

SECTION TWO – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

In section one we examined each of the hills that make up the Belfast Hills Area, helping build up the picture of what constitutes the Belfast Hills. In this section we build upon that foundation of information and examine why this area is so significant.

Visual Importance

The Belfast Hills create a prominent and dramatic landscape setting to the urban parts of Belfast, Lisburn and Newtownabbey and can be seen from far afield. The soft rolling hills generally can be seen above the lines of houses and development of the city, with the lower slopes having some small enclosed fields, leading onto a mixture of woodland and scrub which then open out at the tops of the hills to upland heath. This view is enjoyed by the urban population. However the view is not without interruption, as various quarry works, landfill nets, pylons and aerials are present on the skyline. It is important to prevent further visual degradation of this significant landscape; this is dealt with in project 2.8 Planning Issues Network.



The Belfast Hills are, however, much more than a backcloth to a thriving urban area and contain a fantastic patchwork of biodiversity, heritage and geology features which are individually worthy of protection but in the face of continuing threats merit our urgent attention and efforts to safeguard.

Biodiversity and Habitats

In terms of biodiversity, the hills contain a breadth of priority habitats – Mixed Ashwoods, Parkland, Purple moor-grass and rush pasture, Lowland dry acidic grassland, Blanket Bog, Upland Heath and Species Rich Hedgerow – which are home to a wide variety of wildlife, many of which are identified as NI priority species in need of conservation. There are also key wooded river valleys reaching right into the cities which are vital for wildlife. Many of these sites are recognised by designations such as Area of Special Scientific

Interest, Local Nature Reserve and Site of Local Nature Conservation Interest. A detailed look at the hills' habitats and wildlife may be found in the booklet "Wild about the Belfast Hills". Various improvements to habitats within the Belfast Hills are tackled within Programme 1 – Conservation of Built and Natural Features.



Geology

The Hills are made up of geology in the form of many different rock types representative of various geological eras. The peaks of the hills themselves are capped by Tertiary age basaltic rock. Layered beneath this are Triassic white limestone (chalk), green sandstone from the Hibernian epoch, and red brown mudstone which is Triassic in origin. The wealth of geology represented within this relatively small area acts as evidence of past glacial activity, which is associated with the historical and archaeological significance of the Hills.

The basaltic rock is of particular significance as this offers evidence of the widespread igneous activity of early Tertiary times consisting of a considerable thickness of basaltic lavas, a few small plugs and agglomerate-filled vents and many dykes and sills. While the basalt offers demonstration of the geological processes that resulted in its formation, the limestone present within the Hills is also significant as the quarrying of this stone has played an important role in Belfast's history.

While limestone and basalt are the primary rock types within the area, it exhibits a diverse underlying geology, and in addition to this there are also some areas that are of specific geological interest. The numerous quarries – some of which are still active – within the boundaries of the area demonstrate the wealth of geology that could be

exploited for educational purposes. It is planned to raise the profile of the hills' rich geology through project 2.2 of the LPS (see section 5 for further details).

Heritage and Oral History

The hills also contain numerous important archaeological remains recognised as Scheduled Monuments or sites of historic importance (listed previously in section one). Archaeological remains have been found particularly on the summits of Cave Hill, Divis and Black Mountain, yet much more remains undiscovered. Along the lower slopes of the hills lie many industrial archaeological remains such as water powered mills, weirs, dams and abandoned quarries as well as the grand houses and gardens of those who owned them. Farmers also left their mark in the numerous ridge and furrow patterns, lime kilns, abandoned farmhouses and lost hedgerows and walls covering the upper parts of the hills. A combination of steep slopes and troubled times have meant that many features which would have long disappeared in other urban fringe settings are still present up in our hills, giving us a great opportunity not only to preserve them but use them to interpret our recent rural roots to a substantial urban population who are keen to discover them for themselves.

Lime kilns were particularly abundant across the Belfast Hills due to the good supply of limestone that could be quarried from the hills along with the supply of large quantities of local fuel to burn the limestone. Lime produced would have been spread on nearby fields to help release nutrients in the soil. A couple of good examples of these lime kilns remain today on Carnmoney Hill, but are currently covered in vegetation (one has a large tree growing from the top of it which may in time, if not stopped, cause the kiln to collapse) and hidden from public view. Traditional farm house remains are also present on a number of sites in the Belfast Hills and offer some insight into how people worked and lived in the past. These are likewise largely covered in vegetation, placing the buildings in danger of total collapse.



