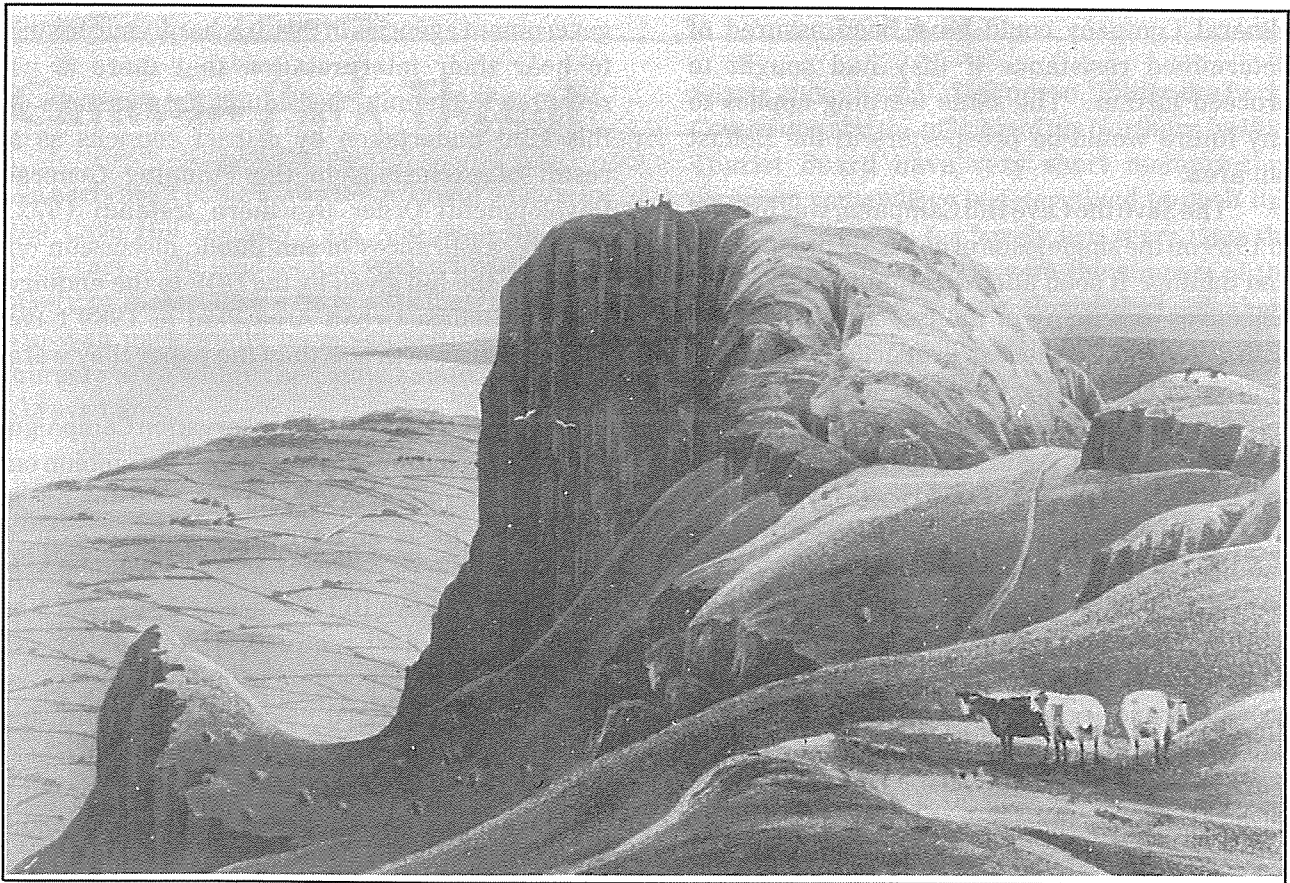


CAVE HILL campaigner

THE NEWS LETTER OF THE CAVE HILL CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN



Andrew Nicholl's view of McArt's Fort in 1828

No 1 . Autumn 1992 . Price 30p

Editorial

Welcome to the Cave Hill Campaigner news sheet of what is now the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign. Farewell then to the organisation's old name – the Save the Cave Hill Campaign, but the news sheet comes with the assurance that the organisation has not gone soft.

