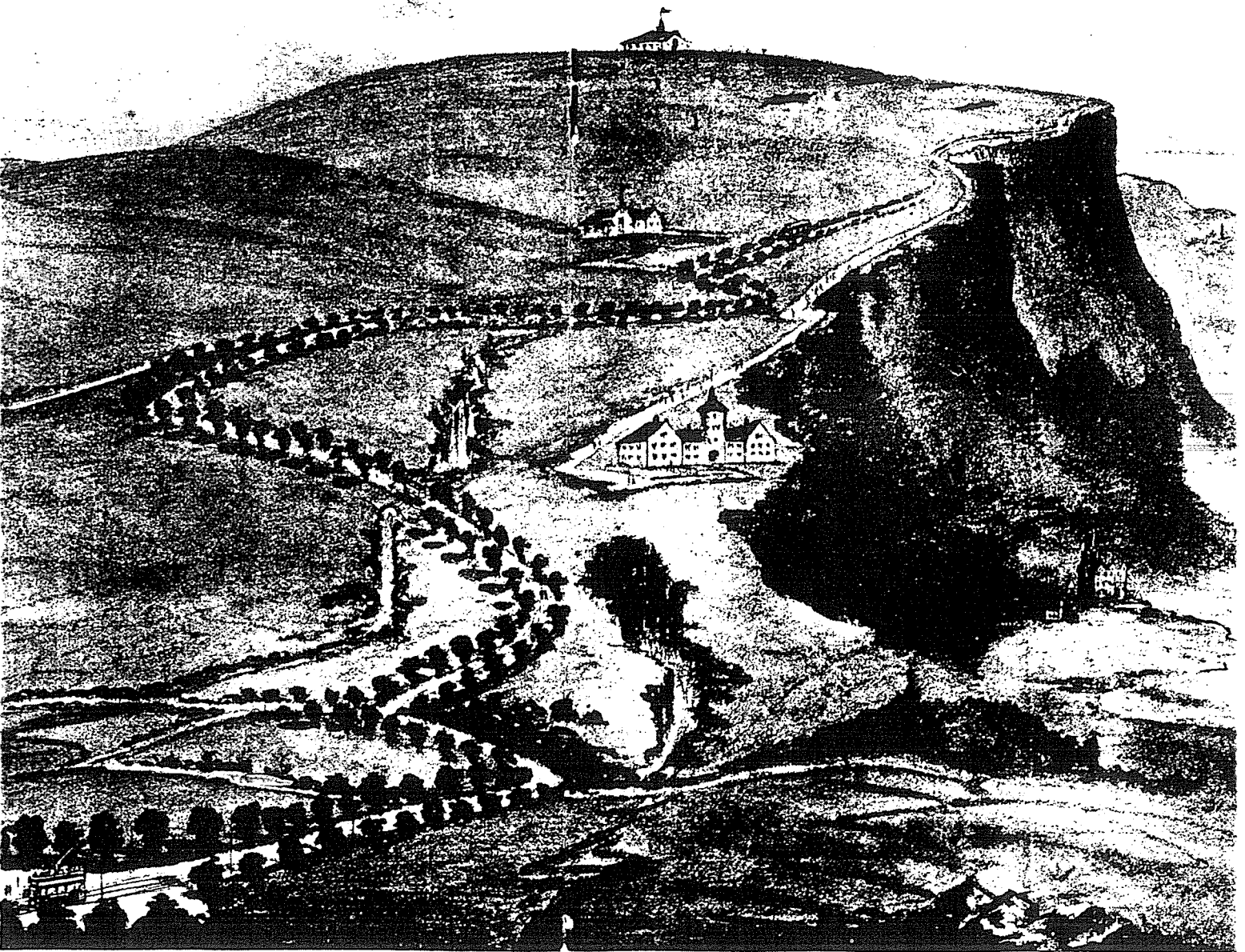


CAVE HILL Campaigner

THE NEWS LETTER OF THE CAVE HILL CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN



A Tramway to M' Art's Fort – See inside

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A Belfast Hills Regional Park within our Grasp

The fourth 'Save the Belfast Hills Walk', due on 6 June shortly after we go to press, is of particular importance this year, as it comes on the eve of publication of major new proposals for a Belfast Hills Regional Park by the *Belfast Hills Aspirational Group*.

