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Conservation Campaign  
May 2008

# The Cave Hill CAMPAIGNER



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# Chairman's Report

It has been a good year for Cave Hill. Last year, in the Campaigner, I reported that one of our aims for the Hill was that Belfast City Council should have a management plan so that there would be a series of criteria against which to judge proposals for change. This should ensure a coherent and sensitive approach to the Park, its development and its problems. I'm glad to report that such a management plan is being developed by the Council Officer responsible for Cave Hill and is being implemented this spring.

One very positive development is that The Cavehill Conservation Campaign has been consulted throughout the process; the committee had a meeting with the Council Officer late last summer when he was drawing up his proposals, and we also have had a preview of what is being planned.. The draft was considered at a committee meeting and warmly received. Our view was that it contained a great deal that was laudable; our only reservation was that there might not be enough funds to implement it.

That consultation was part of a noticeable trend this last year or so; we are in much closer contact with the City Council officers responsible for Cave Hill. Apart from the officer in overall control, there is a City Council Biodiversity Officer and a City Council Countryside Officer. We have worked with the Biodiversity Officer in tree planting and in putting up nest boxes, and the Countryside Officer has drawn us into the scheme for the upgrading of the paths below and to the north of the caves.

There has been one major new problem on the Hill this year. Those who frequent its upper reaches cannot have failed to notice the amount of plastic rubbish caught in the high fences and entangled low among the roots of the shrubs further down the hill. This is not unconnected with the grading work being carried out in the MacWill landfill site on the Hightown Road. That process is bringing a lot of loose plastic rubbish to the surface and prevailing westerly winds are carrying it into the Park. We wrote a letter of complaint to the owners of the site and the Council Officer also made strong representations to the company. The result was an acknowledgement of responsibility and an agreement to pay a group of men for a short time to remove the offending material. But that was a short-term solution. As I write, more plastic rubbish is being blown into the Park and this is likely to continue while the landfill site is being graded. We have to hope that the site owner can be held responsible for this, and will either provide men to remove it while the grading work is continuing, or that funding may be made available to enable the Council to deal with the problem.

We have also been engaged in seeking protection for a badger sett in the vicinity of the Park. We are, at present, lobbying the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of the Department of the Environment, to determine precisely whether such a sett exists and, if so, to ensure that the developer takes action to safeguard these wonderful and beautiful creatures.

Last year we began the process of trying to link all our members electronically. We asked all members for their email addresses, and in return we promised to keep them informed of all our activities on the Hill. To that end we have sent out summaries of our committee meetings every two months along with details of any future projects. We will continue to do this. It is an excellent way of keeping members aware of developments, and I would urge members with email addresses to pass them to us for inclusion on our database. Don't forget that our website editor, Peter McCloskey, details our activities on the website and this is an additional way of keeping up-to-date. Check out: [www.cavehill.freeuk.com](http://www.cavehill.freeuk.com)

You can also contact us electronically by emailing me direct at [cormachamill@ireland.com](mailto:cormachamill@ireland.com)

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# EDUCATION MATTERS

An important element of any education is the transmission of a community's cultural heritage to successive generations. Schools play a vital role in this process. In some respects, they are the designated guardians of the natural and cultural heritage of society.

An understanding of and respect for the local environment is – arguably – best attempted in primary schools. At this stage, when their sense of wonder remains undiminished, children are more likely to respond to appeals for an empathetic understanding of the world into which they are emerging. Early development of a sense of place might, one may hope, survive to inform the sympathies of the adult and thus help to protect and, indeed, enhance the community's idea of itself.

Three primary schools, long established and well respected in the Cave Hill area, make important contributions to this process. Embedded as securely in the affections of the local community as they are in the geography of the area, *Cave Hill Primary School*, *Ben Madigan Preparatory School*, and *Our Lady of Lourdes School*, in their different and very singular ways reflect the history of the locality and, by imaginatively and creatively interpreting curricular requirements, introduce their pupils to a sympathetic engagement with their environment both natural and man-made.

Many people who live in this part of the city are aware that a light railway – the first in Ulster and the third in Ireland – was constructed to transport material from the limestone quarry on Cavehill for use in the prodigious development of 19<sup>th</sup> century Belfast. Fewer, perhaps, know of the connection between this industry and *Cave Hill Primary School*. As a former Principal and historian of the school, Ken Robinson, has pointed out, *Cave Hill School* began in 1844 as *The Cavehill Railway National School*. The original application to the National Commissioners for Education in Ireland to establish a school

was made by John Wallace, solicitor to the railway company. The school was then constructed from limestone quarried from Cave Hill and when completed, provided instruction for the children of the railway and quarry workers.

