

Observatory Hill Research Group

Research Briefing No. 2 (Spring 2026)

The aim of this briefing is to:

- provide an update on developments on and near Observatory Hill since the first briefing in 2023. An online copy is on the Nevilles Cross Community Association website: <https://nevillescros.weebly.com>
- share research into public sentiment about the value of Observatory Hill.
- discuss how the local community could help the landowner/tenant farmer balance 4 aims – public access to green space, sustainable farming, maintaining biodiversity and safeguarding Durham's cultural heritage.

THE STORY SO FAR

Observatory Hill provides one of the glorious hillside viewpoints of the historic Durham Cathedral and castle and city centre. It is owned by Durham Cathedral, managed by a tenant farmer and enjoyed by a wide variety of people. In 2022 the largest field was ploughed up after 20 years as rough grassland. A wild bird seed mix was planted. It had limited success given the hill's clay soil and steep slopes. Local and student residents and visitors continued to use the hill and recreated the footpaths. The slopes have gradually reverted to grassland full of thistles and rosebay willowherb.

A small group of volunteer researchers have kept an eye on the hill and nearby surroundings. They have worked with the St Margaret's Allotments and Churchyard Nature & Ecology Group and talked to 500 people informally about the hill. Some shared stories about what draws them to it. Others shared their expertise, including botanists, birdwatchers, historians.

'Quiet conversations' show that:

- it is loved and used in multiple ways.
- there is considerable misunderstanding about who owns and manages Observatory Hill and nearby green spaces.
- many people are mystified as to why Observatory Hill is seen as an 'ordinary field to be ploughed' rather than a special place with unique panoramic views of the World Heritage Site (WHS).
- there are concerns about what will happen to the hill in 2027 when the 5-year Countryside Stewardship (AB9 Winter Bird Food) grant expires.
- there is widespread support for retaining the top of the hill as a grassy public space, with perhaps tree planting and a wildflower meadow lower down which would attract butterflies and other pollinators.
- many people will spring to the hill's defence if access is threatened. But they don't (yet) want to form a formal 'friends' group or apply to convert the main unregistered path into an official public right of way.

More broadly:

- the tensions around how best to use the land are part of a bigger picture of tension around public access to green spaces and nature across the UK
- new thinking is needed which re-imagines Durham's green setting and vistas for the 21st century and responds to climate change and changing patterns of housing, work, leisure and civic engagement.

THE WAY FORWARD

The landowner, Durham Cathedral, could seek common cause with the tenant farmer, community users and other organisations on a visionary funding and land management plan for 2027 onwards. Key elements of the plan could involve supporting financially viable farming which is also sustainable; enhancing the tourism potential of Durham as a 'city of views'; and valuing community users as 'nature guardians' and a source of local expertise.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Adults. Children. Individuals. Couples. Groups. Longstanding local residents.
Temporary student, researcher and teacher residents. Visitors. Tourists. Sightseers.
Drone enthusiasts. Dog walkers. Ramblers. Runners. Sweethearts. Thinkers.



To locate Observatory Hill:

The What3Words reference for the centre is ///plant.evenly.cafe. The 6-figure grid reference is NZ268414.

The map is provided by OpenStreetMap® and its © OpenStreetMap contributors. The data is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 license (CC BY-SA 2.0). For details see the OpenStreetMap copyright page www.openstreetmap.org/copyright. The map has been annotated with the names of areas, the numbers of Public Rights of Way (PROW), and the location of a permissive footpath and an unregistered footpath.

HOW PEOPLE USE & ENJOY OBSERVATORY HILL

- For walking up, down, around or across on the way to work or the city centre or with a dog
- As part of the Seven Hills trail around Durham
- For running, sledging (in the winter), ball games, yoga and stretching
- Sitting down for a rest, a picnic or a cuddle
- Fireworks, litter picking, metal detecting
- Birding, flower-spotting and plant identification, wildlife watching
- Hydrology – identifying natural springs and studying where the water flows
- Sketching, painting, wood whittling
- Stargazing (full moons, aurora displays, eclipses) and launching a small space balloon as part of astronomy learning
- Imagining what it was like in the past and what it could be like in the future

“Observatory Hill is a Durham classic. Whether it’s sunrise, sunset, or a post-library trip, this spot has killer views and an easy-going vibe for a casual date. Pro-tip: after your college ball, head up here for an unforgettable end to the night. And don’t worry if you missed out your first year; the time will come to snap that perfect hilltop photo!”
(from *The Tab* student news)

