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Conservation Campaign  
June 2006

# The Cave Hill CAMPAIGNER



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# Dumping and Developers - Twin Threats

The annual clean up Cave Hill day always provides a useful nose to terrain view of how we look after the environment. This year less than a dozen volunteers lifted thirty sacks of rubbish off the hill and we can assure you that they stank! As the clean up is done annually that is thirty new sacks of rubbish since last year.

There are obvious culprits. Amidst the bluebells and wild garlic of spring are the drinking dens. It is not our purpose here to make some moral point: it is to say that those who use the Cave Hill as a private sanctuary for partying in this way show a particular disregard for the sanctuary itself leaving a squalid legacy of their entertainment for others to clear up.

But are our standards generally any better? The main walking routes up the Cave Hill are liberally sprinkled with the cartons and bottles of non-alcoholic seekers after good health, and drinkers and non-drinkers alike leave copious evidence of their appetite for crisps. Then there are those who, for some perverse reason, make special journeys to the Cave Hill to dump their domestic rubbish. Almost everything that is dropped is non bio-degradable, and, apart from the visual disfigurement of a litter bestrewn hillside, endangers the wildlife that lives there.

The first responsibility for stemming this tide of filth lies with each of us individually, but we would advocate applying the principle of making the polluters pay. It is a mystery, apart from inertia, as to why our government has not gone for the easy win achieved in the Republic by applying a tax on plastic bags, which are amongst the most damaging forms of litter on the Cave Hill and elsewhere. Beyond that there is much to be said for creating a tax regime favouring deposits re-payable on the return of bottles and penalising non bio-degradable crisp and other packaging.

Ultimately issues of this kind and of the environment generally have to be moved further up the government and local

Government agenda. We can inspire private individuals to change their ways but so long as a regime of public squalor prevails there are limits to what can be achieved. If, as is the case, the government is planning to have three quarters of Northern Ireland's waste dumped in the Belfast Hills, the removal of 30 sacks of rubbish from the Cave Hill is only a small if vital contribution to better times. Jim Bradley of the Belfast Hills Partnership examines the whole issue of waste in the Belfast Hills on page 7, but this issue of the magazine also contains a number of articles with a strong planning theme. Although as an organisation our primary focus is the hill itself, we cannot ignore threats to the built environment on its doorstep. And there are several significant ones at present.

JOHN GRAY

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## Campaign Events

**Annual General Meeting** is on Thursday 15 June at 7.30 pm in the Lansdowne Hotel. Rita Harkin, of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, has kindly agreed to give us a presentation on the work of the society.

**Annual user survey** of Cave Hill is on Sunday 25 June from 10.00 am to 6.00 pm. Please get in touch if you would like to help with this.

Contact us by email: [Cavehill@freeuk.com](mailto:Cavehill@freeuk.com)

And don't forget our website: [www.cavehill.freeuk.com](http://www.cavehill.freeuk.com)

# The Chapel of the Resurrection

## - a sad tale of a listed building

The Chapel of the Resurrection in Innisfayle Park is arguably the most 'at risk' historic building in Northern Ireland. It is also one of our earliest listed structures (Grade B+), having been designated by the Department of the Environment in November 1974 – a mere five months after the Grand Opera House, often proudly proclaimed as Northern Ireland's first listed building.

Its descent into disrepair, however, over the last 30 years has been characterised by slow, incremental decay, with intermittent incidents of vandalism. That its future should still be so uncertain is an indictment both of the owner's intentions, and a failure of the Department of the Environment for not taking timely enforcement action. It could, and should, have been so much different.

The Chapel of the Resurrection, originally Belfast Castle Chapel, was built in the late 1860s by the third Marquis of Donegall as a memorial to his son, the Earl of Belfast. Ownership transferred in 1938 to the Church of Ireland, and it was used as a place of worship until the early 1970s. It has since passed into the hands of a private developer.

The declining fortunes of the Chapel are stark in contrast to several other Belfast landmarks. Christ Church on College Square North, for example, provides a contrasting lesson on the 'art of the possible'. Like the Chapel, this former church was de-consecrated due to a dwindling congregation. It was severely fire-damaged in 1996, reducing it to a shell, and eventually featured opposite the Chapel in the UAHS's Buildings at Risk Catalogue, Vol. 3 (pp. 20-21). The subsequent history of both buildings has a common link – the Belfast Buildings Preservation Trust – but so far only one has had a happy ending.

