

The Cave Hill Campaigner



Time for a New Approach After Collapse of Hotel Scheme

Friends of the Cave Hill have greeted with delight the apparent collapse of plans by Zeilmann & Co. to develop a 135 bed hotel on a strategic 2.96 acre site at the top of the old zoo at Bellevue and just below the main zoo car park. In 1996 the Council had agreed in principle to sell the site to Zeilmann for £500,000, but by January of this year, the once dewy eyed relationship had broken down in terminal acrimony.

Before we celebrate too much, we need to recognise that the Council's policy of seeking a developer for the site is still in place. The Zeilmann deal did not collapse because the construction of a large hotel on this site would have been a monstrous imposition on the hill, rather it fell apart because Mr Zeilmann and the Council fell out on much more marginal matters.

While we welcome the demise, for the moment, of the hotel deal, the simultaneous collapse of proposals for the Floral Hall is a matter for rather more regret. This is a listed building which the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign would like to see restored and put to public use. Theoretically the plans for the Floral Hall were quite separate from those for the hotel development, a matter between Life Enrichment Centres (Ireland) and the Council, but then was not Mr Zeilmann one of the principals of this firm? It was evident that the Floral Hall scheme and the hotel scheme would sink or swim together.

The rather self-justifying account of all these transactions drawn up by the Council's Assistant Director of Legal Services and presented to the Parks and Amenities Sub-Committee on 8 December 1998 suggests that it was almost a matter of amazement, and certainly a point of contention, that Mr Zeilmann and his associates should have attempted such a linkage, just as Mr Zeilmann's proposals for joint ticketing and

marketing arrangements in the zoo also became a matter of irritation. Yet it was surely wholly natural and practical for a developer to think along these lines.

In the light of what actually happened over the two transactions, there is a clear implication that Mr Zeilmann and his associates were at least informally encouraged, and whether by individual councillors or by officers of the Council we cannot say, to expect more from the deals than was formally on the table.

In the case of the Floral Hall, the £3.8 million project was to be carried out, as per the July 1996 Heads of Agreement, at 'no expense to Belfast City Council', and yet Mr Zeilmann has insisted that it was a 'partnership' project. Surely, in some sense at least it was, because it was envisaged that at least 70% of the costs would be raised through applications to the Millennium Fund etc. and to quote the Council's own report, 'The Heads of Agreement were drafted to reflect the Council's position that it was prepared to allow its name to be used in submitting the applications to the various funding agencies' and this on the very reasonable basis 'that the applications would carry more weight if they were in the Council's name'. If, as the Council now insists, there was no element of partnership in the funding proposals for the Floral Hall, was there not an element of duplicity in its applications to what are public funding bodies? In the event the failure of these applications destroyed the financial viability of the Floral Hall project, and had a knock on effect on the viability of the ~~hotel~~ scheme.

The hotel project was marked by precisely similar kinds of disagreement. If we are to believe the Council now, one of the breaking points was Mr Zeilmann's insistence that the original deal included the reserve car park at the zoo, and yet in 1997 Mr Zeilmann, to quote the Council's own document, had reached agreement with the then Estates Manager that he should have 'joint use with the Council of the former quarry site which is currently used for car parking at times of peak usage at the Zoo', and the

Council simultaneously set about clarifying its own ownership of the car park, which suggests that at that point it was potentially 'in play'. And might well have stayed in play if funding had been secured for the Floral Hall scheme, and if more fundamental doubts had not arisen about Mr Zeilmann's willingness or ability to proceed with the hotel scheme in isolation.

With the collapse of both proposals, now is the time for what is a new Council to take pause for reflection. To reflect upon the kind of perilous dance that insistent pressures for immediate private development lead to, and on the long list of ill thought out schemes of this kind which have come to nothing over the last twenty years.

The Council should give priority to the development of its environmentally friendly management plan, including provision for linkages between the zoo and the rest of the hill. In this context there is a continuing need to come up with viable proposals to save the Floral Hall, and for environmentally friendly and public access friendly proposals for the old zoo area. As matters stand this strategic area is indeed derelict, but only because the Council has left it so. If indeed the Council was to give priority to developing community partnerships in developing imaginative and publicly acceptable proposals, it would have a very much better chance of securing significant grant aid to do so.

JOHN GRAY

Clean Up Cave Hill Day 2.00-5.00 pm - Saturday 24 April

For the last few years the Campaign has organised a clean-up day on the hill. Our objectives are; to scour all areas of the hill as effectively as possible, to do so at a time of year when the hill is just coming into heavy use and in the hope that those visiting and seeing a rubbish free environment will think twice about dropping their own, and to secure publicity for our drive towards a litter free Cave Hill.

We assemble at the North Castle car park above the strangely named Adventurous Playground and divide into groups each of which is allocated an area, with some working on the lower and easier slopes, and others up to the summit and beyond. Accordingly we can make use of hardened hill walkers and those willing to help in less demanding areas. All should, however, come reasonably equipped for an outdoor day, and bring basic refreshments with them. Children under 14 should be accompanied by an adult.

