

SAVE THE BELFAST HILLS

By TERRY ENRIGHT

Early in the Spring of 1990, representatives of all the different conservation and environmental groups in North and West Belfast held a meeting. The purpose was to discuss possible ways to further highlight the threat to the Belfast Hills through quarrying and mining, prospecting.

The meeting decided that the best way to achieve this, apart from the usual campaigning, publicity etc. was to arrange a means whereby the largest number of people from our city could see the damage for themselves. We also hoped that in so doing these people would also see the great natural beauty of our hills and become committed to having them preserved and protected for future generations. With this in mind it was decided that we should organise a walk across the Belfast Hills which hopefully would become an annual event. Some headway had already been made towards the potential of such a walk in that Ms Sonya Crawford of the Belfast City Council Parks Dept. after much hard work had the proposed route formally declared as part of the Ulster Way.

CAVEHILL TO HANNAHSTOWN

An exploratory walk was then organised to plan the route and check access, etc., across the different hills from Cavehill to Hannahstown. For this purpose, five of us, representing all the groups involved met one beautiful Sunday morning on the slopes of Cavehill. While standing on the top of Napoleon's Nose at McAirt's Fort, John Gray, chairman of the Cavehill group gave us a brief history of the historic spot on which we stood.

This of course was the place on which the O'Neills were crowned as chieftains of Ulster, and where in May 1795 just prior to Wolf Tone's exile to America and then France the United Irishmen also met. Most of the inner circle of the United Irishmen were there, including McCracken, Russell, Neilson and Robert and William Simms. It was on this same spot that they took the famous oath, "Never to desist in our efforts until we have subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted our independence".

The view from this spot was worth just that climb up alone. We then set off on our journey which we estimated as being roughly nine and a half miles, that would take us approximately five and a half hours to complete. We crossed Squires Hill and then on to Wolfhill, where according to folklore, the last wolf in this region had been killed in the late 1700s. We had already passed one quarry operating behind Cavehill, while on Wolfhill, there was a disused quarry, where no attempt had been made to mitigate its unsightliness.

SLOPES OF DIVIS

Above Ligoniel, a huge, ugly dump was already well established, further destroying what was once a beautiful landscape. As we made our way up the slopes of Divis, the scenery in the distance was magnificent. Stretching panoramically around us was Scotland in the horizon beyond Belfast Lough, the Copeland Islands, the Ards Peninsula and Strangford Lough. Continuing on around was the Mourne, Rostrevor, Slieve Gullion, the Cooleys. All of Lough Neagh and the Sperrins with Slemish just beyond Ballymena. Here we sat down for our first break and rest. The larks and meadow pipits were full of song, while a kestrel hovered then pounced on an unsuspecting prey just 30 yards away from where we sat. It was hard to believe that such beauty and wildlife existed so close to a major city like Belfast.

We came down the other side of Divis in the direction of the city and Black Mountain which we crossed travelling towards the quarry at Hannahstown. It seemed as though the city was laid out beneath us like a huge patchwork quilt. When we reached the quarry, our friends, who had never seen it before, were aghast at

the extent of the damage which had been done. All in the name of progress. We turned and headed back across the mountain towards my house for a cup of coffee and a quick bite to eat. As we passed down through the Hatched field, a group of kids were playing on an improvised swing which hung from one of the sycamore trees.



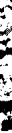
One of the children playing on an improvised swing in the Hatched field.

"Where were you Terry? Did you see the peregrines?" they asked excitedly. They were from a primary school in the area which I had taken for a walk on the hill a few weeks previous. "We were just out for a bit of a dander lads," I replied. "No peregrines, but we did see a kestrel."

"Brilliant," said one, "did you see it catching something?" "Well we saw it catching something but it was too far away to see what it was," I said. "We have to go," I said, "I'll see you later." "Right, Terry, see you." The sun had shone continuously throughout our walk, and John Gray, who had been wearing a pair of shorts was burnt to a cinder. When we got back to our house, we discussed our plans. We then agreed a date for the walk which we believed would suit most people, in late September. If only we got a day as good as today, we'd have thousands, someone said.