Christ Church was the subject of an award-winning reuse scheme some eight years after the fire, thanks to a partnership between the Belfast BPT and the Royal Belfast Academical Institution. But the Chapel of the Resurrection has not been so fortunate, in spite of a similarly ambitious rescue package having been in place.

Somewhat incredibly, the vision advanced by the Belfast BPT for the Chapel was left in tatters after the owner reneged at the eleventh hour on an agreement to donate the building to them. This was all the more devastating, because not only had planning permission for reuse as a single dwelling been secured following a feasibility study prepared in 1997, but over £200,000 in grant aid had to be handed back to the Heritage Lottery Fund. A golden opportunity was lost, and the manner of its unravelling naturally left a bitter taste, not just for the Belfast BPT, but for all those who had hoped that this important building had found a new future.

One might have expected the government at this point to step in and use the enforcement powers at its disposal. Any hopes that this might happen have proven premature, and there have been numerous calls since for the DoE's compulsory acquisition powers to be dusted down and put to the test. Indeed, following the serving of a Repairs Notice on the owner of a listed building in Sion Mills, County Tyrone the first compulsory acquisition should soon be complete. The UAHS would urge that a similar approach be applied to the Chapel (we are eternal optimists) and we will continue to press the DoE on this matter. Vocal encouragement from local residents, and other interested parties, would undoubtedly stiffen any DoE resolve.

*Note that a remarkably incomplete planning application was submitted by the owner in 2005 for the conversion of the Chapel to 3 apartments, with 33 new build residential units proposed for the grounds. The UAHS strongly objected to this application.*

ANDREW McCLELLAND

Heritage Projects Officer

Ulster Architectural Heritage Society

#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

We understand that the property is currently owned by a company called Merit Homes Ltd, whose registered office is at 58 Moneymore Road, Magherafelt, BT45 6HG.

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# Vandalism and neglect at the Chapel of the Resurrection

About five years ago I bought the apartment overlooking the Chapel of the Resurrection in Innisfayle Park. Recently I sold it. I had hoped to remain there to be able to watch the proposed restoration and development of the Chapel (to make it a dwelling) and the quite magnificent site around it by its owners. Unfortunately, after many false starts the development of the wonderful site has still to take place.

Throughout my years living at the apartment I was constantly dismayed at the poor condition of the chapel caused by a combination of years of neglect and vandalism. I remember coming home one day to notice two men on the roof of the chapel stripping something (presumably lead). On many occasions (at one stage every weekend) crowds of youths gathered around the building and lit fires in it or right beside it. Often stones were thrown at its increasingly tired exterior. Any reasonably delicate features remaining were gradually eroded by the constant attacks on this wonderful building. Too often the fire brigade and police were called to tackle these problems.

Frequently I saw young children playing inside the building, even though it had supposedly been sealed – an obvious danger. The graffiti on the chapel was most offensive. About three years ago other residents and myself got together in an attempt to tackle the problems. The community police became involved and were extremely helpful. After some pressure the builder put up an enormous (unsightly but useful) palisade fence which effectively secured the site at last.

Over the years many hundreds of people came to view or photograph the chapel. Often tourists had come from a cruise liner docked in Belfast to view the chapel and Belfast Castle – they came from all over the world and I recall my great shame that they should see our wonderful building in such a neglected condition. In my opinion, the relevant government department, which I understand is Environment and Heritage Service, has a lot to answer for. Why have they not served a repairs notice on the owner? One day I remember one of their staff asking me about gaining access the chapel to check on its condition and if necessary take appropriate steps. The large

fence was not there at the time and I told him of the horrendous problems we were having and my fears for the building. I assured him that he could use the driveway of the apartments to gain access to check the chapel and I gave him my contact details. But I never heard anything more.