The school was transferred to the Antrim Education Authority in 1927 and was known thereafter as Cavehill Public Elementary School. Closed during the Second World War the school was used as an Air Raid Warden's Post. However a new prefabricated school for 360 pupils was built after the war and opened its doors in 1954. Nowadays the site is occupied by the most recent reinvention of Cavehill school: an impressively modern, light, airy building complete with wind turbine and solar panels. By a nice irony of history, the principal of this splendid new school is also a Mr Wallace.

Off the main Antrim Road, the Preparatory Department of Belfast Royal Academy, more generally known as *Ben Madigan*, from the name of the 9<sup>th</sup> century chieftain who dominated the region, lies within the former Castle Estate. The Academy's playing fields, known as the Castle Grounds, were acquired from the then Lord Shaftesbury in 1934, and in due course trees were removed and playing areas levelled and drained under the supervision of the groundsman who had just two years before laid out the new grounds for the Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont.

Although the grounds had been intended as the site of a Preparatory Department for the Academy, this development did not take place until after the war, a consequence of which for the school was the dispersal of many of the Academy's pupils to temporary accommodation in some of the smaller towns in Northern Ireland which were deemed safe from German bombing.

By 1965 a new purpose-built school was opened at the Castle Grounds. An extended single-storey construction designed by Allan Dorman, a former pupil of the school, *Ben Madigan* was very much in the architectural idiom of the time with a flat roof and plate glass windows overlooking the playing fields. Situated just below the tree line, and in the benign shadow of Cave Hill, the building cheerfully but unobtrusively complements the natural beauty of its surroundings.

A near neighbour of *Ben Madigan* is *Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School* more colloquially known as *Park Lodge School*. The original Park Lodge was the great house on the site of which the present school stands.

According to the informative prospective of the school, Park Lodge was a splendid building apparently modelled on the mansion in which Napoleon Bonaparte was imprisoned on the island of St Helena after his final defeat at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. It sat, complete with tower, and in its 19<sup>th</sup> century grandeur, surrounded by "fruit gardens, outhouses and glasshouses." Latterly it was owned by the Baird family, proprietors of the *Belfast Telegraph* and during the second world war it became an ARP station, as had *Cavehill School*. The first pupils of *Park Lodge School* were enrolled in 1958 when the Christian Brothers purchased the by now rather neglected old building and converted it to a school. Work on the present modern building, which has such a distinctive presence on the Antrim Road, began in 1964 and it was formally opened in 1967. In 1990 girls were enrolled for the first time.

A nineteenth century authority on what was then known as elementary education held that it should "benefit the health, cultivate the mind and train [the pupils] in habits of benevolence and virtue." These three schools, in bright attractive buildings, and situated as they are in one of the most picturesque districts of the city, beneath the brow of Cavehill and overlooking the great sweep of Belfast Lough, are ideally placed to express a less stern version of this ideal. And in doing so they display a sensitivity to their immediate environment which their Victorian predecessors perhaps lacked.

Edward McCamley

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# Wild About the Belfast Hills – Review

This is a glossy booklet accompanied by a CD-ROM. The emphasis is on biodiversity in the Belfast Hills, an environment which includes Cave Hill and which is of interest to us all. It was launched in early April by the Belfast Hills Partnership. The author, Dr Jim Bradley, is the Partnership manager. He has also contributed articles to the Campaigner over the last few years.

The booklet is copiously illustrated and is generally laid out by habitat. It describes woodland and quarries; indicates the varieties of flora and fauna to be found there, and directs the reader to where these habitats may be found. It highlights species, such as the marsh fritillary butterfly, which have disappeared from our hills. But then, perhaps not; the flower it feeds on, the *Devil's Bit Scabious*, is not uncommon on Cave Hill and a survey might reveal its location. The booklet, in fact encourages readers to look out for these rare species and to report their presence. It does not say so, but I imagine that any reported sighting would require verification. Perhaps one should carry a camera in walks on the hills!

There is also a short description of some of the sites in the Belfast Hills. Cave Hill is featured here, with a brief description of the habitats on the Hill and the associated wildlife. Details of how to gain access are included.

The production is so professional and so attractive that it lifts the attention beyond the Cave Hill and helps the reader to acknowledge that while our own area is indeed wonderful, there is much to see and do throughout the Belfast hills.

The production is clearly designed to appeal to schools. The CD-ROM has educational quizzes, games and information on local wildlife, and would be of particular interest to

biology, geography and art students in both primary and secondary schools.