The change of name does mark one major victory – the decision of the Glenshesk Mineral Company not to renew its prospecting licence for the Cave Hill and Belfast hill area. Perhaps there were no commercial deposits of zeolite, the mineral they sought. If there had been the Glenshesk Mineral Company could have been assured of determined resistance if they had sought to proceed further. The same warning applies to any future would-be prospectors in the Belfast hill area.

The Save the Cave Hill Campaign was formed in 1989 on the single issue of opposing prospecting and mining. It soon adopted wider conservation objectives and many of the issues it is involved with are of more modest proportions than can appropriately be characterised as a matter of 'saving' the Cave Hill. One of our functions is indeed to welcome positive steps by public bodies when they are taken.

Having said that the actual prospect is bleak enough. We can indeed welcome some of the proposals of city councillors – they like us would like to see security fencing removed from the Castle. We can wholeheartedly welcome plans to provide proper access for walkers to the hill at Bellevue and guides for walkers to the hill. Meanwhile, however, they have put barbed wire all over the hill in the name of good management, proceeded with their pay in adventure playground close to Castle, are investigating a caravan and

camping site, are planning a two metre wide roadway to McArt's Fort for 'light machinery', and are planning to restore pathways and create new ones by the simple application of tons of gravel. They are doing so with the full encouragement of the Department of the Environment, and despite the fact that no environmental impact assessment has been made of any of their plans, and despite the fact that they have no overall management plan for the Cave Hill Country Park in place.

Given the complicity of the DOE and other government agencies in this, it is hardly surprising to hear their interpretation that there is no recourse to planning legislation for measures of this kind undertaken by district councils as a result of exclusions in the Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 1973. Equally, assurances of full public discussion on plans for the hill given by the DOE to the enquiry into the Belfast Urban Area Plan in 1989 have proved to be worth less than the paper they were written on.

Clearly the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign will have to continue to mobilise public opinion on these matters, to argue on each issue on a considered basis and with the help of expert advice. In doing so we have no party political axe to grind. The Cave Hill is a 'green' issue which is neither Orange nor Green in the traditional sense. In those circumstances, we will, in the run-up to the May 1993 Council elections report, on the record of councillors on Cave Hill issues and seek pledges from candidates. Perhaps where reasoned argument fails this kind of pressure may enjoy greater success.

John Gray

A Better Belfast Hill Walk

The third Belfast Hills Walk, which coincides with this first issue of our newsletter, highlights an area in which public bodies could have made progress and have manifestly failed to do so. It is a great encouragement that this event, pioneered by our campaign, takes place this year under the umbrella of Better Belfast and involves a swathe of environmental and community groups throughout Belfast. The walk well deserves this kind of enthusiasm for where else in the British Isles would you find a ten mile mountain walk either within or close to a city boundary.

Extraordinarily, however, walkers have no assurance that they have a right of way along the Belfast skyline. The act of walking the route annually asserts the right but by no means establishes it and barbed wire fortifications en

route suggest otherwise. Yet since 1984 District Councils have had powers under the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 to create public rights of way with due compensation to land-owners. No progress appears to have been made with this, and we think we have a right to ask why.

Meanwhile the DOE tells us that it is behind schedule with its plans for the Belfast Hill area. Given that the original Belfast Urban Area Plan in 1969 proposed an Antrim Hills Park, we can only assume that the DOE on this issue, as with so many others, is still reversing.

Let us hope that each foot print on the Belfast Hills Walk also makes some imprint on the public bodies which so far have manifestly failed to act in securing our rights of way. For your Cave Hill Route see Itinerary, right.

Caravan Park Threat

An early draft of the Parks Department's plans for the Cave Hill Country Park and seen by us in February 1990 tells us just where this threat is likely to materialise – 'it is anticipated that the caravan park would be positioned near the old nursery area within the Castle Estate' (i.e. above G rays Lane).

It was a pity about the destruction of the old walled garden in the 80s, and, who knows, even then the caravan park idea may have been in the offing. Subsequently, however, the area has become an attractive meadow with possibly the most spectacular view of McArt's Fort. It is unthinkable that it could become a caravan site with its attendant 'on site facilities — such as toilets, service points etc.'

