

Stargazer rescued by Queen's?

Astronomer hopes
new castle owner
will save observatory

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IF IT'S in the stars, Norman Walker has probably spotted it.

If it's in the cards, he hopes Queen's University's newly acquired former Royal Greenwich Observatory in Sussex, England will be returned to its former glory as a premier place for astronomical observation.

Mr. Walker, you see, spent 31 years of his life scanning the galaxies from Herstmonceux Estate.

As a foremost expert on black holes, he spent 12 of those years peering into the famous Sigma X-1 and was the first person to discover its light variations. That research led to the deepest, darkest regions of quantum mechanics and other such challenging topics that this author of 60 research papers and an astronomy textbook is best equipped to explain.

Suffice to say, Norman Walker is a patient man.

Even when the royal observatory pulled up stakes in 1980 and moved its operations to the Canary Islands, he never gave up hope of returning Herstmonceux to some semblance of its former scientific glory.

So when Mr. Walker, 53, heard this week that Queen's University was going to become the new landlord of the estate, thanks to a generous donation from an alumnus, the star to which he hitched his optimism began to shine a little brighter.

While the university has inherited an important piece of British history, it has also inherited Mr. Walker's hopes and aspirations and energies.

"I tried very hard to keep the place going as a working observatory," said Mr. Walker from his home just down the road from the rambling 230-acre estate with its 19th-century castle, office building and six domed observatories.

It's those latter structures, the Equatorial Group of Telescope Buildings, that are his main concern. He said they've been shut down for three years and unattended for 10 years, and are beginning to deteriorate.

"Saveable is the best I can put it," he said. "Most of the domes don't open."

So why even bother?

"I have a dream," he said.

That dream goes back to 1956 when as a 17-year-old would-be astronomer he joined the Royal Greenwich Observatory team. At that time the observatories, thanks to the donations of some enlightened British industrialists, were just being constructed.

His first job was in the time department — that is helping maintain the world-famous Greenwich Mean Time by comparing the British time clock with signals from around the world.

Those were exciting times under the direction of the Astronomer Royal, Sir Richard Woolley. Greenwich became a world-class facility and aspiring astronomers learned their skills from the master star watchers, as did Mr.

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