However there is a sad sub-text to the book. In drawing our attention to biodiversity, it inevitably indicates the losses that are occurring. The only way that biodiversity can be maintained - it implies - is by public pressure based on increased awareness of the fragility of the local environment, and in emphasising it this publication is doing sterling service. Copies of the booklet are available from Jim Bradley, the Belfast Hills Partnership at 90603466 or at [jim.bradley@belfasthills.org](mailto:jim.bradley@belfasthills.org)

Cormac E Hamill

## PROTECT THAT TREE

In December 2007 a group of mature trees at the bottom of Fortwilliam Park was felled. These beautiful trees, which were of considerable vintage and a distinctive feature of the area, were unceremoniously removed in preparation for a controversial building project which would incorporate the site. A small but sophisticated support system for the insects and birds that inhabited them, and which are essentially irreplaceable, was swept away. The trees had no protection orders to help ensure their survival.

It is not commonly known but anyone has the right to request a Tree Protection Order (TPO) for either a single or a group of trees. If you know of and wish to protect a stand of trees act now. Contact: Department of Planning Service (Tree Preservation) Belfast City Council. The relevant telephone number is 90 252 800.

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# THE GREAT CAVE HILL RIGHT OF WAY CASE – 150<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY PLANS

Next year sees the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what can deservedly be called the great Cave Hill rights of way case of 1859. This secured the right of way which enters today's Cave Hill Country Park facing Gray's Lane, rises via the Volunteer Well to the caves, and then to McArts Fort (though the latter part is now virtually impassable owing to landslips).

The formation of the Association for the Protection of Public Rights of Way in 1856, and its epic struggle against the speculative builder Joseph Magill, culminating in the court case victory of 1859 was pioneer stuff indeed. The Association was almost certainly the first in Ulster to seek to protect rights of way for recreational purposes. Given the weakness of rights of way protection in Northern Ireland 150 years later, the episode retains its relevance today, and of course has enduring significance for those of us who love the Cave Hill. It is an anniversary that we should mark.

The most obvious way to do so would be to organise an anniversary walk along the route threatened in the 1850s. In doing so we can explore the rich history of the route, and of the people who lived and worked on the Hill at the time, and who campaigned to protect free access to it.

One of the reasons that we know so much about the episode is that an 88 page transcript of the 1859 trial was published at the time by the *Northern Whig*, and the original rules and membership list of the Association are also available in printed form. We are fortunate too that L'Estrange and Brett, who acted as solicitors for the Association survive to this day, and Adam Brett of the firm has recently located maps from the case in their archive. An obvious anniversary objective must be to re-publish these invaluable documents with an appropriate introduction and illustrations.

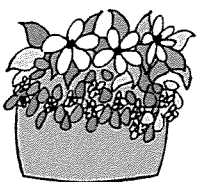
If anyone has in their possession other documents or early photographs of the path relating to Joseph Magill's ill-fated villa at Martlett Towers, we would much appreciate copies. They can help enhance the proposed publication.

In the meantime for anyone who wants to know more now, a longer account of the case was published in the 2004 *Cave Hill Campaigner* and can be accessed via the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign.

John Gray

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## Plastic Problems - What Can We Do?

Plastic has been a very useful part of our lives for years. We have disposable plates, cutlery, cups, bottles and shopping bags. All very convenient but few people consider what happens to the plastic after it has been used.

Plastic waste is unsightly and its disposal causes major problems in our environment. As it slowly decomposes it releases toxins into the water supply and into the food chain.

At a recent party all the fare was served on plastic cutlery so the host would have less washing up to do.

Surely it is time we took a stand to do our bit and stop adding to the plastic mountains. These will cause problems for generation to come. We should stop using plastic needlessly. Try, where possible, to recycle plastic bags and other products. And we should make a conscious effort to save our countryside, and especially the Cavehill, from being despoiled by plastic waste. Perhaps the best use of a plastic bag is to bring it with us when walking on the Hill and use it to bring some small element of waste home for more thoughtful disposal or recycling: as one of the major commercial providers of plastic bags insists - "Every Little Helps."



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## Anti-Social Behaviour

As summer approaches residents and the local community around Belfast Castle and Cavehill Country Park are bracing themselves for another season of anti-social behaviour...namely underage drinking, (apparent drug-taking) and trespassing. However steps have been taken by the various agencies to deal with these problems and to alleviate the distress caused to local residents. Meetings have been held involving the PSNI, the City Council's Parks and Amenities Committee, and neighbourhood watch groups to develop a strategy to combat the ongoing inconvenience and to confront this issue.

Wardens patrol at weekends and will remove alcohol from underage drinkers and require them to disperse (should there be a large crowd, the police are called). The wardens can be contacted by telephone from Belfast Castle Reception. Local police are regularly in attendance at weekends monitoring the behaviour of youths coming and going from the Castle grounds.