When Cobham Resource Consultants, employed by the City Council with Northern Ireland Tourist Board support, reported on the matter in April 1990 they evidently thought so too for they concluded:

"In view of the uncertain demand and short season, coupled with the possibility of permanent caravans 'appearing' on site, and the potential eyesore to other park users, we do not consider this to be a worthwhile project to pursue on this site."

Surely enough said! Alas not so. Either the Parks Committee and the officials of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board have very short memories or someone somewhere is determined to push this proposal through, for barely two years later the Parks Committee, again with the support of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, has set about appointing fresh consultants to look into the feasibility of a caravan park on the hill.

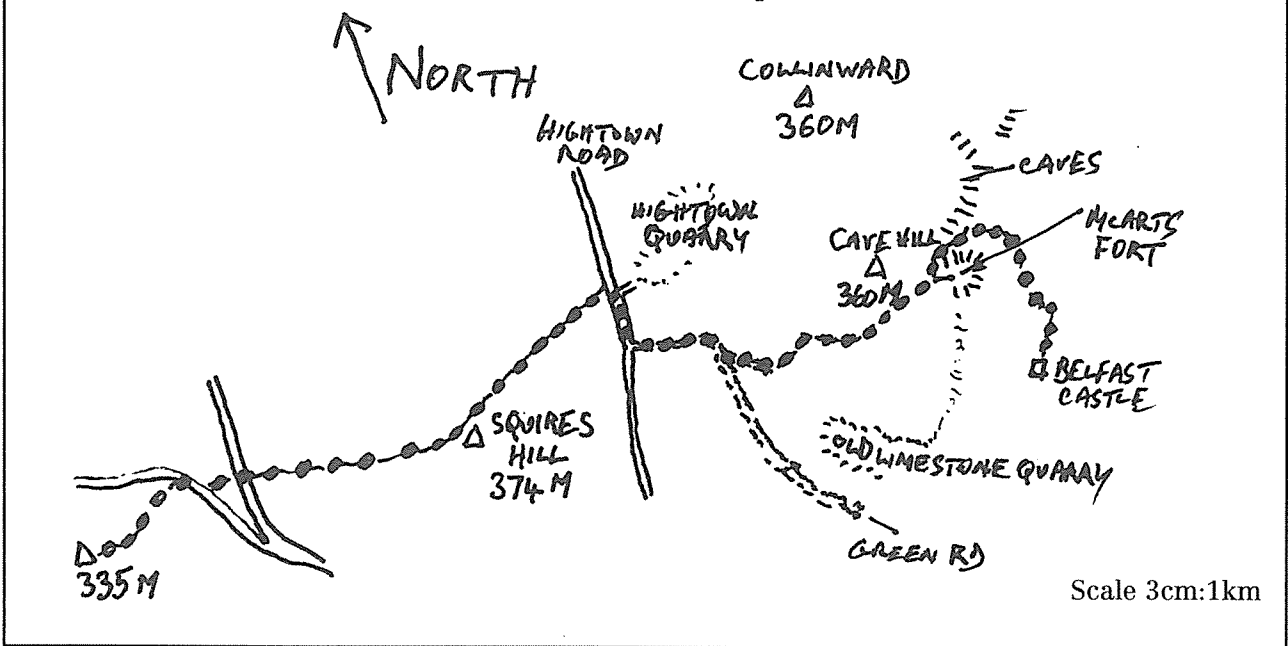
The Campaign condemns this consultants' jamboree at the expense of ratepayers and taxpayers and is totally opposed to any such development.

Upper Cave Hill Road Victory ... and a Caution

Congratulations to residents at Upper Cave Hill Road who have persuaded the Parks Department to drop proposals for a car park at the Upper Cave Hill Road entrance to the hill. This could never be more than a local and subsidiary entry point to Cave Hill Country Park and, as such, certainly has adequate on street parking at present.

It certainly suggests that local groups of residents may get through to the Parks Department on individual issues. Upper Cave Hill residents should also be aware of the plan to turn the path leading up by the steps and through to the Castle Estate into one providing vehicular access 'on security grounds'. The Campaign has expressed its mystification at this and has sought further explanation without success.

