

Student observations of Comet Ison herald a new era at West Hills Observatory

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University of Birmingham undergraduates have made history by capturing an early glimpse of the eagerly anticipated Comet Ison during the last ever observation at the University's West Hills Observatory before a major upgrade project begins.

The observatory houses telescopes that have been used by generations of students to observe the night sky, as part of Birmingham's renowned Physics and Astrophysics degree programme.

Second year students Callum Bellhouse, Paul Carter, and Thomas Syder, glimpsed Comet Ison, miraculously, on the last night of observing before the current telescopes were decommissioned. *'With these observations we bid a fond farewell to today's telescopes, and look forward to an exciting new era of student discoveries with our modernized observatory in the future'*, enthused Dr Graham Smith, Director of the Observatory, from the University of Birmingham School of Physics and Astronomy.

Recently dubbed the "Comet of the Century" this remote ball of ice and dust is plunging towards the Sun from the outer Solar System, and is predicted to be as bright as the full moon when it passes a mere million kilometers from the Sun in late 2013. Today Comet Ison is about 5000 times too faint to see with the human eye.

Dr Smith commented: *'Comet Ison is important for science because it is what we call a 'sun-grazing comet'. It therefore gives us a special opportunity to study the composition of a left over fragment of the early Solar System.'*

After a journey lasting millions of years Comet Ison is making its first and possibly only ever visit to us. It is being tracked by world renowned astronomers as well as budding enthusiasts and students, including those at the University. It is anticipated that as it moves closer to the earth the heat from the sun will warm the comet changing its appearance with gas and dust forming a distinctive tail. By late November it is expected to be visible to the naked eye and may stay as a visible object in our night sky for many months.

In reference to what the new telescope will bring to the observatory Dr Smith said: *'Our new telescope will be bigger and more powerful than our current facilities, and will open up many exciting new projects for our students and our researchers. We're also keen for members of the West Midlands community to get involved in using the telescope, helping to develop astronomy more widely in Birmingham.'*

He continued: *'Observing Comet Ison on the night that we temporarily close our observatory felt very apt. Just like our new telescope, Ison will arrive in the inner Solar System in late 2013. We really gave our current facilities a great send off, and look forward to this autumn's new arrivals with eager anticipation. These students will be among the first to use our new telescope and I'm really looking forward to seeing them and their colleagues develop cutting edge research skills and learning about the cosmos in the years to come.'*

Ends
Notes to editors

- Dr Graham P. Smith is a Reader of Cosmology, Royal Society University Research Fellow and the Director of the University of Birmingham Observatory at the University of Birmingham's School of Physics and Astronomy.
- The University of Birmingham [Astrophysics and Space Research Group \(http://www.sr.bham.ac.uk/index.php\)](http://www.sr.bham.ac.uk/index.php) forms part of the [School of Physics and Astronomy \(/schools/physics/index.aspx\)](http://www.sr.bham.ac.uk/index.php)

1. Watch a [short movie of the comet \(/Audio/news/cometison-wasthills-v2.mpg\)](#)

Description: Comet Ison is currently as far from Earth as the planet Jupiter, only much fainter. This movie shows Ison moving in front of the distant stars, with a small tail already visible to keen eyes. In real time the movie lasts one and a half hours. In that time the comet moved across the sky by little more than one hundredth of the diameter of the full moon.

2. A photograph of the dismantling is available.

Description: The day that the University of Birmingham's West Hills Observatory closed temporarily saw a team of academics and engineers dismantling the Observatory's thirty year-old telescope. Here we see (clockwise from back right) Drs Graham Smith, Ken Elliott, and Mark Colclough, together with Steve Brookes.

3. In Birmingham there is a long and proud tradition of astronomy research, education, and public engagement. West Hills Observatory was opened in 1984 where to the present day Birmingham undergraduates acquire real world technical skills as they design, execute, and analyse their observations of the universe. The University is embarking on the development of the Observatory into a flagship scientific facility for the West Midlands as the centerpiece of a new partnership between academic staff (professional astronomers), students, local schools, and the public. The 30-year-old telescope will be replaced with a new telescope of comparable size, plus computer control system and a new high-tech instrumentation.

To help the University get the new telescope ready for the end of 2013 the public can pledge support for the West Hills Observatory refurbishment by visiting:

<https://bhamalumni.org/NetCommunity/SSLPage.aspx?pid=210&frcrid=1> (<https://bhamalumni.org/NetCommunity/SSLPage.aspx?pid=210&frcrid=1>)

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