Further measures taken include: the replacement and upgrading of lighting on the main thoroughfare, the erection of a new security camera at the entrance, and the planting of bushes and brambles to discourage gangs gathering in secluded areas near residents' homes.

Let us hope that these welcome initiatives will succeed in helping to resolve the problem.

Frustrated Resident

## The Lost Meadow – Requiem for a Special Place

Within the last few months a beautiful, secluded meadow area has been lost forever to the Cavehill Country Park and the citizens of North Belfast. The area, close to Belfast Castle, was a quiet, peaceful haven at the edge of the woodland. For generations, people of all ages visited this meadow area and were revived by its beauty. It was safe for and popular with older people and children alike loved to walk there each day and spend time near the mountain stream. It was especially lovely on a spring or summer morning with the birds, insects and the wild flowers blooming.

Sadly, over recent years a number of young people in their teens started to use this area as a meeting place in the evenings. They met, sometimes drank too much alcohol and partied. Inevitably local residents and their property became the focus of abuse. Neither police nor council staff were able to prevent such behaviour and the situation became intolerable.

As a result the area has now been planted with shrubs so that walking is no longer possible and the joys of this special place are lost forever.

### A Hill Walker

As a community it is important to try to let young people know the outcomes of their actions. They have lost the meadow area for themselves, for their parents and for their children. They knew not what they were doing.

# THE LAST OF T

Envy is a mean customer. I have two friends, both older than myself, who regularly (no, let's be honest, with monotonous and sickening frequency) run to the top of the Cave Hill and back. Several times a week they lope carelessly along different paths, one with his dog, the other listening to the radio on a fancy, arm-strapped gadget, wending their way to the top. They doubtlessly do a spot of Rocky-esque victory-bouncing on McArt's Fort before slipping effortlessly down the track again, their skins radiating health and their limbs pulsing with strength and elasticity as they drop like gazelles from trail to trail, from rock to rock, entering the cover of the trees only to emerge finally onto the tarmac and concrete of our streets.

Since moving to North Belfast a few years ago, my wife and I have been fairly frequent visitors to the Country Park, even being known to climb occasionally the whole way to the top. However, once bitten by the bug I had to scratch that itch. I devised a training schedule and reckoned I would be running the whole way to the top in two months. I checked some marathon training schedules on the Net and noticed with interest that certain experts promoted the benefits of mixing in a bit of walking with the running – run a bit, walk a bit, run a bit. I balked at the idea of being

seen in my shorts and runners *walking* – people would think I was a bit feeble or something, wouldn't they? The fact is, once I started into my training schedule, the walking was less an optional extra and more an unavoidable necessity. However, I was cute enough to time my walking for when no one was looking and to break into a jog when anyone came into view. Sometimes, however, I was too exhausted even for this little tactic and had to resort to the old, "I've just stopped to tie my shoelace," act.

The fact is, running uphill is hard! I mean, surely we're not built for it, are we? Running on the flat you get out of breath, granted. But you know it's going to come back; you just have to keep going at a fairly regular pace. But running uphill it doesn't come back! It's like

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# THE MOHICANS

all the blood in your legs is rushing to your heart to keep it going and your lungs seem to be on the point of collapse and you just know that if you don't stop you're going to have a heart attack. I used to get to the top of the Old Cavehill Road without too much bother. My legs showed a little of their old agility picking my way between the rocks and puddles up the "loney" beside the reservoir. But then comes the sickening gradient up to the beginning of the tree line. As I puffed and groaned up this climb, past the crushed Tennents cans and discarded Subway packaging. I empathized with Hillary on Everest – at a certain point you just have to accept your limitations and admit you need the oxygen.

Other humiliations were to follow. Once you get to that little spot where the teenage boozers hang out you feel like you've achieved something, but not a bit of it, for only a few yards further on there is another steep section that winds upwards between the bushes. I'm afraid I have to confess that not once did I ever succeed in negotiating this stretch without spluttering ignominiously to a stagger. But then, redemption! The path that runs along just parallel to the Castle grounds and looking down on its battlements proved to be a Godsend. Here I was able to muster up a bit of true grit and break into a jog, smiling conspiratorially at other runners and meeting walkers who dared to catch my eye with a supercilious smirk.

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That smirk would soon be wiped from my face. There is one particular short section of the path that took me by surprise every time – you approach it round an apparently innocent corner, all sweetness and blackberry bushes, but suddenly you're looking up a stony, rutted track of unforgiving acclivity! And at this point you're hardly a third of the way to the top! No, the summit would not be mine. No power-bouncing on McArt's Fort for me! I had to admit defeat.