Belfast Hills Walk Route from Squire's Hill to Cave Hill



The Great Right of Way Case – an historic Cave Hill Struggle

The Save the Cave Hill Campaign, and now the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign, follows in a proud tradition, for the first recorded environmental and rights of way group in Ulster was founded on the hill in 1856. It went on to win a great rights of way victory in a celebrated court case.

The circumstances were these. In 1855 one Joseph Magill, the first would be speculative property developer on the Antrim Road line, closed off the traditional route of access to the Cave Hill which ran up above Gray's Lane to the Volunteer Well. He proceeded to construct a grandiose house, Martlett Towers, and even enclosed the Volunteer Well within its outbuildings.

In response 68 prominent citizens of the town came together and subscribed one guinea each to form the Association for the Protection of Rights of Way in and around Belfast. They even had the support of the Lord Mayor who acted as

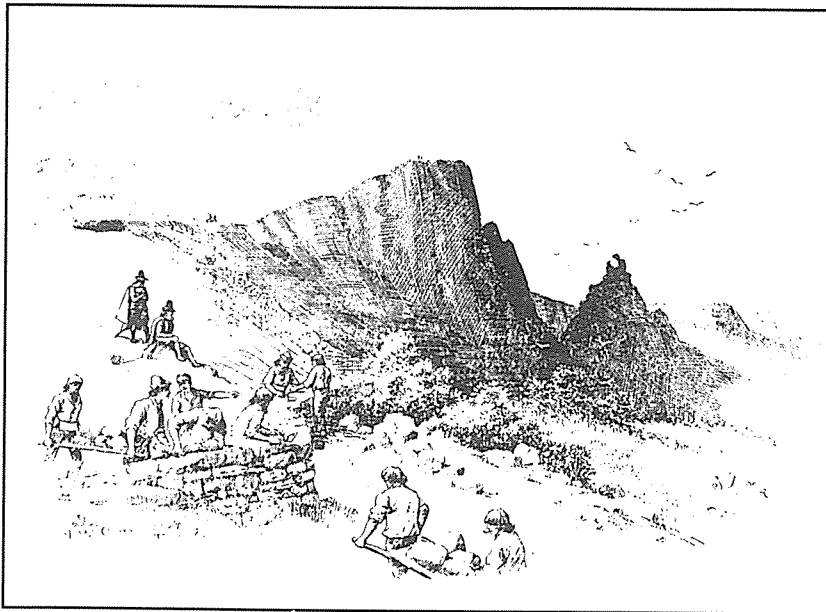
President. They proceeded to take Joseph Magill to court and a famous trial lasting one week followed in 1858 and Magill was found guilty of breaching a right of way.

The case aroused so much interest that the evidence was published in pamphlet form by the Northern Whig and gives a fascinating picture of life on the hill at the time. The case for the Rights of Way Association was won on two main grounds. Firstly that the path over Cave Hill had been a traditional route for those travelling from Greencastle to Glenavy or over to Ligoniel secondly that it was the route of access to the great annual Easter Monday fair which had been held high on the Cave Hill since time immemorial right up until the 1850s.

Justice was done and Magill enjoyed the fate deserved by all those who stamp on rights of public access – he was ruined by the case and went bankrupt.

From Squire's Hill to the Cave Hill

Squire's Hill probably owes its name to the Chichesters who were effectively the 'squire's' of all Belfast but included Squire's Hill in their park which also included the area still known today as Oldpark. The hill was one of the principal haunts of Niece or Aneas O'Haughan, the celebrated 18th century rapparee or highwayman. Why should O'Haughan have frequented Squire's Hill? In those days it lay beside what was then the Antrim Road from Belfast and here he waylaid merchants returning from market in Belfast. Coming over the summit you should see Bohill to the left and Cave Hill to the right with the promontory of McArt's Fort already jutting up.



More immediately and just beyond the Hightown Road you will see the great scar of the Hightown Quarry at present used as an infill dump ostensibly with a view to restoration of the original landscape. The present owners have engaged in significant tree planting to the right of the quarry.