The prospects for these proposals are now distinctly encouraging. On 13 March 1992, Richard Needham, then Environment Minister, announced that the Department would be drawing up a statutory plan for the area which 'would indicate the best use of the land, not only on the hilltops but also on the lower slopes', and would 'also introduce management policies'.

His 'most important initiative' was, however, to announce support for 'the creation of an Antrim Hills and Glens Regional Park' to be run on 'similar lines to the Lagan Valley Regional Park'.

The notion of a Belfast Hills Regional Park has a long and chequered history. As far back as 1969 the Belfast Urban Area Plan called for 'the establishment of the Antrim Hills Country Park comprising the moorland plateau of Colin Mountain, Black Mountain, Cave Hill and Carnmoney Hill'. Whereas the Lagan Valley Regional Park, which was first proposed at the same time, has long since become a reality, the concept of a Belfast Hills Regional Park was allowed to lapse and even the new Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 offered no more than green belt status for the area.

Perhaps the Belfast Hills lacked advocates of the kind who helped progress the Lagan Valley Regional Park project. However since roughly 1989 that has no longer been the case with groups such as the Black Mountain Action Group, the Black Mountain Environmental Campaign, and the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign all seeking to revive the concept of a Belfast Hills Regional Park, and organising the Save the Belfast Hills Walk to focus attention on the issue.

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign was

instrumental in 1991 in convening a Belfast Hills Committee with this specific objective in mind. There is no doubt that this broadly based impetus for the Belfast Hills Regional Park encouraged Richard Needham to make his very positive announcement.

With this 'invitation', the key question has been how best to capitalise on it? To those of us in the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign it seemed vital that the maximum possible alliance of community and environmental groups, and, critically, of statutory bodies, should be involved in pushing for early implementation of a plan for the Belfast Hills Regional Park. We believed that this was best done under neutral auspices, and with the assistance of Bryson House, a Belfast Hills Aspirational Committee was formed involving almost all those who had attended meetings of the original Belfast Hills Committee in 1991, but also, now, enlisting the relevant public authorities. Here credit must be given where it is due in that Belfast City Council has not only been involved, but has provided much of the drafting and technical back up.

One risk from the point of view of the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign in adopting this approach was that of ending up endorsing a watered down concept of the regional park - one embracing all things for all parties, with the environment jostling alongside aggressive tourist development, or agriculture, or even quarrying, for priority. Happily this has not been the case and in the drafting process the protection of the environment has come out a clear first.

Furthermore, the proposed boundaries of the park are extensive, embracing far more than the mere Belfast skyline. To the south the proposal extends to Stoneyford, to the West as far as Lyle's Hill, and to the north includes Carnmoney Hill. The proposal also provides for links with key green wedges in Belfast itself.

All those who take part in the Save the Belfast Hills Walk on 6 June can count themselves as the vital foot soldiers in the campaign to ensure that, this time, excellent plans are speedily implemented.

John Gray

Time for a Change on the Cave Hill



Belfast elections change nothing. That may be fair judgement in relation to the sectarian divide in our community. There are, however, areas which lie entirely outside this field of contention, and one of these is the Cave Hill. The new council, accordingly, has the opportunity to develop appropriate strategies for the Cave Hill, to involve interest groups such as the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign in the process, and to keep the community at large fully informed of its plans.

In the hope of encouraging a fresh look at the situation on the hill, the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign has invited the Parks Department to make a presentation of the Council's plans at an open meeting. At the time of writing it has been suggested to us that this proposal should be forwarded to the Parks Committee, and application to this effect has been made.

This rather ponderous initial response does suggest city hall reservations about any dealings with the Campaign. Certainly for the last three years the Campaign has expressed major reservations about the Council's overall strategy, and has also criticised particular aspects of the work undertaken there.

We were, for example, opposed to the siting of the 'Adventurous Playground' close to the Castle; it is, however, now an established fact. We remain critical of the impact of barbed wire fencing in the summit area. We are unhappy with the quality of path work undertaken to date, and oppose the construction of a two metre wide pathway to McArts Fort. We have asked for details on the tree felling and replanting programme without success, and accordingly, must remain concerned in this area.

