

Embrea Constructed Places of Interest 2:

Willow Observatory

Ostensibly, the Observatory consists of a cluster of buildings near the centre of the map, surrounded by a blue-grey stone crenelated wall with a square Gatehouse tower, looking somewhat like a reused, old, small castle, on a hill. There are other features nearby which suggest the reality is not quite so simple, however.

Notes on the labelled locations and map features follow. First though, some more general points.

The misty edge to the mapped area is because, like all the Embrea Places maps, Willow Observatory does not link directly to any other specific location in the city. Instead when leaving the mapped zone (or sometimes only when passing some form of threshold within it - GM's choice), the party can return either to the Constructed Places map, or the Embrea Official Guide map, from where the GM can select a new location for the players to visit.

While scales are provided alongside the map, accurate to the features as drawn, and directions in these notes refer to the standard pattern of north being towards the map's top as viewed, east to its right-hand edge, and so on, none of these elements need be considered strongly fixed. Such things in the Faerie Realm can be quite fluid, to fit whatever the GM may prefer.

The featured text also beside the map could be used or ignored, as the GM might wish, although it is intended to provide a distinct protective element beyond what the map illustrates. It reads: "A Faerie knight with a red-pennanted lance guards The Observatory. He rides a gigantic caterpillar that has a surprising turn of speed and can fly."

For greater clarity, note that the FCW file has a toggle to allow the on-map labels to be turned-off, if desired. A second toggle lets the interiors of the mapped buildings be viewed, while a third shows the upper level interior for the Gatehouse tower.

Aspects of Willow Observatory

The Observatory contains a number of magical and optical devices for observing mostly the night sky, although observations of the Sun, including eclipses, are carried out by day at times too. Not all the observing here requires such assistance, as the movement of the planets, the presence and behaviour of the aurora, watching for unusual or short-lived events, such as shooting stars or bright comets, is carried out by-eye alone. Records are maintained of what has been seen, and there are several very knowledgeable people, not all of Faerie heritage, who live at the Observatory site. There is a particular interest, during the time of the all-night summer twilight, in looking-out for delicately-formed, often bright, blue-white clouds seen quite low around the northern horizons sometimes when the Sun is below the horizon and the normal clouds are in darkness. These clouds frequently take on very intricate, sharply-defined rippling or swirling forms, rather like the more complex cirrus-type clouds seen during the day. They are known as "summer-night clouds" or "shining summer clouds", or occasionally, and only by a strange few, as

“dragon ghosts”. Whenever a display of these is seen, the whole Observatory staff turns out to watch them.

[The summer-night clouds have a real-world analogue, “noctilucent clouds” (= “night-shining” clouds), which are only seen from higher latitudes in both hemispheres of Earth, north or south of about 40° latitude, during their respective summer months, for places and times when the Sun lies between roughly 6° and 16° below the horizon. Such ice-crystal clouds occur at very high altitudes, much higher than the usual clouds, around 90 km, 55 miles, so remain in full sunlight, and visible when present, over the short summer nights. Edinburgh in Scotland has long been one of the centres for their observation, so this seemed an apt addition for Nibirum’s Embra as well. The “dragon ghosts” name derives from the fact the real-world clouds seem to condense partly around tiny particles left by meteors - shooting stars - in the high atmosphere, and especially bright meteors have long been known in folklore, especially from Europe, as “fiery dragons”.]

* **Blue Dome:** The larger of the two Observatory domes, with a particularly large magical viewing telescope. All the Observatory buildings are a mixture of heights between single and double storey, although none except the Gatehouse have an upper floor, the larger ones simply being open up to the inside of their roofs. The other double-storey locations include the central octagon of the Entrance Hall building and both this Dome and the Red Dome. The great telescope here is able to see such things as details on the other planets in Nibirum’s Solar System, and the brighter of their moons, along with the Dawn Heralds, although being in the Faerie Realm, it is not always clear how “real” any such features may be on the actual planets themselves. (Nibirum’s Solar System is explored in more detail elsewhere in the Community Atlas.)