1980's postcard showing Cave Hill

There is still much archaeology in the Belfast Hills that is both undiscovered and unacknowledged which communities should be made aware of and enabled to become involved in its discovery. Community consultation about historic sites of interest, or sites that it felt were in need of restoration, highlighted a range of sites. These include acknowledgement of Carnmoney Hill's rich history, potentially through on-site signage; Cave Hill's Volunteers' Well and McArts Fort, with their associations with Henry Joy McCracken, leader of the 1798 rebellion; Hannahstown's waterfall and prehistoric settlements on Divis. The Landscape Partnership Scheme plans to address this through survey and restoration works (projects 1.6 and 2.8), along with training of the local community in archaeological surveying techniques (project 4.3).

Due to the close proximity of the hills to the urban population, a rich oral history and cultural traditions have been formed over the years. Some oral history stories have been recorded relating to Cave Hill and Divis, however in other areas these stories are in danger of being lost in our modern society. Further recording of local oral history stories will be undertaken through project 2.3.

Literature and Culture

The Belfast Hills, with its dramatic cliffs, rolling hills and lush wooded valleys have inspired writers and artists for centuries. From Jonathan Swift's Gulliver to modern film makers, these summits and slopes, so close to a bustling city, make for awe-inspiring tales of love, the beauty of nature revealed and heartfelt tragedy. Famously the writer Jonathan Swift was said to be inspired, while living near Belfast, by the sight of the Belfast Hill which resembles a sleeping giant, leading him to pen his most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels*. Other film and literature inspired by the Belfast Hills are:

Man About Dog

Pearse Elliott was born and went to school in west Belfast beneath Black Mountain. The playwright from the Lenadoon estate was nominated for the Irish Film and Television Best New Talent Award for his 2004 feature film, *Man About Dog*, which was based in the Belfast Hills.

The B17 bomber crash and *Closing the Ring*

Shirley Maclaine, Richard Attenborough, Mischa Barton, Christopher Plummer and Pete Postlethwaite star in one of the movies to make it to the big screen, shot at the very place on Belfast's Cave Hill where, over 60 years ago, was the scene of a Second World War crash that claimed the lives of 10 American bomber pilots.



Mickybo and Me

This film was shot in Belfast under the ancient Belfast Hills. The movie director is Terry Loan, a local resident of the hills. It is a story of boyhood and friendship as Belfast erupts

into conflict in the early 1970s. Adrian Dunbar, Ciaran Hinds (from Limestone Road under Cave Hill) and Julie Walters star. Cave Hill can be seen in the background of this picture.

JG Devlin

Actor JG Devlin was born on Divis Mountain on January 1, 1907. He was a prolific actor involved in theatre, films, and television for over 60 years. He began his film career in the mid 1980s having already become a household name with his appearances in *Z Cars* and *The Billy Plays* starring a young Kenneth Branagh, himself a native of north Belfast.

These points of interest will be presented online (project 3.6) and used as part of the education project to help inspire and educate people about the hills.

Economics

The Belfast Hills have historically been quarried for their limestone and basalt. A number of quarries have reached their end of life in terms of value of material possible to extract verses costs of extraction. Some of these quarries are now being used as landfill sites, a number of which accept inert waste while others are licensed for municipal waste. These activities provide both jobs and revenue for the local area. In 2008 it was estimated that 135 people were employed in waste management in the Belfast Hills area. Although these activities create jobs they can have a negative visual impact on the landscape. Project 1.1 looks to restore a number of industrial sites and so address issues of visual impact.

There are estimated to be 40 farms in the Belfast Hills area providing an important economic contribution to the area as well as associated landscape and biodiversity impact. Farmers will be assisted through a third party grant scheme (project 1.3) to undertake various visual and wildlife improvements and to get involved in Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) schemes such as the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS).

Recreation

Today there is also great potential to use the Belfast Hills for recreational activities due to the large populations living very close by, improving the physical and mental well-being of those who visit. Such access should include educating people about the wealth of biodiversity, geology and archaeology in the Belfast Hills. Access and learning will be enhanced through the various projects planned within programme 3.

This special landscape needs to be preserved and improved for the enjoyment of future generations, who will in turn create their own history and story.