Proceed down to the Hightown Road via delightful unspoilt meadows, cross the Hightown Road and you enter the Cave Hill Country Park owned by Belfast City Council. The old Corporation acquired the Belfast Castle Estate in 1935 and in 1988 added the Wallace Estate, the area you are now entering. The first part of the route lies via the 'old coach road' or 'green' road which used to serve the now destroyed quarry villages of Mummystown and Daddystown. The great limestone quarry lies below your route but its development in the 1830s. represented the first

quarrying in the Belfast area on a truly industrial scale. It was linked by gravity railway to the docks and gave its name to the Limestone Road which was the original line of the railway.

You branch up the hill to the left along a track to the ruins of the highest of the old farms on the hill. From here on up the route is by a path severely scarred by motor bikes in places. Belfast City Council's current proposals, strongly opposed by the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign, are to turn this path into a two metre wide track all the way to McArt's Fort. The next scar appears, courtesy of the City Council, as you cross the brow of the hill onto the summit plateau where you will

notice a barbed wire fence running right across to the summit of Cave Hill or Ben Madigan, itself an anglicisation of the name of the Irish chieftain Madadhgain.

To the right lies McArt's Fort. A stupendous defensive position and viewpoint. This has been roughly dated to early medieval times, though Viking silver was found at this location in the early 19th century. The fort is named after Brian McArt O'Neill. McArt's Fort is also celebrated as the place where Wolfe Tone and his associates assembled in 1795 and swore 'never to desist — until we subverted the authority of England — and asserted

our independence'. At that time the fort was known as 'the cap of liberty' rather than as Napoleon's nose.

More problematical is the theory that it was one of the throning places of the O'Neill's. This was a proposition first advanced on minimal evidence by Sir Samuel Ferguson in the 1830s, and the stones concerned were heaved off the top in 1898 by vandals. Since then others of the same ilk have lowered the top of McArt's Fort by several feet in the same way.

Looking north along the line of crags from the summit you will see caves in the most prominent of these. There are in fact 5 of them and they are undoubtedly man made. The first record of them dates from 1556 and they may have been used for storing valuables or as a place of safety in times of attack. Only the two lowest caves are easily reached and very many people

have been killed over the years in trying to reach the higher ones. On the same crag a pair of peregrine falcons nested this year and if you do not see them you are almost certain to see ravens.

You're on the home straight now, but take care on the awkward scramble down to the plateau below the caves. Erosion of the old path has wreaked havoc here. Now you can see the bottom cave from below and wonder how it could have been used by poteen sellers at the great Easter Monday fair which was held here right up to the 1850s. with up to 20,000 attending and complete with tented encampment. The answer to the poteen seller problem is that erosion since the 1850s. has increased the height of the rock wall into the bottom cave. You pass an odd spike of eroded basalt known as the tent rock from the days of the fair and head down into the pine forest.