BRENDA DONNELLY

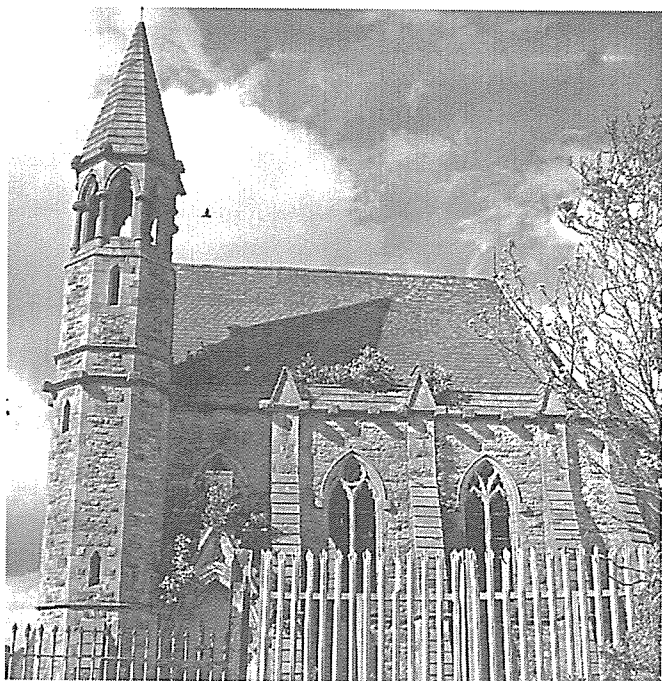
## Alfie's glen

Below McArt's fort, off the main path network nestles a small secluded area. It is not very big but there is a little track running through it and there are trees, vegetation and rocks. There is a stillness and a sense of peace. It is a place for quiet contemplation.

I am not the only one to find this place. I don't go there too often, but a few years ago I noticed a bird nesting-box attached to one of the trees and on the box was written "Alfie's glen" with dates. The dates were something like 1920-1998. I can only speculate that the dates were the birth and death dates of someone called Alfie.

I can further speculate that Alfie was one of a group of friends who would occasionally visit this spot and that when he died, the box was set up by them in his memory. But I may be entirely in error. It would be very nice to find out who was Alfie and what was his connection with Cave Hill. What was his full name? What was his story? Was he a romantic soul who found solace in the peace of that little glen? Did he meet his friends regularly there? Are any of his friends still around? Sadly, the nesting box has gone. I suspect that the vandals who occasionally damage areas of Cave Hill have taken it and in doing so have lessened our chances of remembering someone to whom the hill meant a lot. It would be appropriate if we could find the answers to my questions. We might then set about restoring the nesting box and in so doing, extend further the memory of a man called Alfie.

If anyone can answer any of my questions, I would be grateful if they could contact me at 90291357 or by email at [cormachamill@ireland.com](mailto:cormachamill@ireland.com)  
CORMAC HAMILL

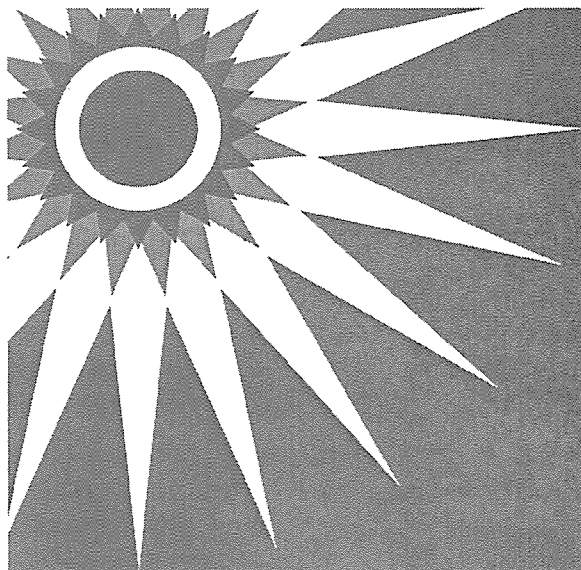


## Woodland near Ben Madigan Heights to be secured

Recently we became aware that Belfast City Council had been offered free ownership of eight acres of land bordering the Cave Hill Country Park near Ben Madigan Heights which was being donated in memory of two members of the Scott family. For various reasons the City Council decided to decline the offer and therefore our organisation stepped in to try to guarantee the future of the land concerned. We contacted the Woodland Trust and are pleased to report that they have taken a keen interest in the site and are currently investigating the possibility of taking on responsibility for this area of woodland, possibly with us as a partner. At present, the area is being carefully examined to see if any part of it is ancient woodland (making it extremely rare and important in environmental terms) and the Campaign will pursue a keen interest in future developments. We will keep you up-to-date with the progress on the website and perhaps in future issues of the *Campaigner*.