We have the support of the City Council in this exercise and they provide bags, gloves, and a skip. While Council staffing levels for litter collection are often less than ideal, we recognise that, even in the

best of circumstances, voluntary effort is necessary to reach areas that are off the beaten track. And does it have any effect? Having undertaken the exercise for a number of years, we do notice that in each successive year there is rather less rubbish to remove!

And a final promise. While rubbish collection hardly sounds a glamorous way to spend a Saturday afternoon, you will get to see nooks and crannies on the hill that you've never visited before, and have exercise and refreshment along the way. There is the photo call as we assemble at 5.00 p.m. and begin to split up our pile of rubbish for re-cycling, but there is also a feeling of a necessary job well done. See you at the North Car Park at 2.00 pm. on Saturday 24 April.

Cave Hill Use Survey 8.00 am-8.00 pm - Sunday 9 May

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign has planned a major survey of patterns of use of the Cave Hill to be undertaken from 8 a.m. to 8p.m. on 9 May. Surprisingly, no detailed exercise of this kind has ever been undertaken, and yet information of this kind is essential in establishing how many people use the Cave Hill, why they use it, how they use it, where they go on the hill, and where they come from in the first place.

We presume that there has been increased use of the hill in recent years; we hope that the majority of users favour the preservation of the hill as it is. We cannot establish the facts of the matter until a comprehensive and fairly conducted survey exercise is undertaken. Meanwhile the City Council is, at least in principle, keen to develop a management strategy for the hill, and the Belfast Hills Committee is finalising detailed recommendations in this respect. And yet an essential building block for a practical management strategy is a detailed understanding of existing patterns of use. For all these reasons we believe that our survey will be an extremely valuable exercise.

It is also a major undertaking, and will involve manning seven sites over the twelve hour period, in order to ensure that all entrants to the area are covered. We certainly hope to secure the co-operation of the public in giving up a couple of minutes to answering a short questionnaire. However, in order to conduct this exercise we need 42 people who will work in pairs for four hour stints at the seven locations. While we have the offer of some volunteer assistance via the Belfast Hills Regional Park Development Officer, John O'Boyle, and Bryson House, the main burden will properly fall on our Campaign.

The proposed survey sites are;

1. Hightown Road car park.
2. T-junction where Carr's Glen path meets Green Road.
3. Path junction on ridge between Upper Cave Hill Road and Belfast Castle.

4. South car park at Castle.
5. North car park at Castle.
6. T-junction between rear entrance road to Castle and track leading to Volunteer Well
7. Bellevue entrance to hill.

We propose to operate in three shifts from 0800 to 1200, from 1200 to 1600, and from 1600 to 2000. If you are willing to help in this important exercise please ring me on 291357.

CORMAC HAMILL

National Dawn Chorus Day 5.30 am - Sunday 16 May

It's an early start, but you are invited to join bird watcher, Larry Toal, inside the main Castle gates (top of Innisfayle Park) between 5.30 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. to listen to the dawn chorus as part of National Dawn Chorus Day which is being observed throughout Britain and Ireland. It will provide an excellent opportunity to brush up on your bird song identification.

After a period of listening and watching in the lower Castle grounds, Larry will lead a 4 to 5 hour walk over the top of the hill which should provide an opportunity for hearing and seeing a wide variety of the birds of the Cave Hill. If you are going on the longer walk come suitably attired and bring refreshment with you.

Major Plans to be Discussed at the Annual General Meeting - Lansdowne Court Hotel 7.30 pm - Thursday 20 May

This year's AGM will provide an opportunity to discuss and get feed back on two major reports of relevance to the Cave Hill. The first is *A Vision of the Cave Hill Country Park*, a report by a Working Group of the Belfast Hills Regional Park Planning Sub-Committee, which in draft form makes a strong case for the adoption of a coherent and environmentally friendly management strategy on the hill by the City Council. The second is the final report of the Belfast Hills Feasibility/ Options Study, and following the unwillingness of the Government or Department of the Environment to proceed with either the designation of a Belfast Hills Regional Park, or a local area plan, we await with anxious anticipation the outcome of this alternative process. Prior to the AGM we hope to be able to circulate at least the key recommendations of these reports.

Apart from the obvious and routine function of an AGM in reporting on the previous year's business, its most vital function is to provide a good start to the year to come, and in this respect the election of an active and energetic committee and officers is

essential. Now is the time to think whether you have something to offer in this respect. If you would like to discuss what is involved ring John Gray on 321707 (W) or 290178 (H).

By way of light relief the night of the AGM will not be all hard work. Once the business is done we plan a night of traditional music along the same successful lines as last year.

Belfast Hills' Walk 9.00 am-3.30 pm - Sunday 31 May

We look at them every day, Belfast's spectacular back-drop, but the Hills' Walk provides a once in a year opportunity to walk over all of them in a day, and to enjoy an unrolling panorama of marvellous views.

