

Chair's report for 2024-25

I was elected chair in 2006 so this AGM marks the beginning of my twentieth year as chair. I am very pleased with all we have achieved in those twenty years following on from the foundations laid by John Gray in his seventeen years as chair previously. But I am becoming increasingly aware that I should prepare for a time when I will no longer be able to meet the demands of the post. To that end, I enlisted the help of two other directors and we worked out a series of roles within the board to which we were able to assign directors and every current director was included. My thanks to the board for agreeing to this reorganisation. I feel we are much more a collegiate organisation and better structured in anticipation of future demands.

Our broad range of activities continued during this last year:

We launched our 27th annual magazine – the Cave Hill Campaigner - again last year. It was, by common consent, our most attractive magazine ever and the 3000 copies printed were a great way of advertising our presence across North Belfast.

We carried out conservation tasks one Saturday a month in the summer months and an extra Saturday in the winter. These activities included regular maintenance of the Maze, cutting down invasive laurel and elimination of invasive plants.

We organised and led ten public walks on a broad range of themes. Our average attendance is about 15 and this is about right; many more than this would be unmanageable.

We organised a walk for Downpatrick Historical Society and three walks for the Carer support unit of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

We led litter lifts on Cave Hill for three organisations – Intel, WSP and Belfast Church of Christ.

I went out to historical societies in Armagh and Downpatrick and gave an hour's talk on Cave Hill. I also delivered a talk at Ballynure – an environmental fair in Ballynure. I also briefed the assessors of Belfast's Rose Week on the history of Belfast Castle in the Castle.

We attended seven events around Belfast where we put up a table and engaged the public to tell what we were doing on Cave Hill. These were at Ballynure – an environmental fair in Ballynure, Belfast City Council Spring Fair, Big Lunch at the Castle, Open Heritage Day at the Castle, the CITI environmental fair, a Women's Health Day and later a Men's Health Day in Girdwood.

We also visited Sinclair Seamen's church in Corporation Square and the launch of the new Castle restaurant.

Because of our increased public presence, we have felt it important to distinguish ourselves when we are working or attending events. To that end, we now have eleven items of clothing bearing our logo along with hi-vis gilets for all our directors.

We have a display cabinet in the Castle basement and that was given a revamp this year.

We are also central to a cross-hills initiative taken by the community directors of the Belfast Hills Partnership. This consists of four walks across the hills, one each at Imbolc – 1 February, at Bealtaine – 1 May, Lúnasa – 1 August and Samhain – 1 November, we are calling the Big Walks. You can see that we have linked these to the four ancient Celtic festivals. Our particular commitment is to lead a group each time across to Ligoniel from Belfast Castle to meet with another group walking in Ligoniel and another coming down from Divis. Our intention is to show the public the common natural resources and industrial heritage across the hills and to emphasise that our experiences are so much poorer than those of our ancestors. We also want to highlight the common threats to the environment and what can be done to restore biodiversity and protect it in the future. We also want to promulgate the message that walking in nature is good for our mental and physical health and good for society.

One other initiative we took this year was to organise a Christmas dinner. It was in the newly-reorganised restaurant in the Castle. We had a great turnout and all present appeared to have enjoyed themselves – within the bounds of decency!

I want to thank BCC - Belfast City Council and its staff with whom we come into contact. They are always obliging and helpful; in particular I want to highlight the Outreach Manager (North) Mark Turner and his deputy Fran Dowler. They attend nearly all our meetings and activities and are invaluable in accessing resources and smoothing our interactions with officialdom. We are recognised as a Friends group by BCC and are entitled to a grant of £300 per annum. BCC also allow us to hold our meetings in the Castle. I want to thank the fifteen current directors for their active help and support; in particular they have collectively agreed to carry out most of the organisational work necessary. We also gave a group of volunteers who turn up on the appropriate Saturdays and cheerily carry out their designated tasks. And finally, I want to thank the members who, by their subscriptions, keep us afloat and active.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cormac E Hamill". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Cormac E Hamill - chair