

Chair's report

2023 was a busy year for us on Cave Hill. We organised 10 guided walks and 12 volunteer work parties on the hill as well as 11 monthly meetings of our board of directors in the Castle. As part of our outreach programme I gave talks on Cave Hill to the congregation of St Peter's church on the Antrim Road and to the public in Chichester library: I also gave the local National Trust a talk in Belfast Castle on the Donegall family. We also participated with Belfast City Council (BCC) on European Heritage Day with our volunteers engaging with visitors, telling them about the Donegalls and showing them our work in the maze and herb garden. We had a table at three public events: two events in Girdwood for senior citizens and Ballynature – an environmental fair held in Ballynure in South Antrim. To help our presentation at public events we created two pop-up banners highlighting our Cave Hill connection. We also continued our butterfly survey work, monitoring weekly the numbers on a particular route on the hill from April to October and reporting these numbers to Butterfly Conservation. Our Facebook page is proving popular; it allows its members – all 4,300 of them – to post pictures and videos taken on Cave Hill. It also acts as an ongoing record of our own activities. Our webpage www.cavehillconservation.org is a repository of what we have produced over the last 34 years. All 26 issues of our magazine – The Cave Hill Campaigner – are there in electronic form as are details of all our 2024 events for the public.

Although maintenance will always be required at the restored maze, we reached a point this year where we felt that it should be opened to the public. Accordingly, BCC organised a formal opening in August by the Lord Mayor Ryan Murphy. In the autumn, we organised a geophysical survey of the maze in an effort to find the rest of the original 2002 maze mosaic which had been lifted and buried some years after its construction. Unearthing those remains is on our 2024 to-do list.

We are very conscious that Cave Hill is part of the wider landscape of the Belfast Hills and we are keen to develop links across that range from Colin mountain in the west to Carnmoney. We do that by working along with, and as part of, the Belfast Hills Partnership (BHP). I am a director of that organisation and as such I can bring Cave Hill matters to that board and hear concerns expressed about other parts of the hills. That concern for linkage has produced a new activity this year from within BHP in partnership with the National Trust. We are calling it The Big Walk. Four times a year, three walks come together at Ligoniel; one down from Divis, one around Ligoniel and one from Cave Hill. Our contribution is to organise and guide the walk from Cave Hill. Our aspiration is that in the near future we will be able to link these walks into a continuous waymarked route across the Belfast Hills.

The Belfast Hills Partnership runs a Ranger scheme across the Hills and we are part of that. That involves reporting monthly on issues and concerns to the land managers, in our case to Belfast City Council. I have to say that issues raised in these reports are acknowledged promptly by officers of the Council and in many instances action is taken to address the concerns.

A growing issue across the hills is environmental crime. This can range from the horrors of badger baiting to breaking fences and riding scramblers. BHP is developing a mechanism for recording these and we will be part of that. Luckily, Cave Hill suffers little, if at all, from wildlife crime but we do have a scrambler problem. We have a prototype recording mechanism in place; anyone who witnesses or hears scramblers or any other form of environmental crime is encouraged to call the PSNI immediately but also to leave the details with us on: ccc.incident.reporting@gmail.com We will then be able to feed our stats to BHP so that a wider picture can be made clear.

There have been personnel changes in 2023. I regret to record the death of one of our founder members Albert Dolan. He had been our treasurer for many years until failing health forced him to step down some years ago. Another long-serving member Eddie McCamley stepped down this year from his role as secretary but continues to serve on the board. And a new member Gerry Lynch has joined the board, bringing our board up to its maximum complement of 18.

I want to acknowledge and place on record our gratitude to all those who helped us in 2023. In particular our thanks are due to Belfast City Council who recognise us as a Friends of Cave Hill group (even though we have our own name!), provide us with a room in the Castle every month for our meetings and give us access to funds for recompensing those we bring in to lead our walks. Individuals within the Council, including the ground staff, the reception staff and staff located in BCC offices downtown have been invariably helpful and cooperative, friendly and proficient. We now have a cadre of regular volunteers who give freely of their time and energy once a month to carry out tasks within the maze, in the herb garden and in other locations throughout the estate and much thanks are due to them. Thanks also to our members who give us their support and whose subscriptions keep us going. And finally, there are our 18 trustee/directors; not only do they meet every month but they are heavily involved in our volunteering activities. They are a great team to have and I consider myself very lucky to be working with them.