

The Western Way - Aasleagh to Sheeffry

Trail surface:	Quiet country roads, river banks and forest trails
Difficulty:	Moderate. Bring food and water and suitable clothing
Distance:	12 Kilometres
Total height gained:	200 metres
Duration:	3 to 4 hours
Dogs:	No dogs allowed as this walk goes through farmland
Start:	At the newly erected Map board at Aasleagh
O/S maps 1:50000:	numbers 37 and 38

Our walk this month is along part of the Western Way from Aasleagh to Sheeffrey. This is a nice, moderate walk suitable for most ages and takes in the most stunning of scenery ranging from Fjords, rivers, lakes and forests. This section is ideal for walkers who would like to get a taste of the Western Way without over stretching themselves, as such, dipping their toes in the water. As always you must remember that when doing the Western Way one must plan for some means of being collected upon finishing each stage as it is a linear route as distinct from a looped walk. On today's walk, Rosaleen Ni Shuilleabhain, my fellow Recreation Officer from Forum Connemara, accompanied me and we left one car in Sheeffrey and drove the other to Aashleagh, starting our walk at the newly erected Western Way map board there.

After a brief walk along the shores of Killary Fiord, we entered the grounds of Aasleagh Lodge beside the Erriff River. The Lodge and the fishing rights have come under the management of Delphi Adventure Centre who are endeavouring to make the facilities more accessible. They serve teas, coffees and scones to the general public and the promotional sign we encountered shortly after commencing the route proved too irresistible to ignore, hence our first detour. After tea in these sumptuous surroundings, the first sight that greets the walker on their return to the river is the renowned Aasleagh Falls. The weather in late July had been very wet and the river was in full flood. Aasleagh Falls, though beautiful at all times, are especially spectacular when there is a flood on the river. The lodge and the forest plantation was once owned by the Marquise of Sligo and during the war of independence the lodge was burnt down but then partially restored in 1926.

On exiting the Lodge grounds the Erriff valley suddenly opens up before you as the trail follows beside the river for some 5 kilometres. The flat river plains one now encounters are in direct contrast to the imposing Ben Gorm Mountain to the North West and the Devils Mother to the south. The scene would not be amiss in one of Robert Service's poems of the Yukon where he once wrote "The icy mountains hemmed you in with a silence you scarce could hear."

The trail then leaves the river at Houston Bridge and after a brief walk with stunning views south to Leenane enters Tawnyard Forestry. The forest is managed by Coillte, the state forestry agency, and the dominant tree species here is lodgepole pine, which is currently being harvested. The trail skirts Tawnyard Lough with its outflow to the Owenduff River that in turn feeds the Erriff. A number of small islands can be seen on the east end of the lake. The westernmost of these is possibly a Crannóg. Crannogs were secure dwelling places that can be dated to the Bronze Age (Circa 1500BC). They were artificial islands reached by boat or by subsurface stepping stones.

The first climb of this section is now before you as the walker begins the ascent to the Sheeffrey Pass. This pass affords a panoramic view of the mountains of South Mayo where the emblem for the Western Way, the Saint Daebhoc's Heath can be found. The quaint village of Drummin to the north beckons in the distance along with the first tantalising views of Croagh Patrick. However those destinations must wait for another day as we end our days trek at the stone cut Sheeffrey Bridge that spans the Glenlaur River.

The old Gaelic translation of the "Devils Mother" may surprise some readers and is open to different interpretation. All opinions welcome!