On Thursdays, my wife and I rise early and walk to the camel's humps. We take our time and listen to the birds and even gloat a little that we are blessed with such a walk on our doorstep. We stop at the top and look down at the early morning traffic building up on the M2. Sometimes a runner happens by at that moment, sweating and puffing happily up the track. Then he trundles off toward the summit and we begin our descent. There is still the odd stirring of the little green chap at these moments and, on those occasions when a blackberrying expedition is mooted by my other half, my inner warrior rebels – I ought to be skimming 'neath the trees, hopping from rock to rock, like Daniel Day-Lewis in *The Last of the Mohicans* toting his blunderbuss and moving with the ease and assurance of some 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuchulain. But then I remember the desperate struggle to keep moving when your legs are like lead and fighting for breath when it seems as if some invisible fist has landed one on your solar plexus. Then the little green gremlin crawls off with his tail between his legs, and the inner warrior stops blustering and sits down with a bump.

Some Sundays we take the car and drive up to the Hightown Road car park before breakfast. From there it's only a twenty minute walk to Napoleon's Nose and from there we enjoy the best view of Belfast there is. We meet people up there and we have a chat. It's heartening the way people who would otherwise not exchange words can fall into easy conversation while standing in front of that vast panorama. Perhaps there's something about it that puts us in our place and banishes differences. When visitors come to stay with us we bring them here and they often say it's the highlight of their visit – they hadn't expected such natural beauty so close to a city. I can't boast to them that I've run the whole way up to this point, and I feel a little guilty taking the car, but it gives so much pleasure I feel it can't be bad.

I've now taken up swimming and I've got my eye on that sixty-five year old who keeps lapping me. I'll show him ... one day.

John Gribbin

# 2007 Cave Hill Visitor Survey

On Sunday 17 June 2007, members of the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign carried out the annual survey of visitors to Cave Hill. Having established in previous years that, on average, 400 visitors visit the area of the Caves, and about 300 of these make it to McArt's Fort, in 2006 we decided to try to determine the relative popularity of the various routes to this site.. In 2007 we repeated this in order to try to eliminate any anomalies or peculiarities that might occur in any one year and, in so doing, to determine the underlying pattern.

The routes chosen and the numbers found over the period (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) were as follows:

	2007	2006
Along the Hightown Road track	66 (29.7%)	(26.5%)
Along the escarpment from the Glengormley direction	64 (28.8%)	(29.7%)
Up from caves through the broken ground	52 (23.4%)	(19.0%)
Along the sheeps' path (below the painted rock)	23 (10.3%)	(7.7%)
Across the top from the landfill direction	17 (7.7%)	(16.9%)
Total	222	

I have given the percentages from 2006 as well.


There are a number of observations. Overall the numbers were well down compared with the average of the previous years but that was probably due to the weather. The preceding week had been very wet and Sunday itself, though dry, was cool and cloudy.

In percentage terms the two years are in broad agreement with the two most popular routes standing out. The large difference in the route from the landfill site across the top can be accounted for by one large guided party coming that way in 2006.

The results of this census are valuable in that when the Council is determining priorities in improving access routes, they will know where to concentrate their resources. And the numbers will inform any discussions we might have with Council officers in the future.

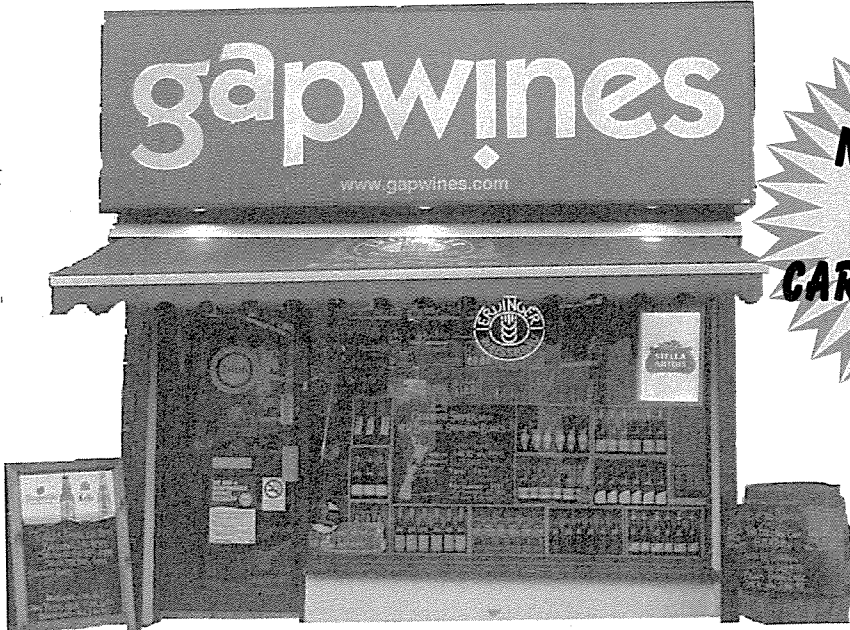
The Survey is scheduled for June 8 this year and I would welcome anyone willing to help. It will involve making one's way to McArt's Fort by a particular time and with a companion, then noting numbers for a period of two hours before handing over to the next two-hour shift. If the weather is in any way clement, it can be very pleasant to spend this time at the top but, of course, volunteers must also anticipate the possibility of cold and rain. Allow three hours in total. If you wish to help, I can be contacted directly at [cormachamill@ireland.com](mailto:cormachamill@ireland.com) or through our website at [cavehill@freeuk.com](http://cavehill@freeuk.com)