MARTIN McDOWELL

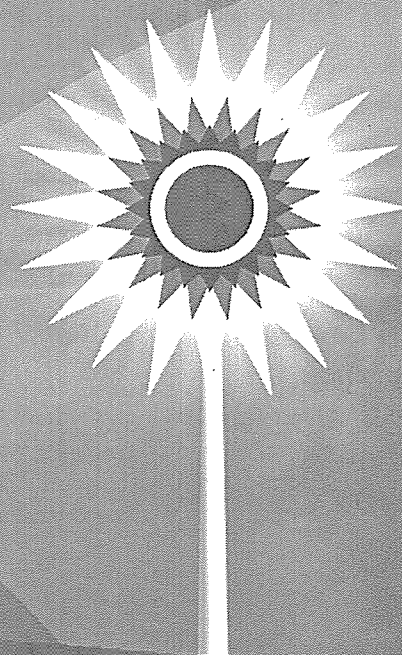
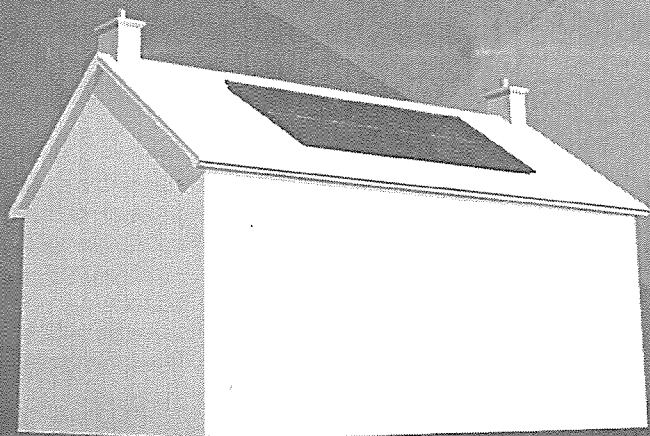




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# A DEVELOPMENT TALE

Previous issues of the *Cave Hill Campaigner* have drawn attention to insensitive developments, driven by short term commercial interests, which have been proposed for the vicinity of the Cave Hill. Recently we have had another example in which planning permission was sought for a proposal which would have allowed a significant change from one "use class" to another, despite convincing evidence that this was not in the interests of local residents.

The proposal was to convert the former offices of the Milk Marketing Board on the Antrim Road facing Fortwilliam Park into a complex of flats with some adjacent housing. The site, which is close to the designated Somerton Road - Chichester conservation area, has been acquired by a developer, who, in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Oaklee Housing Association, initially submitted plans for the construction of 34 flats with a concierge, and 31 houses. This was subsequently amended to 33 flats and 34 houses. In addition, at a meeting with local residents in December 2004, Paddy McIntyre of the Housing Executive and Niall Sheridan of Oaklee expressed their determination to develop further in the vicinity of the Milk Marketing Board area. Had this plan been implemented it would have constituted the biggest and least sympathetically considered development in this part of Belfast.

Since the plans were first made public in 2004, a number of cross-community residents' associations have campaigned vigorously against the proposals. The objections were to the scale of the project, its high density, low-cost character, and the adverse impact it would have on both the stability and the infrastructure of the area. On all occasions when the residents, and those public representatives who shared their concerns, met the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Oaklee, the NIHE stressed their willingness to consider proposals based on the highest standards of social provision. Their emphasis was on providing high quality buildings to both existing and future residents of the area. But the original plans were based essentially on a cheap conversion of the existing office building into living accommodation. In October 2005 Mr McIntyre admitted that "public sector cost allowances" were the determining factors in the standard of construction. It is clear that such a development (if one may use that much abused word without irony) based upon low-cost, failed concepts of social housing that have blighted the lives of its occupants in similar projects all over Europe since the 1960's. In Belfast, the misnamed Unity Flats at Carrick Hill provided a brutal example of how not to do public accommodation. The early proposals for the Fortwilliam site represented a farcical repetition of that failed experiment.

At meetings with the planning officials and the developers, residents insisted that the quality of design was vital to the development. Indeed, there very quickly emerged a consensus on the abysmal quality of the original design and the negative effect that it would have on the neighbourhood. The objectors argued that the conversion of an ugly, dilapidated 1960's office block was simply unacceptable. Recently, the speed at which this building had become vandalised in itself gave rise to much local speculation of a sinister strategy of allowing the site to become a festering ruin as a means of putting pressure on the local community to accept any new use without further argument.

