

The Western Way – Letterkeen to Bellacorick

Trail surface: Forest trails, quiet country roads and 5km on the R312 and the N59

Difficulty: Moderate. Bring food and water and suitable clothing

Distance: 21 Kilometres

Total height gained: 140 metres

Duration: 6 to 8 hours walking. 2 hours cycling.

Dogs: No dogs allowed

Start: At the Letterkeen Bothy

O/S maps 1:50000: numbers 23 and 31

Today's stage of the Western Way brings us through Letterkeen Wood on rough forestry tracks along the eastern slopes of the Nephin Beg Mountains before emerging at Derry. Then from Derry to Bellacorick, our journey's final destination is a combination of semi tarred roads and the N59. This section of the Western Way can be cycled provided you use a mountain bike or similar. As we were deep into December and daylight was at a premium this is the option we chose.

Letterkeen Wood is one of the largest forestry plantations in Ireland covering an area of almost 5 thousand hectares. It is now part of a newly designated Wild Nephin area in conjunction with the national park of Ballycroy. The main tree species are Lodgepole Pine, and Sitka Spruce with some Japanese Larch. The first plantings were made in 1951 and many local farmers were employed in those early years. Gradually as in most industries heavy mechanisation took over with the result that there are only a handful of local people currently employed to manage the Forest. Much of the first cropping is now complete and timber is being continually harvested and sent from Westport by train to Waterford and Clonmel saw mills.

Departing from the Brogan Carroll Bothy one is immediately struck by a wild and rugged landscape, Ireland's answer to the Yukon! Trees that stretch upwards to the clouds, gushing waterfalls and deep deep valleys. There are views here that stretch as far as the eye can see. Strange history too: tales of robbers and bandits that had secret hideaways in the hills above the trail. Horns of gold that were buried by wayfarers on the nearby Bangor Trail. Corpses that were waked for weeks until snows melted and allowed families to have a burial. Men lost in those same snows of 'Black 47' whose only crime was to walk around the gable of their home for a bag of turf and couldn't find their way back. Wiser folk that burned the legs of the table and chairs to stay warm until daylight.

Halfway through our route, nestled in the mountains is Lough Namaroon or the lake of the baronies. Here the baronies of Burrishoole, Tirawley and Erris meet. The barony is an old Norman territorial land name. From the 16th century it was used as an administrative unit. In many parts of Ireland the barony is almost forgotten but not here in the west of Ireland, where places such as Erris still have a strong appeal and sense of identity. There are many

of these small lakes dotting the open bogland beyond the forestry. Bog Bean often grows around the edges and the Teal, Ireland's smallest breeding duck can be seen on these quieter pools.

We emerged from the forest at Derry village and cycled on to Bellacorick crossing the "corrack" bridge. This bridge is known far and wide as the musical bridge. If you rub a stone along the limestone capping you can create a sound that resembles a musical note. Hence the name. Curiously the final capping stone is missing from its rightful place and the bridge remains unfinished. This reflects the prophecy of Brian Carrabine who foretold several centuries previously that a bridge would be built in Corrick but would never be completed. Local legend tells that all who replaced the stone have come to a sticky end and by the following morning the stone would once again be removed from its rightful perch. Land of legends indeed!

Next month, Bellacorick to Ballycastle, big sky country.