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# Hazelwood Woodland Management Project

Belfast City Council is undertaking extensive woodland management at Hazelwood Local Nature Reserve within Cavehill Country Park. Previously the site was dominated by hazel with sycamore occurring as scattered specimens. Sycamore, however, is an invasive species and now dominates parts of the woodland. If not controlled it will significantly alter

## Nest boxes - we've made a start

The Campaign has wanted to get involved in putting up nest boxes in the woodland area of the Cave Hill Country Park. In February this year, the opportunity arose as part of National Nest Box Week. We were able to source around 30 nest boxes from a combination of our own resources, a Breathing Spaces grant to Belfast City Council, organised by biodiversity officer Orla Maguire, and Little Flower School's technology class, led by Malachy Matthews, which had made a dozen boxes as part of a wildlife project. The boxes were all successfully installed on a Saturday morning and we are hopeful that they will be used in this year's breeding season. The woodland is relatively immature, with most of the trees having been planted in either the late nineteenth or late twentieth centuries. This means that relatively few trees have holes for nesting birds. In future decades the trees will offer many more nesting opportunities than now, but in the meantime we intend to give nature a helping hand by putting up more nest boxes over the next few years.

Peter McCloskey

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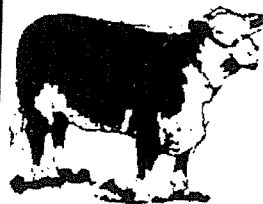
Eye brow tinting

Eye lash tinting

640 Antrim Road  
Telephone: 9077 7002

the habitat and reduce the woodland ground flora for which Hazelwood is particularly noted. It is not desirable to remove all the sycamore at once, but in parts significant removal of mature trees, capable of producing large amounts of seed was required. Other areas of the woodland are still in pristine condition so minimal woodland management was undertaken. The trees have been left in-situ to provide dead wood for invertebrates.

Over 400 hazel whips have been planted in the north western section of the site to re-establish hazel woodland. A very successful tree planting event was held in March. Many thanks to the staff of White, Young, Green, who worked extremely hard planting these trees and to Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland for providing the trees. Future proposals for the site include monitoring sycamore on the site and coppicing over mature hazel stools. This project is funded by the Big Lottery Fund's, Breathing Places grants programme. If you would like further information on this project or would like to become involved contact Orla Maguire at [biodiversity@belfastcity.gov.uk](mailto:biodiversity@belfastcity.gov.uk) or 028 9066 2259.



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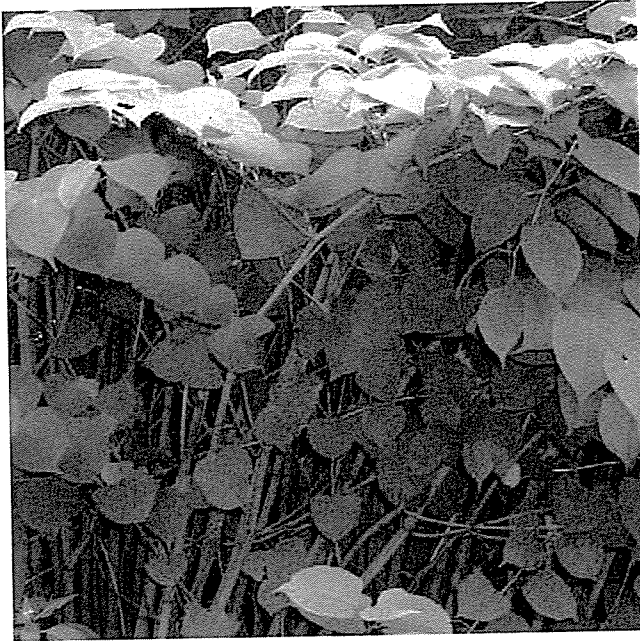
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# Invasive Species Not Welcome!