In addition to these dispiriting considerations, there was the possibility of further plans to increase the scale of this project by between 33 and 50 percent by the acquisition of the

**(With apologies to Geoffrey Chaucer)**

Salisbury Bowling Club. While it is true that residents received assurances that there would be no Phase Two, these were muted by the qualifying phrase, "supported by the Housing Executive," which did little to inspire confidence. The bold vision of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, and the more recent Dunlop Report on the future of North Belfast, urged carefully thought-through initiatives based on the existing heritage and traditions of this part of the city. This is the kind of community-based approach that would contribute to the eventual creation of a vibrant and sustainable community in the area. Over the past two years, residents' groups, supported by some local politicians, have made strenuous representations in order to modify the proposals outlined above so that they might be more sensitive to the character of the area. As a result, Ian Elliot, the Chief Executive of Oaklee Housing Association, arranged a series of meetings with the Housing Executive and with the architects associated with the project. The good news is that significant changes to the original proposals have been made. There will now be two apartment blocks instead of four and alterations will be made to their design. Tree preservation orders will ensure the continued existence of the mature trees on the site. Community groups and residents' associations will be consulted on the management of the project. And there will be no Phase Two.

If this tale holds any lessons, it is surely that planners and politicians serve the community best when the interests of those most profoundly affected by their decisions are consulted. It is the residents who should have a decisive say in development proposals that will shape the circumstances in which they live. Those who are part of a neighbourhood are the best equipped to sustain a sense of appropriate public space within it. As Chaucer put it, "intent is all."

EDWARD McCAMLEY



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## The Cave Hill: what drew us to Belfast BT15

I first caught sight of Cave Hill in September 1998 when the Stena ferry, on which Lisette and I had crossed over from Stranraer, docked in Belfast. From Belfast Lough, the city seemed like a huge saucer surrounded by hills. The nearest of these, and by far the most impressive, was the towering mass of Cave Hill, with its craggy rock face and wooded slopes which descended all the way to the handsome looking Belfast Castle lower down. But soon this spell was broken in the stampede to retrieve our car from the lower ferry decks, and finding our way to the house which we were renting in south-east Belfast. By the time we got there and settled in, darkness had already descended over the city which, viewed from our house by the Cregagh Glen, had magically been transformed into a sea of thousands of lights. So, as we retired for a good night's sleep, it seemed as if Belfast had already welcomed us in a manner befitting the recent Good Friday Agreement.

In the weeks and months that followed we soon fell in step with the routines of academia at Queen's, as well as the shopping and socialising that are part of urban life anywhere. Overall, we had settled in well, and shared the optimistic mood of many of our friends for whom the bad years of the troubles already seemed like past history. Domestically, the unresolved issue for us was that we still had to find a house of our own in or near Belfast. Practically this meant that after all the many years of moving around continents, from London to Papua New Guinea, the United States and back to London, we had to brace ourselves for yet another bout of house hunting - but where? For some strange reason, most of the estate agents on whom we called seemed to assume that "foreigners" of our type would only want to live in either east or south Belfast. They showed us more homes than I can remember, except for the two instances when went as far as to make offers. With the last one, we owe it to our daughter who had come over to visit us from London, to open our "seasoned" eyes to the fact that for all of our pros she could list twice as many cons for not buying.

It was around that time, about a year after our arrival in Northern Ireland, that contrary to the best advice of our estate agents, we decided to start snooping around north Belfast, and especially the Cave Hill area. When we mentioned this to friends at Queens, there were some who looked worried, thinking that we would find ourselves in a most unsafe part of the city. Still, we persevered, until one morning we looked at a house that, from the moment we walked through the door, we knew "was it", with the added bonus that a similar house in east Belfast would have cost a lot more.

Afterwards - in the midst of unpacking a bottle of red wine from our neighbour and his infant daughter (preceded by an African-style libation to placate the ancestors of the land) confirmed that we truly belonged to the place. So it was that we settled in BT15, in the shadow of Cave Hill. Clambering up to McArt's Fort keeps me fit, and the reward of the breathtaking panorama at 375 meters (1,200 feet) more than repays the effort. In these tourist days, Cave Hill is also a welcoming, cosmopolitan space where, away from Belfast's humdrum and frenzy, walkers from all backgrounds and nationalities still say "hello" and smile when you meet them.