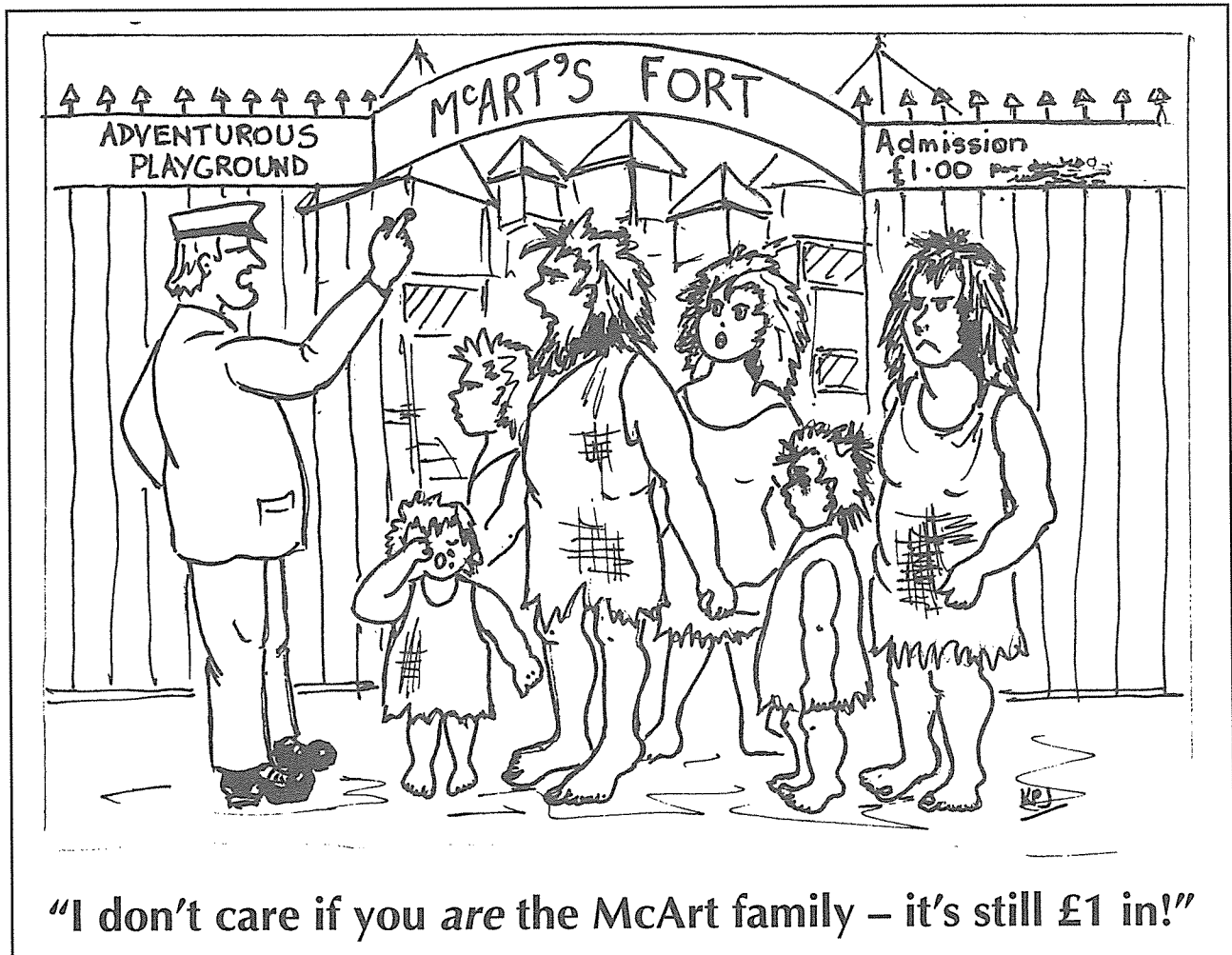
This is not a native forest. Almost all of it was planted by the Shaftesburys following the construction of Belfast Castle in 1867 - 1870. Before that the area was a deer park though there is little historical evidence of deer. On your way

down you might note Belfast City Council's crude ideas on path construction - send the digger through and pile on the gravel. We are taking bets on how soon a flood will collapse crudely exposed banks and send the gravel sliding down hill!

You've made it. Well done. We know you will be feeling a little delicate and hesitate to suggest an environmental shock but you'll probably see it anyway if you let your eyes wander to the left. Yes it's the new McArt's Fort, courtesy of Belfast City Council, designed by the same man who supplies border look-out posts. Actually it's a pay, in adventure playground. Wrong thing in the wrong place we say. After all the Belfast hills are an adventure playground without having to pay in aren't they!

Now you have finished. If you don't have a lift home, take the roadway past the adventure playground down to the Antrim Road where you can get a bus. And thanks for coming!

Illustration, page 4: Engraving by J.W. Carey, published in 1909, showing McArt's Fort.



The Forest University

A casual glance at Cave Hill will surely result in a pleasing feeling as the eye sees a forest covered slope. Although much of the forest was planted in the early parts of this century, some areas, namely Hazelwood, are primeval. Let's look closer. The forest comprises of different varieties of trees and plants, oaks, ash, hawthorn, beech etc. In other words, tall trees, small trees, bushes, grasses, herbs, climbing vegetation reaching up again, root systems, fungi and ferns, even the mosses on the bark are colonised by smaller varieties of mosses. At all these levels a host of beneficial bacterias, bird, animal and creepy crawly insect life is continually active, noisily making all the necessary connections. In different areas sunlight and shadows result in completely different environments – damp and dry, water-logged and windy, flowing waters and densely overgrown fertility.