IRISH AND ENGLISH

Cormac Hamill and Phil McGrory, two experienced hill walkers and climbers would be chief marshals. They would arrange all the other marshals and route markers, St. John's ambulance and 'Raynet' (a communications network). The rest of us were to arrange publicity, leaflets, etc. All literature was to be bilingual, Irish and English. After all, there was no better way to show the people of Belfast united around an issue which was such an important part of our common cultural heritage. Careful emphasis was to be put in the leaflets concerning the necessity for all to come properly dressed for such a walk. That is, proper footwear, raincoats, etc. All children to be accompanied and registered at



start, with the rest of the walkers. After several more weeks and months of careful planning, we believed that we had thought of everything. Everything that is, except the weather!

REGISTRATION CARD

The walk was scheduled to leave the entrance of the road leading up to the UTV station on the Black Mountain at Hannahstown. Walkers were to register between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. so that we could keep a count on all participants. Anyone deciding to leave the walk during it had to hand back their registration card. Groups would then leave periodically between 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. accompanied by a Marshall, an experienced hill walker who also knew the route. I listened to the weather reports the night before and they weren't bad, scattered showers, occasional rain, with sunny spells. Oh, yes and slight hill fog in places!

BACK MARKER

Because I was more familiar with Black Mountain than the others, my role was that of back marker. That is, the Marshall who stays at the back, making sure no one gets left behind, got lost, or to pick up stragglers at the back.

Up I bounced on the morning at 7.45 a.m., full of enthusiasm and optimism, a quick glance out my window, up at the mountain and my heart just sank! The mountain was covered in a thick mist. There was sudden panic! Should we call it off? Is it too dangerous? Will the mist lift? A million thoughts ran through my head. No matter! I quickly eat my two soft boiled eggs and toast, checked my rucksack for food and drink and headed for the top of the Rock.

COVERED IN MIST

There were six people already waiting in the minibus I had organised. As I climbed in, they started to banter and make nervous jokes about the fact that the mountain was now completely covered in mist. "We're all staying beside you Terry," said one, "at least you'll be able to get us back down, ha! ha!" "No bother," says I, "I'll get you to Napoleon's Nose, no problem." "Do you think it might be cancelled?" asked another. "Well, we won't really know until we get there," says I. "The marshals will have already checked the route and should know what conditions are like right across. We've put a lot of preparation into this," I said, as much to reassure myself as those present.



Some of the walkers including Eamon Maguire and Stevie Trainor.

EAMON MAGUIRE

When we arrived up at the starting point, I was pleasantly surprised to see dozens of people milling around the registration table, lots of young and old, all dressed in completely diverse outfits, some of which were clearly not designed for hill walking! Visibility at this point wasn't bad, but 30 yards beyond was thick mist. As I jumped down out of the bus, there was a chorus of cheers, jeers and good natured banter. "I suppose it was you who picked the date for the walk Enright?" "You couldn't organise this, or you couldn't organise that," they slagged. "If we get lost here Enright, we're going to eat you," shouted big Eamon Maguire. He was dressed as usual in jockey cap, jeans, big boots

Trainor had been at a set dance the night before when they talked about the walk. So they and their mates just arrived up for start all slightly the worst for wear.

After a quick consultation with the other organisers we learnt that although the mist was heavy in places it was lifting in others and should brighten up. The crowd which now looked to be several hundred, started to move off in small groups of twenty or so. As I was moving off behind the last group I took a final look behind me and saw about a dozen or so people trying to catch up. I told them that although they weren't registered and thus it wasn't my not be the organisers' responsibility, they were still welcome to come. Two of the women in this group were wearing flat skirt skirts and nylons, while one of the guys had on what looked like his best suit, white shirt and red tie. He was also wearing a pair of well polished shoes. Thankfully the women turned back.

As we rushed forward to catch up with the rest, a driving rain came down through the mist onto our faces. When we finally caught up with the weird looking shapes in front of us, the mist appeared even thicker. I then realised we had made a very



Eamon Maguire, Stevie Trainor and Brendan Moynan enjoying a craic.

a mistake in our planning. Some of the younger marshals who were in front were actually following a straight line between two points on the compass from our starting point to the first registration place at Divis. Now this would have been fair enough if the visibility had been good, not to mention conditions underfoot. Instead the groups were heading across the marshiest part of the top of the Black Mountain. I should have insisted that they should stay on higher ground which would have been long and much firmer underfoot. This would have taken us right up the quarry onto the top of the Black Hill, down and over, to above the gully and right up along the first game ditch above the "Hatchet field". It is only a short distance on across this ditch to above the Quakers house, turn left along the path to the "Bobby Stone" TV station then up the road to Divis. I took my group on the correct route and visibility was now down to less than 10 feet.