MARC SCHILTZ



# WASTE IN THE BELFAST HILLS

For many years it has been apparent that waste disposal is one of the most important issues in the Belfast Hills. A series of campaigns and clean ups have shown the depth of feeling and concerns around the use of the hills for all sorts of waste management, be it landfill, recycling or fly tipping. Given the high levels of illegal waste and the high number of legal sites, it was actually very difficult to get an overall view of exactly what was happening in the Belfast Hills. Any detailed studies have only been environmental assessments carried out for single planning applications, specifically restricted from looking at the cumulative effects e.g. of multiple landfills. This greatly hampered any hope of a concerted and planned approach to improving waste management in the hills – you can't get where you want to get to if you don't know where you are in the first place.

The Belfast Hills Partnership therefore wanted to gain an objective view of the overall levels and impacts of waste management in the area that went well beyond the usual environmental assessments and would act as a solid first step towards proper planning and management of waste in the hills. We therefore commissioned a Strategic Environmental Assessment of waste management policy and practice in the Belfast Hills which was carried out by RPS Planning and Environment Ltd. The results of this study were successfully launched at Belfast City Hall on 15th March 2006. The report highlighted that:

- There are 27 times more waste facilities per acre in the Belfast Hills than the NI average.
- Almost one million tonnes of waste can be legally land-filled in the Belfast Hills every year, including roughly 30% of all Northern Ireland's construction and demolition waste.
- It is estimated that 150,000 tonnes of illegal waste are dumped in the Belfast Hills every year.
- Current plans to close the Dargan Road site will add a further 400,000 tonnes every year. Following recent planning decisions, levels of household waste legally dumped in the hills could hit 66% of the total NI level.

- High levels of illegal domestic fly tipping across the hills have a significant detrimental impact on the landscape and scenic value of the hills.

In summary, current waste policy and management give cause for serious concern for the well being of the wildlife, landscape, residents, visitors and agriculture in the Hills.

Publication of the report got good coverage in the press, radio and TV, but even better was the timing of the launch, perhaps more by good fortune than judgement! The publication of a damning parliamentary audit committee on the performance of the government's handling of waste management in Northern Ireland the following week and the launch of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy meant that the issue has kept bubbling in the news with frequent reference to the Belfast Hills. The recent Dispatches programme highlighting just how dire the situation is with regards to waste management both afar and very close to home has intensified the debate.

So where to now? The report has a series of recommendations ranging from the general aspirational to the specific, which we are currently working through to decide which we must immediately implement. There is some concern that a plethora of plans and consultations about waste are in the pipeline, such as the regional arc21 plan. These might act as an excuse for key agencies to prevaricate at a time when substantial action on proper monitoring and enforcement is absolutely critical.

At the very least, we hope that our report highlights the urgent need for greatly improved waste management and policy for what is recognised as a precious environmental asset to the citizens of Northern Ireland.

JIM BRADLEY –

BELFAST HILLS PARTNERSHIP MANAGER

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# St. Clements Housing Development -

After 45 years the Redemptorists have found it necessary to close St. Clement's Retreat House. The Retreat has been in a steady decline since the 1980s and the buildings have gradually fallen into a state of disrepair. The estimated cost for the buildings to comply with the necessary legal requirements was approximately £3million and, having exhausted all possible options, the decision was to sell the St. Clement's site for residential development.

The grounds of St. Clement's would be classified as a mature area of outstanding natural beauty. They are bounded on the north and west sides by the Cave Hill Country Park and are an important element of the landscape character of this part of north Belfast. The mature trees are subject to a Tree Preservation Order and provide a natural habitat for the many species of birds and wildlife.

An application for outline planning permission for 65 dwellings was submitted to the Planning Service on 13 January 2006. The plan also indicates "significant improvements to the existing access onto the Antrim Road" and this upgraded road is to run between St. Gerard's Church and the Community Centre. The concept statement document states: "The proposal provides for a quality residential development that respects the mature landscape setting, and will deliver low density, high quality housing which respects the special characteristics of this unique development site."