Wilderness is often seen as chaotic. However if we take more than a casual glance, we can observe a fantastically interconnected ecosystem that is very productive. A forest is stable in the sense that it only needs light for photosynthesis, rain and rocks to make its soil and fertilisers.

If we clear forest we lose integral functions. These include oxygen, soil conditioning and stabilising, carbon dioxide absorption, cloud seeding abilities, water retention, climatic modification, beauty, fuels, wildlife support, shade and shelter, leaf moulds and seed provision, and the freedom to learn with leisure. Here we see germination, growing, flowering, fruit-bearing, withering, dying, rotting and the building of nutrition for the new life cycle.

No scientist in the world could recreate every genetic component of the forest on Cave Hill. We should not be deceived by the propaganda that promises “for every tree cut down, a tree planted”. The exchange of a fifty gramme seedling for a forest giant of fifty — one hundred tonnes is like the offer of a mouse for an elephant. No new afforestation can replace an old forest in energy value!

Therefore, if we interfere with this complex forest system to suit our amplified interests we will cause great havoc. Soil erosion, for example,

Cave Hill
Conservation Campaign



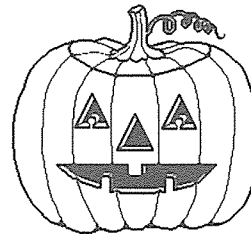
HALLOWE'EN BARN DANCE

Saturday, 24th October

8 'til late

at 21 Lenamore Drive,
Jordanstown

Tickets £3



Buses at 8.30pm
and 9.30pm from
Fortwilliam Shops,
Antrim Road

CONTRIBUTIONS

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

is an ongoing process that needs careful repair work in order to halt its progress. Globally, we lose fifty thousand tonnes of soil every minute in this erosion.

Unlike our man-made consuming system, forests are only interested in abundance and produce no pollution in the process, and that is why this article is entitled “The Forest University”.

Philip Allen

The Badgers of Cave Hill

Some years ago an employee of the Parks Dept. informed me – in a rather embarrassed way – that Craig Wallace had directed his workers to leave fallen tree trunks where they lay, as habitats for insects. I was amused, then impressed. The wood and its creatures – even the humble wood-lice – were safe, protected, in the hands of a knowing boss.

There has been much talk of conservation in the interim, and the Castle environment was sensitively guarded under Mr Wallace; but in very recent times a devastating change has undone much of his work. I take just one sad story of official vandalism: the badgers. One of the special pleasures of walking in the Castle grounds – during some 40 years of my lifetime – was watching the badgers emerge at dusk from the rhododendron shrubberies to play and grub about in their inimitable and charming way, feeding in safety. What wonderfully protected setts, hidden far inside the dense branches, out of reach of men with terriers and spades, the same men who had dug up and destroyed less well-hidden setts further up the hill until the fear of prosecution halted them. After all, the law is clear: interference with badgers or their setts is punishable by heavy fines. Imagine then the horror of watching park employees systematically:

1. cutting down all the rhododendrons
2. burning them in huge fires on top of the setts and finally
3. treating the stumps with poison.

What we have now are three areas of setts turned into gross eyesores, colonised by rank weeds – some of which are poisonous to animals themselves. Nowadays we all know about invasive rhododendrons: David Bellamy has seen to that. *Rhododendron Ponticum* is indeed invasive. But in forty years I have seen no *Ponticum* in the Castle grounds. How could there be? They were all specimen trees and shrubs some of which can be seen in Rowallane for example. They were planted by plantsmen. The ground where they died at the Castle shows no signs of seeding or layering as would be the case with *Ponticum*. Only pathetic shoots from the crippled, burnt, poisoned roots, struggle for life.

Rabbits have also been displaced by thoughtless, needless planting. I see them now in strange places – dank and damp, not their choice, and animals normally choose so well.

But that's another sad story ... By the way, the woodlice are still happy with their lot ...

M. Lecky

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