THE TAB

- Standing still and experiencing a restorative moment of grace
- A place of remembrance, despair, joy, solace
- Admire the panoramic views of Durham Cathedral and the World Heritage Site
- Listening to the sounds - children at play in nearby schools, church bells, traffic, birds, voices
- Taking photos and films for pleasure and work – seen on numerous online maps, news sites, social media and official documents
- Sharing photos on apps with global reach
- A vibrant shared space where friends, neighbours and acquaintances meet by chance, or for a celebration, or bring visitors to admire the vista

UPDATES

Since the 2023 research briefing

Named on the map: In 2025 the name 'Observatory Hill' was finally added to the Ordnance Survey map of Durham. Field surveyors undertook research, judged that the name is widely used for the fields below the Observatory and authorised the change. Observatory Hill has featured on Google Maps for several years (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/BJT9NH1c4zmm6EkJ8>). It also features on Mapcarta (<https://mapcarta.com/N853092826>).

A new gate: In 2025 a new wooden gate was installed on PROW (Public Right Of Way) 23 next to the Observatory's back garden wall. It was commissioned by Durham parish and county councillors and the PROW Team. It replaces the broken V-shaped stile that was picturesque but inaccessible for many people. The PROW team also organised structural repairs to the flooded section of PROW 23.



New gate on Public Right of Way No.23



Tumbledown metal gate and fencing at copse

Future repairs: Hopefully the nearby rickety fencing will be repaired. For instance, during autumn 2025 the metal gate near the copse at the top of Observatory Hill fell flat onto the black plastic bags of silage disintegrating beneath it. The adjoining wooden fencing poles were also overturned and the tumbledown barbed wire fencing cut.

Vegetation: The largest field reverted to rough grassland in 2025 after the remnants of the winter bird food planted in 2022 were mown down in 2024. Swathes of creeping buttercups, thistles and pink rosebay willowherb emerged on the disturbed soil and diminished species richness. However the untended hedges appear to nurture biodiversity. The other fields on the hill are predominantly grassy. No cattle have grazed on them for the past 5+ years.

Birdlife and wildlife: Nature watchers have spotted a range of small mammals and birdlife. Common bird sightings include pigeons, crows, jackdaws, blackbirds, magpies, thrushes, tits, finches, black caps, redwings and nuthatches. Occasionally exotic parakeets are seen perched on the tops of trees and great spotted woodpeckers heard drumming. Owls are regularly heard at night and kestrels seen circling. It is difficult to know if the wild bird seed mix increased the numbers of birds on the hill. There do not appear to be any formal monitoring records from before or after 2022.

Climate change: More could be done to progress resilience to climate change through nurturing Observatory Hill as a species rich grassland and woodland which would capture carbon and enhance biodiversity.

The Observatory: It is still used as a recreation/music space by Ustinov College students. Essential maintenance is periodically carried out. Trees in the front garden have been cut back to improve the weather station's exposure to the prevailing weather conditions. Ustinov students and local residents have created an allotment in front of Observatory Cottage, with fruit trees provided by City of Durham Parish Council. Additional hedging has been planted in the hedges around the fields surrounding the Observatory. A gap has been retained in the fencing to allow people to divert from PROW 23 around to the front of the Observatory, through the nearby copse and onto Observatory Hill.

Redevelopment on hold: Funding has yet to be found to convert the listed Observatory building into a science outreach learning centre. Ideally it would also contain a display about the Observatory's tremendous contribution to the development of science in the 19th century. The one historical reference in active use is the name Chevallier Court for the new housing on Potters Bank. It is named after Temple Chevallier who helped found the Observatory in 1840. He and his fellow astronomers used the slit in the Observatory's green domed roof to line up their telescope with the Obelisk at the top of Western Hill and establish a fixed point from which to examine the stars.



The Observatory - with weather station in front



Promo image from 'Virginia Woolf's Night and Day' film, (Source: West End Films)

Upcoming film 'Night and Day': A night-time scene was filmed outside the Observatory in 2024. The 'un-romantic comedy' is based on a book by Virginia Woolf about a young woman balancing love and a career in astronomy. It is set in the early twentieth century against a backdrop of advances in science and technology and the suffragette movement. It is due for release in 2026.

