# Britain’s Jodrell Bank Observatory faces closure as £2.8 million science funding withdrawn

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Jodrell Bank Observatory, home of the Lovell Telescope and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, faces the end of 70 years of scientific observation.

On July 27 the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) confirmed it will withdraw the entire £2.8 million annual grant funding for e-MERLIN, Britain's national radio astronomy facility, when the present agreement expires in March 2028. Unless money is found elsewhere, all scientific observations at the Cheshire site will cease. Twenty-eight jobs go directly, and the work of around 3,000 scientists who use the array of radio antennas is thrown into doubt.

Jodrell Bank’s radio telescopes gather radio waves that pass unimpeded through interstellar dust that blocks optical telescopes. It is the hub of e-MERLIN, seven dishes from Cheshire to Cambridge linked by dedicated optical fibre carrying data at 30 gigabits per second, observing together as a single instrument 217 kilometres wide and producing images as sharp as the Hubble Space Telescope's.

The high resolution of e-MERLIN enabled the e-MERGE survey to look inside distant galaxies as they were when most of the stars in the present-day universe were forming, separating the glow of star formation from the emission of the black holes at their centres.

In July 2025, astronomers using e-MERLIN released images of the discs of gas and dust surrounding two young stars in the Taurus molecular cloud, DG Tau and HL Tau, some 450 light years away. The images showed that centimetre-sized “pebbles”—the raw material from which planets are assembled—had already gathered out to at least the equivalent of Neptune's orbit. Only a handful of instruments worldwide have the resolution and four-centimeter wavelength to detect objects this size.

The Lovell and its sister telescopes are also Britain's contribution to the European VLBI Network, whose baselines now stretch more than 10,000 kilometres. The Lovell is among the network's most sensitive dishes, and its loss degrades what European astronomy can see.

Professor Simon Garrington, the observatory's associate director, said the withdrawal 'effectively pulls the rug out from under Jodrell Bank.' Professor Michael Kramer, executive director of the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy, called the decision 'scientifically, technologically as well as economically short-sighted,' adding, 'Internationally, people will look at that and will hardly believe it.'

Substantial resources are being squandered. The fibre network and other upgrades cost some £8 million in 2009. The government committed £100 million in 2015 to win the global headquarters of the Square Kilometre Array Observatory (SKAO) for Jodrell Bank, followed by a £16.5 million extension. The £21 million First Light Pavilion, largely lottery-funded, opened in 2022, and the engagement centre generates around £4.7 million a year in economic impact—more than the science costs to run.

The e-MERLIN decision is one of dozens announced the same day across particle physics, astronomy and nuclear physics, expected to cost around 800 jobs. British involvement in instruments for the Extremely Large Telescope in Chile is cancelled. Britain is withdrawing from the Event Horizon Telescope, which produced the first image of a black hole, and cutting participation in the newly operational Rubin Observatory by a fifth. The operating budget of Boulby mine, the country's only deep underground physics

facility, falls by 40 percent.

The Science and Technology Facilities Council’s core budget stands at £835 million and will reach just £842 million by 2029/30. This flat cash settlement is a substantial real-terms cut. The council is reducing operating budgets by £162 million over this period.

Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Jonathan Reynolds responded to the announcement by declaring the government is 'funding R&D at record levels,' with £38.6 billion going to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), while noting that 'UKRI is responsible for taking specific funding decisions.' This arm's-length structure allows ministers to set a budget that cannot cover existing commitments, then disclaim the closures that follow.

Of that £38.6 billion, £7 billion is set aside to help companies 'scale and commercialise' technologies and £8.3 billion for 'targeted' research serving government priorities including national security, including over £1 billion for quantum technologies and £1.6 billion for artificial intelligence. Publicly funded science is being reorganised around the requirements of British capital, with the open-ended investigation of nature squeezed out wherever there is no immediate commercial or strategic interest.

Money for war is found without difficulty. Over the next four years the government plans to spend £298 billion on the military, nearly eight times UKRI's entire allocation. The Ministry of Defence spent £3.1 billion on research and development in 2024-25 alone, several times STFC's annual budget. A further £3 billion a year is committed to the war in Ukraine until 2030/31, and Britain has signed up to spending 3.5 percent of national income on the military by 2035.

The £2.8 million withdrawn from Jodrell Bank is what the MoD gets through in roughly twenty minutes. These commitments were made under Keir Starmer's Labour government and reaffirmed by his successor, Andy Burnham.

This is not the first time the apparatus has been threatened. In March 2008, following an £80 million shortfall, the STFC's Programmatic Review listed e-MERLIN as 'lower priority.' A campaign drew more than 1,200 submissions to a consultation, and in July 2008 the STFC reversed course, guaranteeing some £2.5 million a year for three years—found within the same squeezed budget, at other projects' expense.

Eighteen months later, in January 2010, the STFC stripped a further £115 million from astronomy, particle and nuclear physics and space research, sums trivial beside the hundreds of billions in loans, capital injections and guarantees handed to the banks after the 2008 crash.

Opposition today is broad. An open letter signed by more than 200 public figures calls the closure 'foolish and shortsighted”.

Sue Ferns of the Prospect union warned it 'would be a tragedy that undermines the mission for the UK to be a science superpower.' Such appeals accept the nationalist framework driving the cuts—astronomy is among the most internationally collaborative of sciences, and no single country can see the whole sky.

Sections of the scientific establishment have begun looking to the military for a lifeline. Garrington has suggested the telescope's newly demonstrated role in tracking satellites and space debris might attract alternative funding. The Long Baseline Multistatic Radar trial conducted at Jodrell Bank this summer—bankrolled through the UK Space Agency and hailed by officials as a 'dual use by design' capability delivered without the cost of a dedicated facility—indicates where such money would come from.

This is not a route to saving Jodrell Bank, but a proposal to dismantle it as a centre of open scientific enquiry and hand what remains to the war planners. Radio astronomy would survive only in the degraded form the state finds useful: surveillance of low Earth orbit, the crowded band of space that government strategy documents already treat as a theatre of future conflict.

Scientists and technicians cannot defend their work by pleading its usefulness to the war machine. Their jobs and the future of British science can be defended only through a political struggle against the militarist programme devouring the resources on which civilian research depends, by turning to the working class facing the same attacks.