All these items of apparent disagreement should not obscure the fact that we welcome the creation of the Cave Hill Country Park, believe in encouraging increased appropriate use of the area, and support measures taken by the Council

to improve access.

Nor has the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign any natural inclination to find itself in a position of sniping from afar at the Parks Department and with minimal effect. It is, however, lack of meaningful consultation, real discussion of strategies, and above all lack of public information that leads in that direction.

Certainly the Council can proceed on the basis that it has an electoral mandate, and hence no obligation to consult with non elected interest groups, or to offer detailed presentations of its plans to the public. It can also proceed unfettered by any planning constraints, as most of the work being undertaken is exempt from such review under Article 3 of the Planning (General Development) Order 1973, and in any case funded by wings of the Department of the Environment more interested in economic development than the environment. In short, the Council can act as judge, jury and executioner for the hill without any second thoughts in doing so.

The loser, if such a stand off persists will be the Cave Hill itself. The old Belfast Corporation and now Belfast City Council certainly have one great claim to virtue - they acquired the hill on behalf of the people of Belfast. The history of their management of the hill is, however, a much more chequered one, littered by as many disastrously misconceived notions as good ones. Often, indeed, the hill was only spared by lack of funds.

There is no harm in civic pride, but if this develops into a theory of infallibility then the Cave Hill remains imperilled. In this day and age full public involvement including that of relevant environmental groups should be seen as essential in improving plans.

We look forward to a positive response.

"Where the Gar Sweep Down

A tramway to McArts fort, a golf course on the Cave Hill summit plateau! Are these new plans by the City Council? Not so - they were serious proposals by the old Corporation well before the First World War. There is then a long history of municipal desire to tame the wilderness of the Cave Hill.

At the turn of the century the upper Antrim Road was still virtually undeveloped, and Glengormley a small and sleepy village. The Antrim Road itself was served by the still horse drawn Cavehill and Whitewell tramway which attracted some summer custom to the small Bellevue pleasure garden then on the lower side of Antrim Road at Glengormley.

Belfast Corporation in those days was in expansionist mood. In 1904 they took control of the city tramway system, with the exception of the Cavehill line which the ambitious manager of the Belfast system, Andrew Nance, now described as the 'only tramway under alien control within 60 miles of Belfast'.

McArts Fort Tramway

How best could Nance eliminate the independent Cave Hill tramway? By totally upstaging their small Glengormley pleasure ground. He certainly achieved that by persuading the Corporation to approve a tramway to McArts Fort. A first variant in 1909 was to run via the Cave Hill Road and round the back of the old limestone quarry. The second version in 1910 was to run across to the Cave Hill from the Horseshoe Bend.

By then a great more detail had been added to the plans. In the summit area he proposed a golf course and sanatorium - one suspects he was not overly familiar with the prevailing climate in the upper regions. He certainly expected myriads of visitors because he planned a 120 foot wide roadway fronted by a 3½ foot high wall running the full length of the cliff tops with tea houses at either end. All this received the support of councillors by 25 votes to 10.

And yet within days this project was to be forgotten, for in the meantime the Corporation had finally got its hands on the Cavehill and Whitewell Tramway. Following this victory, Nance's ambitions to tame the Cave Hill merely shifted ground. He proposed to abandon the existing Glengormley pleasure ground - it was too small, and to buy land on the upper side of the Antrim Road, and to develop a larger attraction for would be tram users - 'a new and improved Bellevue Gardens'.

Bellevue Gardens

Costs of the new project were estimated at £5,000 to £20,000, and councillors had misgivings about Nance's vague sketch plans which men were already working to implement by May 1912. Consultants were called in, and, no doubt encouraged by Nance, came up with even more ambitious plans which in fact foreshadowed later development.

They envisaged a lower terrace with provision for an aviary, animal houses and an aquarium - the first suggestion of a zoo, and a dance hall foreshadowing the Floral Hall. This lower terrace was to be linked by the 224 steps, which we can still see today, rising to the upper terrace. Here there was to be a tea house, 'all the usual paraphernalia of a fair', a scenic railway, a pond and facilities for bowls and croquet. All this was to cost £50,000 or more.

PITHY POINTS ON

- 1 The distance from M'Art's Fort to Castle Junction is four and a half miles.