Benign neglect: The sign erected to explain how Durham University and the Meteorological Office jointly manage the weather station fell over and eventually disappeared. The wooden covers over two disused external astronomical instruments near the Observatory have disintegrated. Both are partially visible through curtains of brambles and a ramshackle metal fence.

Incomplete nameplate: The original nameplate on the pillar at the Potters Bank entrance to the single-track road leading up to the Observatory has been replaced with a new nameplate 'Observatory House'. The original metal nameplate featured a purple and black Durham University logo and the names 'The Observatory, Observatory House and Observatory Cottage'.

Access road: The single-track road to the Observatory runs past Observatory House and garden, which were sold off to private owners in 2011. There are 'private land' signs at both ends which local walkers abide by. However, Land Registry documents indicate that Durham University has retained ownership of the road, as well as the surrounding fields. Observatory visitors and maintenance staff are legally entitled to drive up to the Observatory when necessary.

SNAPSHOTS OF HISTORY

OBSERVATORY HILL

Sledging: Ask people for memories of Observatory Hill and sledging is often the first one that comes to mind. Thanks to Royston Thomas for the photos, and Dorothy Hamilton and Martin Roberts, and the late Margaret McCollum and George Hetherington, for their insights and memories.



A pilgrimage route: Observatory Hill may not be one of the 4 pilgrimage routes into Durham currently promoted through the Northern Saints Trails scheme. But there are plenty of clues that it could have been used by medieval pilgrims visiting the relics of St Cuthbert. For instance, the sloping field adjacent to Observatory Hill/above Durham School is called Bellasis Field. Bellasis means 'beautiful seat', which implies that the field could have been known as somewhere to sit and admire the view towards the end of a long journey. Bellasis was also the name of the aristocratic family who owned the hillside before ownership was transferred to Durham Cathedral. The Bellasis family also owned other land and property in the region, including Bellasis Hall in Billingham.

Winter pastures: During the coldest months sheep were herded from the hilly upland slopes in the Durham Dales down to the lower grassier slopes for winter grazing, including, probably, the hillsides around the cathedral.

Clay and pottery: Some historians say that medieval potters took their clay from the hill, hence the names Clay Lane and Potters Bank. An alternative view is that Potters Bank was a place for burials because Potters Fields have long been associated with graveyards. Bow/Elvet Hill Road Cemetery is near the bottom of Observatory Hill.

Small treasures: Finds by metal detectorists include 18th and 19th century firearms ammunition such as grapeshot and musket balls; hammered coins; jewellery; and buttons. These finds indicate that the hill was probably used at different times for military training, shooting practice, trading and promenading.

Formal gardens: Joseph Spence, a renowned academic, priest and garden designer, was appointed as a canon of Durham Cathedral in 1754. He designed a range of gardens for fellow canons and friends and larger landscapes for Raby Castle and Auckland Castle. Detailed plans for a formal garden on the Bellasis slopes are in his collection, but none of the planting (if it went ahead) remains.

Coal mine: A blocked entrance to an old coal mine can be spotted above Prebends Bridge. Anecdotally the tunnel comes to a halt underneath Durham School playing fields. This may be the place where a sinkhole opened up during the 1940s. The schoolboys were given shovels and told to fill it in.

Highland Cattle: A BBC Archive film from 1981 shows boys from Durham School tending to a herd of Highland cows donated by a former pupil. The 11-minute film is entitled 'The School with Highland Cows on the Curriculum'. Two well-known characters are featured – the TV reporter Luke Casey and the history teacher Norman McCloud. The film was originally broadcast on 17 March 1981 on BBC1's Nationwide programme and is now available on YouTube.

POLICY UPDATES

Since the 2023 research briefing

Introduction: Policy documents can look wordy and boring. But they contain the principles and plans that shape how places develop and how they can be protected. Sometimes decision-making about what to put in the documents is fraught. Ideally policy should be a living process which adapts to change and nurtures the social contract between powerful landowners, civic organisations and the community.

Updating key policies: Three of the four policies featured in the 2023 Research Briefing which affect Observatory Hill are currently under review. One is the Durham City Conservation Area (the new management plan will specify actions to be undertaken). Another is the County Durham Plan to guide future development and heritage protection (a new version is being produced). A third is the updated Durham WHS Management Plan monitored by UNESCO. All of these documents are expected to emphasize the scenic value of Durham Cathedral's setting.

