

## The Western Way – Westport to Letterkeen

<b>Trail surface:</b>	Greenway, Quiet country roads and moorland trails
<b>Difficulty:</b>	Moderate. Bring food, water and suitable clothing
<b>Distance:</b>	26 Kilometres
<b>Total height gained:</b>	100 metres
<b>Duration:</b>	6 to 8 hours
<b>Dogs:</b>	No dogs allowed as this walk goes through farmland
<b>Start:</b>	At the newly erected Map board on the Westport Greenway
<b>O/S maps 1:50000:</b>	numbers 31 and 23

Our fifth instalment of the Western Way brings us from Westport Town through Newport and on to the Brogan Carroll Bothy in Letterkeen wood. This part of the walk is quite a contrast to the previous four stages. Gone are the wild and rugged hills, the mountainside streams and the vast expanses of moor that we encountered in North Connemara and South Mayo. Instead we encounter man's taming and shaping of the environment for his benefit.

This benefit is immediately obvious as we begin our walk on the Westport Town Greenway near the quay. It is a joy to see all the activity taking place on this route, jogging, cycling and walking. Onwards to the town park where the young and not so young are skateboarding, playing basketball and soccer. All too soon we pass down the Allergan road and begin to leave Westport behind, joining the Great Western Greenway for the journey to Newport.

North of Westport the way crosses the undulating landscape caused by the dumping of huge masses of glacial material during the last ice age. This is Drumlin country, found only in this part of Mayo and the border counties of Cavan and Monaghan. The soil is quite rich and grass grows well making for good pasture and hay. The slopes are well drained but the valleys between betray their wetness by the presence of rushes, Purple Loosestrife and Yellow Flags.

When the railway line was built here in the early 1890's this drumlin terrain must have been quite a challenge for engineers and sappers to evaluate the best route possible to minimise labour and material costs. One can only imagine the vast numbers of workers required to build bridges and construct tunnels in an era when the pick and shovel reigned supreme.

This built heritage is something to be immensely proud of. Both Westport and Newport boast viaducts that are unsurpassed in all of Ireland and there are many more examples of smaller but equally important bridges as one passes through the half parish of Kilmeena. On our approach to Newport the entrance to one of two railway tunnels becomes visible. What a boost to the Greenway these would be if they could be re-opened and restored to their former glory.

Newport was founded in the early years of the 18th century and a community of Quaker weavers were among its first inhabitants. They are long since gone but their heritage remains in town land names such as Bleachyard. Continuing north, glimpses of lough Furnace and then lough Feeagh can be had as the trail approaches Treenbeg. Traces of abandoned potato beds are visible here along these hillsides, testament to a time when famine and evictions were commonplace.

The short days around Halloween meant that night was beginning to fall on our group of walkers. When one bright spark came up with the idea of telling ghost stories the pace of the walk definitely quickened. As we headed out the old Derrybrock bog road and passed by Crann Na Sí (Tree of the Fairies) the walk became a quick canter. Needless to say there was a collective sigh of relief in glimpsing the car awaiting us at the Bothy. Next month the wilds of Nephin Beg await us.