While this proposed development appears to be sympathetic in nature, changes can occur as proposals move from one stage to the next. Should approval be given at this outline stage, there is always the danger that a developer will seek to increase the density and perhaps try to alter the nature of the development. The document states: *The proposal will not lead to any significant adverse intensification of traffic flows onto the Antrim Road. (8.2) The consulting engineers claim in their Conclusions of the Transport Assessment (7.0) that:*

## The story so far

*Detailed modelling has been undertaken to demonstrate the site access is adequate to accommodate the traffic generated by the proposed residential traffic. (7.4) We have demonstrated the development will not have a detrimental impact on traffic, air quality or traffic noise and the site will be accessible by a variety of transport modes. (7.5) On the basis of this study, it is our opinion that the proposed development will not have a significant impact on the surrounding road network. (7.6)*

How can these claims be justified? The type of development proposed will probably equate to at least two vehicles per dwelling which will create an additional traffic hazard, as this will surely cause a considerable increase in traffic of around 130 vehicles per day, every day. If at the final application stage the developer is granted approval to increase the housing density it is likely that there will be an even greater increase in traffic onto the Antrim Road, intensifying the use of the existing access / egress point. There are other road junctions in close proximity to this point, so any additional traffic will be of grave concern for road safety. Yet it is claimed in the conclusion of the planning document that *the proposal will have no adverse impact on road safety. (8.3)*

It is imperative that the planners, in conjunction with the DoE (Roads), carry out a more accurate transport assessment to determine the increase in traffic at this junction on the Antrim Road before any full planning permission is granted. It is also imperative that the development is not allowed to become larger in terms of housing units.

BRIAN CALLAGHAN

## Lynda Logan

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# The Ginkgo Tree

If Belfast City Council were ever to create a "Jurassic Park", the maidenhair tree would certainly feature there. The ginkgo, as it is known, is the world's oldest living species of tree, the sole survivor of the ginkgolaceae family, whose fossil records date back to an age when dinosaurs roamed the earth. It has remained unchanged from its distinctive appearance of 200 million years ago. In fact, Darwin described this tree as a living fossil and as wardens of the world. This tree is the only plant which survived the atomic bomb that was dropped in Hiroshima. However it did not survive too well during the ice age and flourished only in parts of China. It would probably be extinct had it not been for the preservation efforts of some Buddhist monks planting them in their temple gardens.

Ginkgos are revered in monastery gardens and holy shrines in the far-east and have become the national tree of China. Outside Asia in Japan and Korea some of the specimen trees are almost four thousand years old. In Europe, the oldest ginkgos are in Belgium and the Netherlands. In England one was planted in Kew Gardens in 1762 and is now over 90 feet high. They are very slow growing but can eventually reach a height of 90 feet with a spread 40 feet. They have unusual fan-shaped leaves which are bright green in spring and summer before turning a glorious gold colour in autumn and then shedding all its leaves at one time. The Art Nouveau movement frequently incorporated the design of the ginkgo leaf as did the Italian dress designer Armani in his 2006 autumn designs.

The leaf of the ginkgo tree is reputed to have medicinal values. In studies of Alzheimer's disease its extract seems to suggest that it could help in the reduction of symptoms in the early stages of the disease. It has also been known to increase blood circulation to the brain and body extremities and regulate the tone and elasticity of blood vessels. Research in Europe has shown the tree leaf extract as very effective in the treatment and prevention of strokes, cataracts and diabetic retinopathy. Herbal tea and other extracts from the ginkgo leaf would appear to have very positive effects. Chinese medicine has used the ginkgo for hundreds of years. But it would be incorrect to believe 'if it is herbal it is safe'. Ginkgo, as with many other plants with a medicinal effect should not be taken in conjunction with anti-depressants. You should always consult your GP before taking any herbal remedy.

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## (planted 2005 in Belfast Castle Herb Garden)

In Ripley, Ohio, people gathered to honour a 156 year old ginkgo tree as a 'witness tree'. They recognised that this tree had lived through all the important events in their town's history. We hope that the tree planted in Belfast Castle herb garden in April 2006 (kindly funded by Belfast City Council), will bear witness to a new peaceful era in our previously troubled city.

GERALDINE BIRCH



*The Ginkgo Tree at Kew Gardens, London*

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# The Cave Hill Diamond Discovered

In the 2000 issue of the *Campaigner* we gave an account of the legend of the Cave Hill diamond and of possibilities that it actually existed. Francis Joseph Biggar writing in 1926 described how "There was a tradition current in my youth, that there was a diamond in the Cave Hill — it was said to have shone in the face of the cliff and that vessels in the lough had fired on it to secure the precious jewels." (*Belfast Telegraph*, 16 March 1926).