The recent news that one of the lakes at Belfast Waterworks has been threatened by a fast-growing lily has highlighted once again the threat which non-native invasive species can pose to our native flora and fauna. The lily in question – Fringed Water Lily – is native to parts of Europe and the Mediterranean, but because of its attractive yellow flowers, it is sold here as an ornamental pond plant. It tends to grow in dense patches, excluding native species and creating stagnant areas of water underneath the floating mats. Fish and other aquatic creatures are threatened by low oxygen levels. At the Waterworks, the lilies have spread rapidly and threaten to eventually turn the lake into a swamp if no



action is taken. Belfast City Council is aware of the problem and has applied to EHS for permission to use chemical spraying to remove them.

Unfortunately, these lilies are by no means the only non-native invasive species in the area of Cave Hill. Regular walkers in the Country Park will be aware that there are large areas of Rhododendron and Laurel, particularly in the area close to Belfast Castle. Both of these were originally introduced as part of the formal gardens but have escaped into the wild areas and rapidly colonised. They cast a dense shade under which nothing else can grow, including native wildflowers such as bluebells. Some of our volunteers have been active in recent years in reducing their presence, but a complete solution will require contractors, because of the large extent of the areas affected and because to prevent re-growth it is necessary to either remove the roots or treat the stumps.

We have had more success in tackling Japanese Knotweed (pictured). This is established in an area close to the Hightown Road car-park and also close to the Upper Cavehill Road entrance to the Country Park. Like other non-natives, it provides nothing for native wildlife in terms of either food or habitat and it soon crowds out native species such as hawthorn and blackthorn. But it can be treated using systemic weed-killer during late summer, and last August we did just that. It is likely that two further treatments will be needed, but we are looking forward to getting it completely eradicated from the Hightown area and replanting with native species.

Peter McCloskey

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# PATH UPGRADE

The past few months have seen a great deal of exciting activity on Cave Hill, from a helicopter dropping bags of stone, to teams of volunteers upgrading the paths.

The path restoration programme is a Belfast City Council project and has been made possible by funding secured from the Environment and Heritage Service, Natural Heritage Grant Programme, and Belfast City Council. The Council are working in partnership with Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland (CVNI) to complete the project.

This project aims to improve the path network within Cave Hill Country Park, focusing on carrying out improvements to two of the major walking routes in the park, namely the Caves path and Hazelwood.

The topographical conditions of the Park severely limit any vehicular access to the site and it is for this reason that materials were transported to the site using a helicopter. The project was due to start in early January with the materials being airlifted, unfortunately wintry weather conditions hampered several attempts to deliver the materials. Fortunately February brought some sunshine and now the work is well and truly underway!

During wet weather some sections of the paths within Cave Hill Country Park would have become very muddy and slippery. This was particularly evident in the Hazelwood area of the park. This area once had a network of stone pitched paths constructed in Victorian times; some of which are still clearly evident. Here the debris will be cleared off this historic path and drainage channels constructed to direct the run off away from the path. The Caves path (path which skirts the Devil's Punchbowl) has always been very narrow, making it difficult for people to pass one another. Work is being carried out on widening this path, where possible, and giving the path a stone finish. Upgrading work is also taking place on the connecting path; this includes resurfacing, construction of drainage channels, introducing some new steps and upgrading some of the steps already in place, vegetation clearance and tree planting.

The country park is a very popular location for countryside recreation with an influx of local walkers who use it daily, it also attracts national & international visitors. These account for approximately 140,000 visitors annually. It is anticipated that these works will give the paths a much more stable surface whilst protecting the landscape from degradation. It will also provide visitors with a much more pleasant experience under foot and at the same time blend into the surrounding landscape on what is one of Belfast's best loved landmarks.

Anne Reid

## FIRE ON THE HILLS

Now as we move – however slowly - into early Summer and dare hope for higher temperatures, Sky Larks and Meadow Pipits will begin to nest in open moorland.

Sadly this is also the time vandals are disposed to set heathland alight. The fledglings, together with newly born rabbits, which are incapable of movement, and leverets, which are born on the open moorland, are cruelly threatened.

How to respond to this situation? Anyone who sees the telltale smoke rising from the hills should contact the fire service immediately, however tempting it is to assume that someone else will do so. In these circumstances time is of the essence. A rapid response is the surest way of protecting vulnerable wildlife and the same time protecting the hills from being scarred by unsightly swathes of scorched earth.



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# VOLUNTEERS REQUIRED

Want to get more involved? If so, the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign needs you! There are a number of events coming up soon for which we need your help and support so please come along if you possibly can.