CRAIC WAS GREAT

Everyone was still in good spirits and the craic was great. As we headed over and along the Hatchet field, we were suddenly confronted by a group of shrouded and ghostly figures coming through the mist. "Thank God to see you," the front pair said. "I'm lost." "Not at all," says I, "you're only going in the wrong direction." There was an element of panic in their faces and voices. They were totally lost and had been walking in circles. Some of them they had become separated from their group and did not know where they were going. They joined our group and we continued along the different fences I know well. Just as suddenly we were across another group of about twenty people totally bewildered standing at a fence about twenty feet to the left of us. "Is any one of you brought a ball?" I laughed.

Two women in particular were giving the young marshals a hard time. "I wish I had known it was going to be like this," said one. "You should have told us it was going to be like this," said another.

I think it was going to be like walking down to Castle Street/ everyone laughed. Actually, the marshal was taking them the right direction in a straight line. So I pulled them over and followed the route I knew and which took us on to the Divis Road. Halfway up this road we seemed to just step out of the mist into a bright clearing almost totally free of mist. Maguire and Co. were sitting laughing, drinking tea, coffee and beer. "What happened you Enright, did you get lost?" "St. John's Ambulance were also there, looking after those who felt they needed it. It really was a most unusual scene, it seemed as if all of us were sitting in a cocoon of brightness in amongst the thick impenetrable mist.

EXHAUSTION

The walkers in my group just slumped down in exaggerated exhaustion where they stopped. They sat on the road, the verge, or wherever. Although the distance we had covered was approximately one and a half miles, the conditions made it feel like five. After a short break of half an hour or so, those who thought they couldn't make it the rest of the way were brought back to the start at Hannahstown. The rest of us set out back into the mist, while I reassured the group by telling them it wouldn't be long until we reached the half-way stage. The responding moans and groans were good natured. I assured them that the rest of our journey was "all downhill" and we continued on over to Wolf Hill.

On we walked and talked. One minute a person would be talking to two strangers, that would just as quickly change as old friends joined and talked, and then on, on your own, in that strange way which happens only on such a walk. As we walked, I joked about the beautiful scenery on either side of where we were, which we could have seen had it not been for the thick mist which swirled all around us.

CAVEHILL

On Squires Hill we had another well earned rest with coffee, tea and soup supplied by the walk marshals. At last the mist started to lift as we climbed the slope to Cavehill, stopping for a beautiful drink of spring water on the way up. "Are you sure we can drink this Terry," someone asked. As I bent down and took a drink of the delicious water, I replied: "If you are thirsty you should drink it." Everyone did. Approaching McAirt's Fort, there was a definite feeling of elation and sense of achievement. It was now 2.30 p.m. We hadn't rushed and everyone was still fairly lively though tired. Without warning, the skies just opened. The rain came down in sheets. As we slithered and slid down the slope beside Napoleon's Nose every one laughed and joked. We had had every aspect of Irish weather in one day except for snow and we still had some way to go. Arriving at the finishing point beside Belfast Castle we were again greeted by the slagers. "What happened ye Enright, did you break one of your crutches?" As we watched the remaining stragglers emerging from the forest, it was like a scene from the Amazon. The water was running out of them. Tea and coffee was served as walkers exchanged stories of the walk. Almost 400 people had taken part. We had hopefully, established our first annual walk.

CARNMONY HILL

Since then we have held the walk every year. Due to its popularity, it had been extended and now includes Carnmony Hill and Colin Mountain a distance of 13 miles. We continue to make many new friends for the Belfast Hills. Peter McLachlan and Bryson House, who now play a major role in organising the walk have added a new professionalism to the event. Our walk this year of 1994 attracted almost 1000 people, long may it continue and may those who participate become part of the movement which Cares for the Belfast Hills.

P.S. The weather was brilliant this year.

Note:

The first game ditch is a reference to a ditch and fence which was used in the late forties and early fifties as a boundary denoting ownership of a game reserve on top of Black Mountain. The game reserve was owned or leased by linen and thread merchants Milne & Barber.

The Bobby Stone is described by archaeologists and geologists as a glacial erratic. Although some suggest it may well be some sort of neolithic or Bronze age burial place.

The Hatcher field is a large field whose shape is not unlike the shape of a hatchet. Hence the name. It is located high on the side of the Black Mountain facing towards the city of Belfast.

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