In his youth and in the 1890's the last of Belfast's ballad sheet printers, John Nicholson, had simultaneously published two separate songs entitled "the Cave Hill Diamond", one of much earlier provenance, but the other written at the time by a Queen's University professor. Clearly, at the time, the diamond had a particular topicality.

Writing in 2000 we were able to establish factual grounds for this. George Henry Bassett's *Book of Antrim* published in 1888, contains the following under the entry for Whitewell:

*"Last year a very good example of the Irish diamond was found at Cave Hill by a little boy, son of Mr Hanna, belonging to Belfast. It is 11 inches in circumference, and weighs about a pound. Mr John Erskine, of North Street, Belfast, purchased and advertised the crystal as the 'Cave Hill Diamond', finally disposing of it at a good price to the proprietors of Madame Tussaud's Gallery, London."*

And there the trail ran cold until very recently when we were approached by a retired Church of Ireland clergyman. One of his parishioners was getting very elderly and had no descendants, and she entrusted him with a particular treasure of hers — the Cave Hill diamond. It turns out that she is a direct descendant of the Mr Erskine mentioned in 1888. Perhaps the 'diamond' was lent to Madam Tussauds rather than sold: at any rate Mr Erskine evidently retrieved it.

In the next issue of the *Campaigner* we hope to provide a geological report on what the 'diamond' actually is.

JOHN GRAY

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*The Cave Hill from Gray's Lane by Catherine McWilliams*

## Protect our countryside from developers!

Planning Policy Statement 14 (known as PPS 14) is the new policy on Sustainable Development in the Countryside led by the Department for Regional Development. The main point of it, and the issue which has received most attention, is the presumption against construction of new single dwellings in the countryside. Technically, PPS 14 is out for consultation until 9 June, but a moratorium on new applications was announced in April. The background to this is the huge growth in recent years in the number of planning applications being submitted for one-off rural dwellings in Northern Ireland. The number of single new dwellings approved here is more than three times the combined total of England, Scotland and Wales - and was still climbing. In 1994-95, planning approval was granted for 1,845 single homes in rural parts of the province. By 2004-05, the annual figure had soared to 9,520. The total for 2005-06 will be over 12,000.

Clearly, we were on a totally unsustainable path, even if you allow for different settlement patterns to England. But there have been predictable howls of outrage from rural dwellers and their political representatives. With many farmers struggling to survive financially, selling land for building has become an important part of their retirement plans. But the figures quoted above make it obvious that if the previous planning regime was allowed to continue, our countryside would be destroyed within a decade. So be in no doubt that opposition to the new policy implies the eventual destruction of our countryside, with the building of perhaps 12,000 single houses every year. Many readers will be familiar with the "bungalow blight" which has defaced coastal areas of Donegal and a similar scene can be found in large parts of Kerry and other formerly-scenic counties in the Republic. PPS 14 is the last chance of stopping this

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happening in Northern Ireland. The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign is in full support of this and urges you to support it as well. The opponents have made most of the running until now, but you can register your support for the new policy by logging on to the website of CPC (The Campaign for the Protection of the Countryside) and signing their online petition. The site can be found at [www.countrysideni.org](http://www.countrysideni.org) and there is also a link to it from our website which is at [www.cavehill.freeuk.com](http://www.cavehill.freeuk.com)

EDITOR

## AN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND?

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign strongly supports proposals for an independent Environmental Protection Agency for Northern Ireland. A Coalition for Environmental Protection comprising nine major environmental organisations in Northern Ireland has been advocating the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency since 2003.

A particular opportunity to make an impact on this issue has arisen with the establishment in March of this year of a government Review of Environmental Governance. The review will examine all the mechanisms to protect and promote our natural and historic environment (air, water, soil, natural, and built heritage, landscapes) and to ensure that Northern Ireland fulfils its national and European obligations to protect the environment. Our record in this area is so dismal that the case for change is overwhelming. An obvious point is that we are now the only region in the British Isles without an independent environmental protection agency.

Those wishing to participate in the development of proposals by the Coalition for Environmental Protection should contact Shirelle Stewart on 90491547 or at [shirelle.stewart@rspb.org.uk](mailto:shirelle.stewart@rspb.org.uk). You can access the government enquiry itself at [www.regni.info](http://www.regni.info)

JOHN GRAY