

QUARRYING ON THE BLACK MOUNTAIN

Quarrying in one form or another has been taking place on the Black Mountain as far back as 1745. Early information is scant. The Black Mountain was once part of the O'Neill's land and was then given in an extensive grant to Sir Arthur Chichester during the plantation and confirmed by various patents. Apart from legal notices, 18th Century references don't give much information. One reference regarding the mountain relates to a herd of wild goats in 1762, raiding the land below the mountain as far as Shaws Bridge. Some of the goats had been shot.

In this statistical account of the parish of Belfast published 1823, George Benn refers at one stage to the fact that the mountain "possesses an appearance of uncommon interest from the multitudinous spots of brighter hue which the revolving seasons produce and from the whiteness of the immense limestone quarries which industry has formed and may continue to use for ages to come".

Previously, in 1745 a lease was granted by the Donegall estate to one John Hughes to 'mine' for limestone on the Black Mountain for a period of 21 years. A James Wallace also worked a quarry there in 1790, and quarried some excellent limestone we are informed. Mr Wallace also had a lime kiln in Ballygomartin where he burned the lime and made lime putty for building purposes. Stones as well for road metals was also quarried and was used on the streets of Belfast in 1805. At this time the now Ballygomartin Road was called the Whiterock Road and appears on the 1832 O.S. map as such. It is assumed that it is from those white limestone rocks quarried and clearly visible from all over Belfast came the name of the Whiterock area.

A further report from the Belfast naturalist field club, dated 23 August 1879, describes how a group of members made their way up the Whiterock Road before reaching the recently opened chalk quarries at the base of the hill.

Other early quarries start appearing on O.S. maps in 1901 and indeed this the first time that the forerunner of the present controversial quarry is seen. However this quarry only becomes clearly evident on the 1920 map, and again in 1931, and then 1938 moderate extensions of the quarry can be seen. From 1939 to 1969, even given increased technology, the growth of the quarry on maps was little. However, the period from 1969 to 1989 shows a massive expansion to the stage where it is now. So much so, that, that part of the Black Mountain from Hannahstown to the 'Gulley' known as the 'Black Hill' has lost almost one quarter of the hill.

While acknowledging the fact that quarrying technology has advanced, it must also be said that environmental awareness has also grown.

The 1969 Belfast Urban Area Plan clearly pointed out these dangers to the environment and subsequent problems of quarrying on Black Mountain, but it was 1973 before quarry operators were obliged to apply for permission to quarry.

The 1969 BUAP at the time stated "that the natural beauty and amenity of the hills around the urban area are in danger from quarrying". It also proposed, "the establishment of the Antrim Hills Country Park, comprising the moorland plateau of Colin Mountain, Black Mountain, Cavehill and Carnmoney Hill, with a forest park established immediately outside the stop line". No one knows what happened to these plans, nothing ever happened!

From the middle eighties, opposition to the destruction that was taking place began to grow. This opposition was mainly based within those communities living in the immediate vicinity of the quarry, and was concerned not only with the gaping hole which had appeared in the mountain, but also with the increased dust pollution and damage to housing from blasting.

In 1989 the lower Lenadoon Housing Action Committee landed over a detailed list of objections to the quarry, to the planning appeals committee of the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001. This list drew attention to the contradictory position of the planners, in terms of statutory duty, their public projection of the plans and what was actually taking place on Black Mountain. Whereas planners spoke with hands on heart of "vigorous controls" of mining extraction, of, protecting and preventing environmental damage to the landscape, and of "safeguarding the amenity of housing areas". Glencolin and Lenadoon estates were choking on the dust while their housing shook from blasting!

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although the quarry directors attendance at such a community forum was commended by all, they did take considerable flack, given that some members of the community present knew considerably more than the general public about the workings of the quarry. For instance reliable local information puts the actual number employed by the quarry as being 30 people, only five of whom actually live in the greater Andersonstown area. Two of these five live in Hannahstown. None of the directors or top four management live or have ever lived in West Belfast! Some of the private hauliers may live in West Belfast but it wouldn't matter to them from where they hauled stone. They would still be paid. Lagans, the company which owns White Mountain Quarries are the biggest and main quarry owners in Ireland. They also control some quarries in England as well as numerous other companies. One of their subsidiaries McCleery's of Comber has supplied most of the stone used in building the Channel Tunnel. Lagans also own a major quarry in the Coleraine area which would be quite capable of handling all the demands presently made on Black Mountain.

All materials extracted from Black Mountain is sold i.e. different qualities of rock, rubble and dust. Nothing is wasted. There is also a tarmacadam producing unit on site and the company have recently applied to build a concrete batching plant on the site. The Belfast City Council also have a dump on the same site and the company are paid £7 per load for everything dumped (excluding household rubbish). It is not known if this dumping is monitored or not.

The quarry company has received planning permission to continue quarrying until the year 2056. Contained within this is permission to extract 500,000 tons per year. No monitoring takes place by any statutory body! Locals estimate that most lorries make up to 40 runs per day and that when weather conditions are good something in the region of 4,000 to 5,000 tons per day is taken.

The Black Mountain is disappearing before the very eyes of the people of Belfast. Still, the main concern of those who benefit or apologise for the quarry has been the attempt to hide or disguise the damage being done. Biggest worry for the DoE has been to "maintain the skyline", "Making Belfast Work" and "Healthy Cities of Europe" is only for media consumption and doesn't apply to the West of the City.

In spite of this blind intransigence from government and statutory bodies, the campaign continues. The community based Black Mountain Environmental Group has submitted a detailed preservation and development plan to the DoE. This plan, if implemented would convert the Black Mountain into the nature park and conservation area similar to that suggested in the 'lost' 1969 BUAP. The plan entails an immediate opening up of the mountain as a facility and amenity for all the people of Belfast. With subsequent employment and tourist potential which would be of particular benefit to West Belfast which has one of the highest unemployment rates in Western Europe.

All that is required is for the Northern Ireland Office and the DoE to admit mistakes have been made and to show vision and commitment to rectifying the damage done. Progress could then be made towards opening this beautiful facility for all the people of Belfast and particularly for those generations to come.

This needs to be updated & our groups proposals for restoration included.

*Photos - aerial - check for copyright!!
+ others of quarry etc.*

+ need our copy of company accounts updated & cleared if they are to be used.

i.e. proposals for regional PK / community role etc.

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