

The Western Way – Bellacorick to Ballycastle

Trail surface:	Forest trails, quiet country roads and 4km on the N59
Difficulty:	Moderate. Bring food and water and suitable clothing
Distance:	32 Kilometres
Total height gained:	370 metres
Duration:	7 to 9 hours walking. 3 hours cycling.
Dogs:	No dogs allowed
Start:	At the newly erected map board in Bellacorick
O/S maps 1:50000:	number 33

With the Christmas dinner fully digested and a house full of guests struggling for fresh items of conversation, an idea came forth that the more active family members among us would do part of the Western Way, weather permitting. It was decided to cycle (as opposed to walking) the Bellacorick to Ballycastle section as the December days are short, with daylight at a premium. As this route is linear in contrast to a looped walk, we arranged transport to collect us from Ballycastle and commenced our journey in Bellacorick.

How times have changed in Bellacorick in the last twenty five years! Today giant wind turbines turn and turn to the east of the trail. This was not always the case, for Bellacorick was once the location of a peat burning power station. Hundreds of local people found good employment here with the neighbouring towns of Bangor, Newport and Crosmollina reaping the benefits. However very little occurs here today. The public house and the Garda station are closed. The massive cooling tower and furnace housing are gone. Only the bog remains, depleted but not totally spent.

Turning right just past Ballymunnelly Church we soon enter Sheskin Forest Park. We will remain in forestry plantations for practically the remainder of the trail. Sheskin is actually the largest town land in Ireland at 2,915 hectares. Sheskin or seisceann in Gaelic means a sedge mountain; sedge being a grass like plant that grows in temperate and cold regions. Two miles into the woods, barely visible amongst the trees one comes across the ruins of Sheskin Lodge. The MacDonnell family who fought alongside the French in 1798 built the original lodge. At the end of the 19th century the Jameson family, of whiskey distilling fame owned and fully rebuilt the lodge and its main use was as a base for hunting and shooting. Many locals were invited to parties here and upwards of 400 persons would attend in the 1940's.

Dotted along the trail there are ruins of old dwelling houses strategically located beside meadow streams. Roofs and windows are long gone with only the stoutly built stone walls remaining. Gone are the families, the history and the music. One is reminded of the lines from a Thomas Moore poem when he imagines the mysterious home of the ancient high kings of Ireland which had been long vacated.

"The harp that once through Tara's halls

The soul of music shed,

Now hangs as mute on Tara's walls

As if that soul were fled".

Great care is advised on this leg of the Western Way as the area is very isolated and mobile reception can be patchy at best. It is the Irish equivalent of big skies country, bereft of light pollution and ideal for stargazing at night. There is a 4 km boardwalk to be negotiated which can be very treacherous, particularly in wet weather and is only suitable for walking on with care. Dismount from the bike! Finally, descending from Glencullin we viewed the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. What a welcome sight to behold Downpatrick Head and the delightful village of Ballycastle nestled by the sea. Boy did we enjoy the late lunch in Mary's Cottage shop!