Two miles of proposed new line must be constructed at any rate for the convenience of the increasing population on the Old Cave Hill Road.
- 2 The height of M'Art's Fort is 1,188 feet above sea level.
- 3 The first three miles of the route would go through a district which would amply pay for the working expenses and fixed charges from the fares of the passengers who would not want to go to M'Art's Fort at all.

M'Art's Fort passengers proper would in reality only be responsible for one-third of the route, and less than five passengers per car to the he summit would pay expenses.
- 4 If the traffic turned out better than this, the fare could be reduced to 2d, each way, and Mr. Nance believes this would happen in the first year.

This and front illustration tak

e n s a t B e l l e v u e t o t h e S e a "

Councillors got cold feet and merely approved the basic layout, and there is little doubt that with this approval Nance hoped to proceed much further. Soon an army of 'hundreds of workers' was on site, and Nance was assisted by a captive press who described the Bellevue works as 'a pleasure ground not surpassed in the United Kingdom', indeed one with almost miraculous qualities for paths were 'so scientifically constructed that, although we are climbing up, no weariness is felt and we get there unexhausted'.

Ambitions Swept Away

All this was long before the grounds had actually opened. Nance too had anticipated events, advertising the attractions of Bellevue on tram tickets, and anticipating revenue. There was one flaw in all this - no proper survey had been done of the ground

and in November 1913 heavy rains triggered off major landslides destroying much of the work already done and threatening the rest of it.

Bellevue became known as 'Nance's folly', and a local music hall singer adapted Percy French's song, 'Where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea' to the words, 'Where the Gardens at Bellevue sweep down to the sea'.

Councillors too were quick to make Nance a scapegoat, accusing him of undertaking unauthorised expenditure. But the corporation had already staked so much on Bellevue that its own pride was at issue - it could not withdraw. Approval was given to complete the existing works, or those of them that could be secured. As a final insult the one substantial structure built on the site, a tea house on the upper terrace was burnt down by suffragettes in April 1914. War then intervened leaving the future of the gardens in limbo.

THE PROPOSED LINE

- 5 The work of construction could be done by the Tramway Department under Mr. Nance's direction. Mr. Nance always constructed the old company's lines by direct labour.

In this way 20 per cent, would be saved on estimated cost; the money would be spent locally, providing real relief work, and would result in a much better job.

- 6 Mr. Nance, one of the foremost tramway experts in the three kingdoms, stakes his reputation on the ability of the proposed line to pay its way.

He is supported in this opinion by the experienced officials, who have worked side by side with him for the last thirty years.

Everyone agrees on the desirability of the line, the only difficulty is the financial one, and as Mr. Nance's word is good enough on this point, let us have the M'Art's Fort Tramway as soon as possible.

Portents for the future

Chequered though this pre-first world war history of the Corporation's involvement with the hill was, it foreshadowed so much of what was to follow. The notion of a transport system to McArts Fort was not forgotten, and was to resurface in the early 80's with plans for a ski slope, and then in 1990 with a plan for a cable way. There in the embryo plans of 1912 were all the later features of Bellevue including, dance hall, fairground and zoo.

The involvement was initially almost accidental arising from a tramways war and indeed the Tramways Committee and later the Transport Committee was to retain responsibility for Corporation property on the hill until the 1960's. Legally the Transport Committee had a responsibility to earn revenue.

Its commitment to the hill was justified first on that basis and on the encouragement of extra use of the Antrim Road line. The merits of recreation were a second priority. In those days the natural environment came a poor third, indeed seems to have been considered as 'alien' an influence as the old Cavehill and Whitewell Tramway.

Then, perhaps, there were those elements held in common with today. Municipal ambition, often misplaced, combined with a municipal pride which, often, and equally unwisely, scorned even constructive criticism.

A C A V E H I L L

May has certainly seen the hill in all its contrasts. Days bathed in summer sunshine, with all the hill flora springing into flower, and very large numbers making their way to the summit. One wonders have the combined efforts of the City Council and the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign encouraged increased use of the upper parts of the hill. Those unfamiliar with the experience will still be somewhat mystified as to route finding. Courtesy of the Parks Department, large boulders have appeared, marked with mysterious signs - the colour coding familiar in other forest parks, but on the Cave Hill no key to these routes is yet to be found.