## CAVE HILL CLEAN-UP DAY SATURDAY 10 MAY

Every year the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign devotes one Saturday afternoon to cleaning up some of the rubbish discarded over the Hill during the previous months. The event is supported by Council staff who provide gloves, rubbish pickers and a skip – all we need are the volunteers! If you can help us out, please meet us outside the main door of the Belfast Castle at 2.00pm on Saturday 10 May. People are free to stay for as long or as little time as they can spare. It's always nice to walk across the hill so if you can make it, please feel free to come along and help us!

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING WEDNESDAY 28 MAY

All members (and others who are interested in joining) are welcome at our Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 28 May at 7.30pm in Fortwilliam Golf Club. This year Orla Maguire, the City Council's Biodiversity officer, and Finton Grant, the Parks Manager, will be there to talk about ongoing work in the Cave Hill Country Park. You'll also get a chance to hear a bit more about what we have been doing over the last year. It would also be great to talk to as many of you all as possible – we need to hear your concerns and opinions to help us plan our activities over the coming year. And if you want to take a more active role in the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign we are always looking for new enthusiastic people of all ages.



## CALLING ALL MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS!

If you are a member wishing to renew your membership for 2007 or a new member wishing to join, it's never been simpler! You can either join at our Annual General Meeting at the Lansdowne Hotel on Wednesday, 23rd May or attach a cheque to the form below and sent it to: Cave Hill Conservation Campaign, 32 Waterloo Park, Belfast, BT15 5HU.

All email addresses supplied will be kept secure and only used to communicate with our members.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Post Code: \_\_\_\_\_

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£10 Waged

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If you are a current British taxpayer please tick here (we will then be able to reclaim the income tax already paid from the Inland Revenue - ticking this box will not cost you any more money but will benefit the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign)

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign is a Registered Charity  
(Charity Number XR96728)

## CAVE HILL VISITOR SURVEY

This year we intend to continue our annual tradition of counting the number of people who use Cave Hill. If you'd like to get involved, all you have to do is sit at McArt's Fort for two hours and count the number of people you see! All volunteers will be arranged into pairs to ensure safety. For more information please see our article on last year's survey in this magazine or contact Cormac Hamill on 90291357.

## PATH RESTORATION

If you have already read the article in this magazine on path upgrading, you will be aware that the Conservation Volunteers are carrying out the work on an extensive path restoration project near the Caves and at Hazelwood. Would you like to get involved in this project? The work will be hands on and gives you a real practical opportunity to improve the Hill for everyone's benefit. Groups or individuals are all welcome and it is hoped that some of the work will also be carried out at week3ends to enable as many people as possible to do their bit. If you are interested in making a difference please contact Neville Walker or Helen Tomb (CVNI) on (028) 90645169 or check out [www.cvni.org.uk](http://www.cvni.org.uk) for further details.

MARTIN McDOWELL

## REDS OR GREYS?

A recent article in *The Times* by Jack Malvern highlighted once again the problems presented by the remorseless progress of the grey squirrel. This threatens (and not least in the environs of Cave Hill) to drive the red squirrel to extinction unless drastic, and to many people, no doubt, unpalatable, action is taken to control or, say it quietly, locally exterminate, the grey squirrels in order to preserve the native red.

First some facts: according to *The Times* the population of grey squirrels in our sister island is about 2 million. Classically, the grey is about 25 cm long and is easily recognised by its 20 cm tail. It was introduced to Britain, from whence it has spread to Ireland, in 1876 when a breeding pair was released to Henbury Park in Cheshire. The population of red squirrels is about 120,000 and these animals are about 22 cm long with a 22cm tail. According to the experts, the reds have been native to Britain for about 10,000 years.

So what's the problem? Well the problem is that the grey carries the squirrel parapox virus but is resistant to it, and mates once or twice a year, producing between one and seven young. The red has no immunity to parapox and produces litters of up to six young. The consequence is that the grey is well on its way to replacing the native red.

Unless steps are taken to sustain the population of native red squirrels, its American cousin, the grey *Sciurus Carolinensis*, will soon be dominant. In a recent debate in the House of Lords Baroness Butler-Sloss, who, as Malvern points out, was the most senior female judge in England and Wales, urged getting rid of the grey to protect the red. This means shooting, and already the border between England and Scotland is being manned by those authorised to do just that. For those who are repelled by such a policy the alternative is simply to accept the inevitable replacement of reds by greys.

Read more at *The Times* online, [wildlifeonline.me.uk](http://wildlifeonline.me.uk), Red squirrel Protection Partnership, The Ulster Wildlife Trust.

Edward McCamley