* **Entrance Hall:** One of the larger buildings in the Observatory complex, this is the main entryway for visitors and newcomers to the site. The internal layout shows how all the buildings connect with one another, and their internal courtyards, across this main, central grouping. The middle octagon of the Entrance Hall is of double-storey height, although there is no upper floor, just walls that extend right up to the ceiling.

* **Gatehouse:** This is the only passageway through the blue stone wall into the Observatory proper. Like the wall, it is made of blue-grey stone, and is two storeys high. The upper floor is accessed by a stone stairway in the eastern corner. This upper level leads out to The Parapet Walkway, which is the only way to access it without flying. There is no roof access route from inside the Gatehouse, so the roof can be reached only either by a very difficult external climb, or by flying. The roof is surrounded by more crenelations, and is the preferred watching and resting place for the Faerie knight and his great flying caterpillar steed from the featured text.

* **Lookout Square:** A fenced-off area of open grassland southeast of the Observatory, and screened from it by a scrubby line of trees and shrubs. The fence is high and in good repair, yet it has no gate, or any pathway leading to it, and its purpose is most obscure. Nobody at the Observatory can provide any information beyond its name.

* **Marshstones Isle:** In some respects, the siting of Willow Observatory seems an odd one, as although it is on its own little hill, there are woods and marshes close-by that promote mists and fogs, which is not ideal for any kind of observing location. There does though

seem to be a long history of important places for former observations or ceremonies involving the sky here. This Isle is apparently one of them, a small, dry spot in the middle of Willow Fen, on which there are three groups of four large standing stones. In each group, three uprights support a fourth flat, like a raised, huge, table. The stone-groups seem to be placed to indicate the directions of the northeast and northwest, around the locations, as seen from the middle of all these stone groupings, where the midsummer Sun would rise and set (or the midwinter full White Moon, perhaps), and the south. There is no safe pathway across the Fen to reach them on foot, however.

* **Observatory Trail:** The packed-earth roadway to the Observatory from the northern edge of the map.

* **Old Observatory:** In the northern part of the walled enclosure surrounding the Observatory, within the sharpest angled part of the outer wall (suggesting it may have been deliberately constructed to accommodate this feature) is a ring of standing stones with a large, flat, central square “altar” stone. The whole is set on its own little hillock, upstanding from the northern part of the hill where the Observatory is. While the central stone seems to be positioned with its angles towards the four major cardinal directions, the other stones seem not to be aligned to any particular directions, as viewed from the ring’s middle, so whether its title is correct or not is unclear.

* **The Parapet Walk:** The high walkway along the top of the surrounding wall at the Observatory. It can be accessed on foot only *via* the upper floor of the Gatehouse.

* **The Platform:** Although the label is placed on its eastern side for clarity, the name is used for the whole hard-packed, level, earth area on which the main Observatory buildings are set on the hilltop. There is plenty of space to allow observing equipment to be set-up stably outside the buildings and domes, and for visual observers using no equipment at all to stand, sit or lie to watch the sky.

* **Red Dome:** The smaller of the two Observatory domes, with a magical telescope similar to, though smaller and less powerful than, that in the Blue Dome (see above). The building is two storeys high, but has no upper floor, as the various rooms, and the Dome itself, are open inside up to their respective ceilings.

* **Residences:** Two single-storey, blue-painted and tiled, buildings with living quarters for the Observatory’s staff and a small number of special visitors.

* **Tumbling Wood:** The extensive woodlands across the southern third of the map, and extending off its southerly edges.

* **Watcher’s Marsh:** A small area of marshland west of the Observatory, fringing the southern edge of the more westerly part of The Willows woodland. Notable for often producing mists, and occasionally fogs, and also for its variety of small, flying insects, including some that produce their own light of various colours. Treacherous to try crossing on foot.

* **Willow Fen:** The larger area of marshland north of the Observatory, at the foot of its hill. Similar in character to the Watcher's Marsh just described above, though set in the midst of the more easterly part of The Willows woods, with Marshstones Isle in its middle.

* **The Willows:** The willow-rich woods across the northerly parts of the map. Low-lying, with marshlands near and in them, the woods too are subject to frequent mists and fogs that may linger all day sometimes, as well as numbers of small, biting, Faerie insects, some of which also produce bright light at times.