This year's walk begins at Colin Mountain at 9.00 a.m. and will finish at Bellevue at approximately 3.00p.m., with a further walk over Carnmoney Hill. Six hours at a reasonable walking pace will have brought you over Colin Mountain, Black Mountain, round Divis, over Wolf Hill, Squire's Hill and Cave Hill, some twelve miles in all.

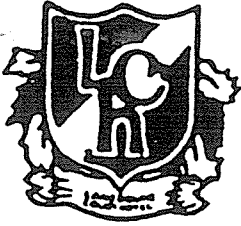
It is rather more than a dander, and those planning to go should remember that this is a mountain environment. You will need appropriate footwear, warm clothing, waterproofs, and adequate food. The route will be flagged and marshalled the whole way.

In recent years over a thousand people have participated. The walk helps lend strength to the argument for a Belfast Hills Regional Park, and, at the very least, to the argument for the establishment of a right of way across the hills on 365 days in the year instead of just one!

It was in fact the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign, then the Save the Cave Hill Campaign, which first established the walk, working in conjunction with Black Mountain activists. In that first year only 200 took part and in a gale with thick mist and driving rain. Nowadays, and we welcome the fact, the event is on a scale beyond the capacity of any one group to organise, with up to 140 people involved in marshalling and safety roles. Thus the Belfast Hills Regional Park Development Officer and Bryson House undertake the overall organisation, but the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign still plays a major role on the key organisational committee.

You do need to pre-register for the walk. Contact Bryson House, 28 Bedford Street, Belfast, (Tel 01232 - 401684) to secure your entry form and pay your entry fee of £5 (£2 unwaged). A useful point - parking will be available at the start at Colin Mountain and there will be transport to bring you back there from Bellevue.

But enough of the boring organisational details. Get out there and enjoy what is always a memorable walk.



**The Lansdowne
Court Hotel**
657 Antrim Road,
Belfast BT14 5EF
Tel: (01232) 773317
Fax: (01232) 370125

- End of Season Dinner Dances
- Luxurious En-Suite Bedrooms
- Fund Raising Nights/ Presentations
- Wedding Receptions
- First Communion/ Confirmation Menus Available
- Palm Court Restaurant
- Conference Facilities
- Quarterdeck Nightclub Every Weekend

Some Flowers of Cave Hill

With the days stretching out and spring approaching, the Cave Hill offers rich terrain for lovers of wild flowers. It will not be long before the Lesser Celandine, Wood Anemone, Wood Sorrel, Dog Violet, Bluebell, and Primrose amongst many others make their appearance.

One of many interesting plants which can be found in the wooded areas of the Cave Hill is Lords and Ladies, a member of the Arum family. It is related to the Swiss Cheese plant familiar to many as a common house plant. With its poker like flower spike and arrow shaped leaves it is readily identifiable. Midges are trapped in the flower hood below the spike later escaping to effect cross-pollination by becoming trapped in other flower heads. Its roots were a source of laundry starch, especially for ruffs, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some readers may also be interested to know that they were also thought to be an aphrodisiac!

Other favourites of mine are the Cuckoo Flower which can be found on the banks of the small streams which come off the top of the hill and make their way down to Hazelwood. In the same locality, later in the year, you can see the Common Spotted Orchid, and Eyebright, a little gem with a white flower marked with yellow or purple. It apparently derives its name because it was once used to treat eye disorders.

As we behold the feast of flowers that Spring and Summer bring we can hardly take them for granted. Of course there are natural upheavals, and most recently the great Boxing Day storm, though that in time will lead to regeneration. Rather the great danger lies in the continuing obsession with inappropriate development, a storm which no wild flower can withstand, and the ultimate form of vandalism.

JOHN CROSS

Join The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign

The Cave Hill Conservation Campaign, founded as the Save the Cave Hill Campaign in 1988, has consistently sought the preservation of the Cave Hill as a natural and unspoilt environment. It has also played a leading role in efforts to more generally secure the preservation of the Belfast Hills.

Objectives:

- To secure the preservation of the Cave Hill as a natural and unspoilt environment.
- To encourage public access for appropriate purposes to the Hill.
- To encourage Belfast City Council to adopt an environmentally friendly management strategy for the Hill.
- To oppose all intrusive development on the Cave Hill.
- To support the creation of a wider Belfast Hills Regional Park.
- To oppose further degradation of the Belfast Hills.
- To support the implementation of environmentally friendly management policies for the Belfast Hills.
- To support the creation of public rights of way across the Belfast Hills.

If you wish to join please fill in and return the attached slip:

I wish to join the Cave Hill Conservation Campaign and enclose the appropriate subscription for one year:

Name:.....

Address:.....

..... Postcode:.....

I enclose payment as follows (tick whichever is appropriate)

Standard ~~£10.00~~ Unwaged ~~£5.00~~

5.00

1.00



Please return to:

The Treasurer
Mr Albert Dolan,
64 Downview Park West
Belfast BT15 5HP

Published by the Cave Hill Conservation
Campaign, 19 Glandore Avenue,
Belfast BT15 3FB.