Other policies with an impact on Observatory Hill: The city's Light and Darkness Strategy balances the illumination of iconic sites like Durham Cathedral with the retention of darkness in the surrounding natural landscapes. The new Biodiversity Net Gain rules might oblige developers to fund biodiversity enhancement on Observatory Hill in exchange for permitting nature depletion on one of their building sites. (These rules are as yet largely untested.) English Heritage is recreating meadows on grassland around 100 historic sites, including Barnard Castle.

Future policies:

View management: Durham City Neighbourhood Plan's companion document 'Looking Forwards' (Initiative 5) advocated for the identification, protection, restoration and improvement of views of the WHS. However, there are still no interlinked viewpoint, skyline and tree management policies for Durham. This contrasts with London where there is a London View Management Framework, and Bath where there is a holistic 'Bathscape' project celebrating Bath as a landscape city.

Drainage: There does not appear to be a drainage management policy. The increased winter rainfall projected through climate change may make this a serious problem. It is possible that sub-surface field drains were put into Observatory Hill 100+ years ago to manage the water from the natural springs. These occur in areas of sand, gravel and clay created by glaciers in the past. Sandy layers soak up water like a sponge. In contrast clay is impermeable. Springs occur where the two layers meet. The pool of water next to PROW 23 could be such a spring.

Visitor research: There does not appear to be any data collected on how many of the 4 million annual visitors to Durham City make their way up and down the hillsides. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that people arriving by train, car, bus and bike from the north and the south are awed by the views of Durham Cathedral, like the pilgrims of old.

Emerald Network: Durham City Neighbourhood Plan (Policy G3) advocated for a green infrastructure plan to bring together all the city's green assets into a circular emerald network. However current projects seem to be wholly dependent on grants based on funders' piecemeal priorities rather than the needs of the city's living landscape encircling the cathedral. Recent funding awards have gone to 'linear' initiatives such as The Green Corridor and the River Wear. The one exception is the Seven Hills circular trail around Durham (which was developed by volunteers).

Vision for the future

The good citizens of Durham appreciate that Durham Cathedral keeps Observatory Hill accessible to the public. They appreciate that Durham University keeps the grassy areas around the Observatory accessible to the public. They appreciate the ways in which Durham County Council and the City of Durham Parish Council recognise Observatory Hill's panoramic landscape value. However, they also feel that more could be done. As Fred Robinson wrote in his 'Churches and Tainted Money: Principles and Pragmatism' report, churches have buildings and land which can be used more imaginatively and generously. Observatory Hill is worthy of such consideration.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

to help the future

Simply enjoy Observatory Hill.

Talk to people about it. Share images and stories. Make art about the space.

Below is a recent artwork and a recent photo. Artists have been painting the views from Observatory Hill for 200 years.



Durham Cathedral by Kamila Davletshina, PhD researcher



Photo by Jeffrey Zhang (@jeffreyzhang_920) on Unsplash

Write to Durham Cathedral

Thank them for keeping Observatory Hill accessible. Tell them why you love it. Point out that photographs of it go round the world. Ask them to seek common cause with you as a member of the community and to work with the tenant farmer and other organisations on a visionary funding plan. Point out that the latest version of the Countryside Stewardship agreement pays farmers to protect, enhance or restore the environment and mitigate the effects of climate change while providing permissive access to the public: this augurs well for Observatory Hill. Not making the most of community involvement would be a missed opportunity.

Write to Durham University

Thank them for keeping the grassy areas around the Observatory accessible. Express support for converting the Observatory into an educational and community venue. Ask how student and staff talent could help enhance and protect Observatory Hill.

Write to your local Durham County Councillors

Thank them for maintaining the PROWs. Ask them to support initiatives enhancing Observatory Hill and all the green spaces encircling Durham Cathedral.

Write to the City of Durham Parish Council

Thank them for taking an active interest in the Seven Hills Trail and Durham's volunteer-led green groups. Ask them to take the lead in brokering conversations between the community, landowners, tenant farmer and other stakeholders such as Natural England regarding ways forward when the current Countryside Stewardship funding for Observatory Hill comes to an end in 2027.

Write to Visit County Durham

Thank them for promoting the city as a destination. Query why Observatory Hill and other hillside viewpoints are not featured in their tourism/walks guides to Durham.

Write to the Observatory Hill Research Group

Email obshilldurham@gmail.com and Nevilles Cross Community Association on nxresidents@hotmail.com. Share your thoughts, historical knowledge and old maps and photos. Thanks to everyone for their support and passion.