Despite the extra use, the paths are in better condition this year than last. This is entirely due to the relative success in keeping motor bikes off the hill, indeed some of the worst areas of damage are starting to grow back. The natural recovery of the paths in most places, suggests that gravelling, as applied on the lower paths, is not necessary on the higher paths, nor is it desirable.

Come the middle of May and the scene changed dramatically. Caught in a combined thunderstorm and vicious hailstorm on the summit one could see both the Antrim Plateau and the Mourne covered in deep snow. Since then record deluges have followed, and the summit of the hill has been a wild and windy place - a suitable haunt only for the well equipped. Such times serve as a useful reminder that the Cave Hill offers a truly wild environment, one

where the danger of cliffs or of rapidly changing weather can imperil the foolhardy.

That is even more true of the totality of the Belfast hill range. Engaging in a pilot expedition for the Belfast Hills Walk in thick mist, navigation across the Black Mountain and Divis by compass proved, as always, testing. Did you know that the trig point on Black Mountain is not actually on the summit? A minor problem that is fairly mind blowing in minimal visibility.

This walk once again confirms the notion that many a school which sends its children far away to the Mourne for outdoor pursuits, would find far better navigation tests closer to home. These hills certainly offer one unique sensation - the possibility of at one moment being apparently lost in a bleak wilderness, and the next looking into the backyard of a city through a rent in the clouds.



*Above & opposite: FALCO PEREGRINUS
- Peregrinus Falcon*

NOTEBOOK

Bird life too, often seems to be richer on the Belfast Hills than in the Mourne. Red grouse seem ever scarcer in either location, but this year we raised one on the back of Divis. Even on this blustery day the singing of skylarks aloft predominates - as insect hunters they seem, on such a day, a trifle optimistic. Except on McArt's Fort where we find one cowering on the ground. The explanation is not far off, as the Peregrine Falcons, now nesting on the cliff, circle above.

Coming down into the forest we note how the loose gravel applied liberally to the paths last year is now running off down hill. Thus the lower limestone slopes will progressively be provided with an over-layer of different stone, courtesy of inadequate construction by the Parks Department. Collin Glen at the far end of the hill range, provides a better example of how to construct paths. There edging boards are used to retain the path gravel.



Nicer things to report at the Castle, where at least the old disfiguring high security fencing is being replaced by ornamental fencing - one regrets even designer troubles architecture, but it is better than the original. The new ornamental garden at the Castle is certainly elegant and in keeping with the Castle, although on a wet Sunday afternoon- no pints welcome!

Nor do we, like so many others, carry a carry-out. Far be it from us to pass moral judgement on those who like a beer on the Cave Hill, but when they leave evidence of their visits in the form of burnt undergrowth, scorched and smashed trees, and a litter of cans and plastic bags, that is another matter. Of course it is not only the drinkers who scorn the environment - one can track many a respectable family party by their trail of crisp bags and soft drink cans. It is important that the Parks Department should seek to clear the rubbish, and they are entitled to our assistance in doing so.

CONTRIBUTIONS

We would welcome letters or other contributions for future issues of the Cave Hill Campaigner.

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FREE Full colour Cave Hill Poster

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign with the assistance of the Ultach Trust, has published the magnificent enclosed full colour poster of the Cave Hill.

This dramatically features the 1992 **Save the Belfast Hills Walk** and includes inset illustrations of some of the main features on the Hill and its wildlife. Captions are in English and Irish.

Additional copies are available free from the Campaign and bulk orders are welcome.

"It is doubtful if the view to be obtained from the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon could rival or even equal that to be obtained at Bellevue."

— Belfast Telegraph.

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign Aims

1. To oppose all mining and quarrying operations on the hill.
2. To take all steps necessary to ensure the preservation of the Cave Hill and surrounding area as a natural and unspoilt environment.
3. To propose positive measures to ensure that the area is preserved in this manner for public enjoyment.

Membership

Membership is £5 per annum or £1.00 if unwaged. Do join the ranks.

Name

Address

I enclose £5 £1 (tick whichever applicable)
Please return to:

Cave Hill Conservation Campaign,
19 Glandore Avenue, Belfast BT15 3FB