

The Downside Observatory



'Downside would become a centre of astronomical life' were the words written by Abbot Snow in his Downside Review article of 1866 to describe the purchase of a telescope by the community.

Not just any old telescope, but at the time, one of the largest in the world. The monks had ideas of turning Downside into a scientific hub *'with visions of scientific triumphs'*. A place where students and monks could star gaze and examine celestial bodies was the plan. With the purchase of the telescope the first phase was completed. Next, a great observatory was designed and executed to house the great instrument.

In the archives here at Downside we have just one image of the observatory, another of part of the building and two plans by Charles Hansom. Unfortunately the images are of the shell of the building which was destroyed by fire in 1867. The observatory is a lesser known aspect of the history of Downside, but one which has sparked much interest.

In the early 1860's work began on the building, *'The prosaic labourer with pick and shovel next came on the scene to work at the foundations'* and soon *'Masons succeeded labourers, and the building began to grow.'* The plan for the observatory was for a two floored building; the observatory on the top floor and a museum on the bottom. Abbot Snow describes the building, *'The appearance of the building was not artistic; it was a temple of science not of art.'* Yet there is something architecturally pleasing about the observatory.

Once the telescope was in place, issues began to arise. It seems that very little could be seen with the glass. Mr Slater, the man who had arranged the sale to the monks, returned from Bath *'at intervals gradually lengthening, and during these visits adjusted the instrument for nearer objects, viz., the sun, moon, and planets, but the fixed stars still wanted definition.'* In the end the telescope became a large headache, with the monks blaming Mr Slater, the latter blaming the weather and meanwhile the telescope remained all but useless.

In the end, *'the catastrophe settled for ever the question of star definition.'* On 20th January 1867, whilst the community was at Mass in the Old Chapel, a great fire broke out in the observatory. Arriving there it was already obvious the building was lost. *'By the end of high mass, all that was consumable had perished, and the fire smouldered on among the debris till late in the afternoon'*.

Thus the end of the observatory came about. Yet the building still had its uses. Though the telescope had been destroyed, the stone building remained. The stone of the observatory was used to build parts of the school and the window frames are still in place there. The transit room, as seen in the image below, was the Clerk of Works office for the building of the abbey church.



Much of what we know comes from Abbot Snow's Downside Review article, and we are also indebted to Abbot Charles Fitzgerald-Lombard for his research into the observatory.