer Royal). ○ A dedicated centre would enable Durham University scientists to expand outreach work with schools and members of the public interested in star-gazing. ○ Explore options to improve public access routes to the Observatory. 

Policy on Observatory Hill

<p>Designated as a Local Green Space in Durham City Neighbourhood Plan (Policy G2.2) <i>“Its elevated site makes it very visible from the centre, and it contributes to the green and rural landscape setting for the World Heritage site and the city centre. It is well used by local people, and has been for countless years, for access for walking, dog walking, exercise, sitting, picnics, sledging in winter, photography, etc – all the types of purposes for which open green space is used. There are footpaths criss-crossing the area (though not all are PROW). Most of Observatory Hill is used for agricultural purposes, as rough grassland.”</i> The Plan Submitted Policy G2 Durham City Neighbourhood Plan</p>	<p>Included in Durham City Conservation Area (Character Area 3, Crossgate). <i>“Observatory Hill itself is enclosed by trees, walls, hedges, and fences. The open slopes of the hill form an expanse of rough pasture with extraordinary views and high landscape and scenic value, with the flatter lowest section forming playing fields for the Choristers School.”</i> (p.165 Durham City Conservation Area Appraisal Area 3 Crossgate)</p> <p>References in County Durham Plan to the need to <i>“protect and enhance the Outstanding Universal Value, the immediate and wider setting and important views across, out of, and into the site.”</i> (Policy 45, Durham Castle & Cathedral World Heritage Site).</p>	<p>Identified as a key viewpoint in Durham World Heritage Site Management Plan (Policy A4.9.3. II) <i>“The slopes of the inner ridges offer a range of views with landscape to the foreground ...They have been important for artists and photographers who depict the WHS...Key viewpoints are at Whinney Hill, Mountjoy, Observatory Hill and Crook Hall.”</i> (P.77 Durham WHS Management Plan 2017.pdf (durhamworldheritagesite.com))</p> <p>The importance of multifunctional urban green space in Co Durham is outlined here https://durhamlandscape.info/durham-landscape/green-infrastructure/</p> <p>The value of footpath networks is outlined here County Durham Local Access Forum - Durham County Council</p>
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