

Durham: A Good Place to Be From and Belong

**A speech delivered by Dr Fiona Hill on her installation as 13th Chancellor of
Durham University
Durham Cathedral, Thursday 29 June 2023**

Welcome to everybody who is attending this historic event today. I am delighted to be among so many University staff, students, alumni and supporters, as well as my own family and friends.

Thank you, all, for your support. It is very much appreciated as I take up the role of Durham University Chancellor, a role I am truly honoured to be appointed to.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep admiration and respect for my predecessor, Sir Thomas Allen, who gave 10 years of service to your University community, and who is here today. I have a considerable legacy to fulfil.

This Cathedral is indomitable and iconic. It is the enduring symbol of a unique region - County Durham and the North East of England - that is very special for me personally. For my family and many of my friends who are here today, Durham is our home.

When I went to school here in County Durham, geography and history lessons began with facts about our region. People in North East England were fiercely aware of who they were and where they were from. On vacations outside the region, my parents would rattle off endless lists of the North East's history and achievements to anyone they managed to corner into asking where they were from. They had great pride in being from the region, and with good reason.

Durham marks the southern extent of the ancient Kingdom of Northumbria, England's storied borderland with Scotland. This Cathedral briefly served as a prison for Scottish prisoners during one of the many periods of brutal conflict between England and Scotland. Durham University's Department of Archaeology has carried out extensive and fascinating research into these Scottish Soldiers. (Reference: [Scottish Soldiers - Durham University](#))

The North East has also been England's militarised frontier zone for far longer, since Roman times. Roman legions built forts here, like Vinovium in my hometown of Bishop Auckland, on a hill above the River Wear. Durham University played a critical role in excavating this and many similar remarkable Roman sites.

After the Romans, the North East was a centre of learning in the so-called dark ages, centred around the early Christian church. It had an influence and network of ecclesiastical connections that extended as far as Rome. The region produced the first illuminated manuscripts and translations of the gospels into English. The Venerable Bede, who marked and recorded the transition from the 7th to the 8th centuries, is buried in this Cathedral. After the Norman conquest, came the Bishop of Durham—for centuries a powerful warrior Prince who ruled the North, not just a clergyman. William van Mildert, the last of the Prince-Bishops, created University College and Durham University through his donation of Durham Castle and the Palace Green. Today's students are part of a 15 century-long tradition and legacy of learning in North East England.

In the 19th Century, as the University expanded, Durham and the North East became a leading centre of British industrial innovation. The people of the region extracted the resources, invented the technology, and made the manufactured goods that people used all around the world.

All this was driven by the development of the Durham coalfield. The coal mining and pits or collieries that spread across the region became the foundation for every other industry in cities like Newcastle, Sunderland, and Middlesbrough.

By the late 19th Century, Newcastle was a major financial centre, renowned for its fine architecture and gracefully curving city streets. You didn't "take coals to Newcastle" because Newcastle's ports shipped coal across the globe. In Sunderland further down the River Wear from Durham, the locals were nicknamed "Mackems," the people who "mack 'em" or "make them," referring to all the steel, ships, trains, massive machines, and bridges that everyone else needed.

The region and its three great rivers, the Tyne, Wear, and Tees became a magnet for industry, goods, jobs and people, turning villages centred around a mine into towns.

Members of my family worked for the big industrialists and their manufacturing companies in the North East.

My mother's maternal grandfather was the coachman for Sir Stephen Furness, part of a famous shipbuilding company on Teesside. Her paternal grandfather migrated from Scotland to work for the Bell Brothers. They were the family of Gertrude Bell, the so-called "Queen of the Desert," who helped T.E. Lawrence carve Jordan and Iraq out of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Gertrude Bell was born in her family's home in Washington, County Durham, the same place as George Washington's ancestors. The Bells built "Washington New Hall" and the

Washingtons built “Washington Old Hall.” There is a plaque to the Washington family and their accomplishments in America here in Durham Cathedral.

My father’s side of the family were miners for several generations and deeply rooted in County Durham. Alongside the titans of industry and historic figures, Durham miners developed their own legacy, including Redhills, which is known as the “Pitman's Parliament”. Redhills opened in 1915 and was built with thousands of small contributions from ordinary miners.

The upcoming Durham Miners Gala was first held in 1871 and is still one of the biggest events on the UK organized labour calendar. My Great Grandad Thompson Hill was a workers’ spokesman for the Durham Miners Association and, in his day, a celebrated “orator” at the Gala calling for improved work conditions and pay.

The Durham miners were deeply committed to their own and their childrens’ education. They invited faculty from the University to give ~~them~~ lectures at Redhills. I won a bursary from the Durham Miners Association to complete an intensive Russian language course in the 1980s. Several of Thompson Hill’s descendants went to study at Durham University and work in education. Some of them are here for today’s ceremony.

Why am I relaying this? Because this is the story of County Durham and my family’s life over multiple generations, as well as Sir Thomas Allen’s. This City and its University prospered because of coal and industry. But this is often a hidden history for those who come to study in Durham. With the exception of the wonderful outdoor museum of the North East at Beamish, it is easier to see the remains of Roman Britain than the legacy of industrial Britain in County Durham. The 1984 Miners’ Strike marked the end of coal here and in many other parts of the United Kingdom. The last pit in County Durham closed for good in 1994. The last shipment of opencast-mined County Durham coal from Newcastle was in February 2021.

There was nothing romantic about working down a pit. It was backbreaking work, but miners and their families created a rich communal structure that shaped this region and its outlook. Many of those communities and most of the physical traces of County Durham’s and the North East of England’s rich industrial heritage have been destroyed. Between the mid-1960s and the 1980s, centuries of economic development and innovation were bulldozed in the name of “reclamation.”

The disappearance of coalmining, all the other industries, the jobs, and the way of life associated with the pit villages was a major trauma. The industrial remains that I remember vividly from my childhood—the slag heaps and rusted metal of the old pit head machinery, the empty factories, the abandoned blast furnaces of steelworks, the grassed over tracks of railway lines for freight and passenger trains that once

sped across the region—were erased. They were viewed as “haunted,” too painful to deal with, a stain on the present.

But these remnants were monuments to considerable human ingenuity. They were testaments to the things our grandparents and parents had made and once took pride in—just like this incredible Cathedral and wonderful University. Durham Cathedral is built on the foundations of an earlier Saxon church. Durham University was founded on church property. Durham’s students stand on the shoulders of the generations who preceded them.

Durham University is the product of the history of an entire region and the repository of its achievements. Today’s students and graduates are our investment in the future. Durham University is both a community and an international centre of excellence and learning for the people who pass through its doors. Pioneering research conducted at the University already has and will continue to advance human knowledge. Graduates of this University will personally and collectively shape the United Kingdom and many other parts of the world in the decades ahead and find solutions for our most intractable problems.

Durham’s students will build their own monuments to human ingenuity on the solid foundations that have supported them here.

I am privileged to be part of this inspiring community and its endeavours. And I am also profoundly grateful. The Chancellorship has brought me home in a full circle to the place and people I am proud to be from.

ENDS
