

Storm clouds gather as mountains start moving

In the days before video and live football on TV, thousands of Belfast people passed their Sunday afternoons in the hills surrounding the city. And many a jar of homemade jam was provided for families by the fruits of the generous slopes of the Divis and Black Mountains.

Recognising the recreational potential of the range, an Antrim Hills Forest Park was proposed in the 1969 Belfast Urban Area Plan. But little or nothing has been done to follow up on this innovative idea.

Now, a drive along the city's Westlink gives saddening glimpses of the far western corner of the Black Mountain, scarred by the effects of sustained quarrying over the past 20 years.

Just as offensive as the actual alteration of the once-elegant skyline is the presence of noisy machinery, belching clouds of smoke and vapour over the surrounding area.

The desecration has attracted the attention of such diverse personalities as Gerry Adams and Joe Hendron.

The Sinn Féin leader has made numerous representations to the DoE, and the owners (White Mountain Quarries). He is currently planning a Community Environmental Conference to which he intends inviting the department, community groups and the owners.

Dr Hendron has met DoE Minister Richard Needham about the disappearing mountain and has worked closely with the latest community body to take up the green mantle.

Formed in 1988, the Black Mountain Action Group encompasses the full range of

Stephen O'Reilly

ending basalt extraction at the site.

One of the founding members, Jean Craig, explains that White Mountain Quarries is not their only target: "Our quarrel has always been with the DoE over their unwillingness to protect the environment," she says.

"We have been looking at planning permissions given, trying to see if conditions have been complied with.

"But the incompetence of the DoE is such that, if the quarry owners had not pointed it out themselves, one of the permissions granted would allow them to remove a large rockface that would alter the skyline even further and the visual damage would be far worse."

Ms Craig lists several alleged breaches of the permissions, ranging from failure to paint buildings a particular colour, to the more serious examples of quarrying where permission had not been granted and changing the skyline. The company admits to most of these.

Explaining why the group wants quarrying stopped, Ms. Craig points to the enormous quantities of material involved: "In 1979, the company was granted permission to take one million tons of basalt rock each year for 75 years. They were later given permission to take a further half a million tons for 30 years and in 1985 the quota was increased 400,000 tons for five years."

When the change in the mountain's appearance is considered, the question must be

Community health and safety is a concern of the group, too. So far there is no evidence of any affect on the people of Glencolin, the nearest housing estate, but they are completing a survey on the subject.

If the quarry is not closed, Jean would like to see machinery immediately moved back from the skyline and no further permissions granted.

Charles Jenkins, a director of The Lagan Group, parent company of White Mountain Quarries, says quarrying has been carried on at the site since the start of the century. "Substantial scars were inherited when we acquired the site in the late sixties," Mr Jenkins explains.

"While quarrying has progressed, the view from the city has improved," he claims.

"The more we quarry, the more topsoil becomes available for earth bank screening."

Mr Jenkins is quick to deny past allegations of complicity between the company and the DoE in operations at the site: "The department is very strict regarding planning consents," he points out. "And as a result of their diligence, the inadvertent working of a site was noticed and immediately stopped." He also challenges earlier "sensational" publicity which claimed that the Lagan Group was a multinational taking enormous profits out of the country, and especially west Belfast.

"We are a local company, owned by local people, employing about 200 people, most of whom are from our catchment area of west Belfast," Mr Jenkins says. "As for

that is totally ridiculous, we would not even have that turnover," asserted Mr Jenkins.

Mr Jenkins also claims that as quarrying is a mainly parochial industry, none of the material excavated is exported, but used in the immediate area for roads and dwellings.

Regarding pressure from Black Mountain Action Group, he admits that the group's representations have made the company more aware of the consequences of their operations and have prompted them to be proactive.

"We have taken advice from landscape architects and are planting 30,000 saplings along the front of our land. But to extend that and create a more natural aspect, we offered another 10,000 to the action group, to be planted on land adjoining ours."

The company has spent £100,000 on earth banking, sprinklers and dust covers for machines, and on monitoring dust levels.

On breaches of conditions for quarrying, Mr Jenkins concedes that these have happened, but says most were inadvertent or the company actually surpassed the requirement.

"We painted buildings on the site green instead of brown, because it seemed more sensible to us," he says. "It would have been pointless installing a wheel-wash at the weighbridge 150 yards from the main gate because the lorries would have picked up dirt before leaving the plant. Instead, we bought a road sweeper which cleans the road every day.

We did move into an area where we did not have permission to work, but that was a mistake and we stopped as soon as it was pointed out to us."

Alteration of the skyline will now be for the better, he says, because further quarrying will be carried on behind the large outcrop of basalt which the company is using as a screen.

On the question of machinery he is optimistic, but his timescale may not satisfy the action group: "We accept that the equipment is visible from parts of the city. This has been discussed with the BMAG.

"We have not refused to relocate machinery, but we have explained the difficulties of doing so over a short period. It can be compared to a production line and consequently difficult to move," he says.

White Mountain has plans to relocate each machine as it becomes obsolete, eventually ending up with all equipment on the quarry floor, out of sight. But this process could take a number of years.

The DoE declines to comment because consultants are currently formulating "an environmental strategy for the urban-rural fringe in the Hannahstown-Black Mountain area which is to take into account the environmental effects of the quarry".

But any prospect of a quick end to Black Mountain operations was dashed in a letter to The Irish News from the department stating that "the Minister is not reviewing quarrying operations with the objective of halting them."

Campaigners' hopes receive little encouragement from Charles Jenkins either. "The quarry is there