

A weekend in the Mourne 27th to 29th March

“Great weekend – enjoyed immensely!” The final words spoken about the latest adventures of the Foyle Rambling and Hillwalking Club and their Associate colleagues from the Sperrins. Words spoken by the normally reserved Lori and carrying all the more weight for that!

Day 1: Friday – a long walk and a longer wait!

Friday afternoon saw Bernard, the aforementioned garrulous Lori, Ita and the shy and reserved Peter head off up the Trassey Track in bright sunshine and brighter spirits.

“A nice steady, relaxing warm up walk to prepare for the challenges of Saturday” Ita lied! And it was! Until we got to the top and a hailstorm in 60mph winds accompanied us the whole way back to the car. Not a single word spoken the whole way down! And everyone soaked to the skin. But we are made of stern stuff and were soon back at the cottage, stripped and preparing to enjoy a long lingering hot shower. (Not all together for the benefit of any wives or husbands reading this!) The first disappointment of the weekend reared its head! The shower could be hot or wet – but not both! So Bernard and Peter made do with half a wash whilst the ladies enjoyed the luxury of a bath. As compensation for the disappointing shower Bernard provided entertainment by ironing the damp out of his only pair of trousers! On the bedroom floor! An unexpected sight when stepping out of a dry shower – it is hard to know where to look when you see a man on his knees! In his boxers! I think I made the right choice!

But there was the renowned County Down hospitality to look forward to, this time provided by the Maghera Inn. Bernard had booked for 7.00 o'clock for 3. Or 4! Or was it 5? And 13 showed up for the 7.00 o'clock booking and the place was already packed to the rafters. Did this faze the staff? Not a bit of it!

“We will have a table for you in less than an hour” said the manageress with what can only be described as a smile. Sure enough she came back at 8.00 and said it would only be another 5 minutes and she would keep in touch! We

should have seen the deeper meaning in that but we were indoors, dry, warm, hungry and vulnerable. And there was nowhere else. At 8.45 she said she would have a table shortly and, taking us totally by surprise, came back at 9.30 to tell us the table was now ready. So we ate, drank, laughed and generally made mouths of ourselves before departing for our excellent accommodation, Mary and Bernard, Ita and Lori, Wendy and Jenni, and poor lonely Peter at the Tory Bush Cottages. Ian, John, Johnny, Ken, Stephen, Diane and Denise – of whom more later – headed to Meelmore Lodge. Our Associates Gerry and Father Brendan headed for their own little House on the Prairie to enjoy the sort of luxury which only £24 a night can buy!

Day 2: Saturday – and why elastication twice a week is good for your mental health!

Saturday morning dawned bright and beautiful as we all met at Meelmore. After a little group hugging and massaging we managed to get Gerry and Father Brendan defrosted and into their walking gear. A lot easier, it must be said than some of those who had consumed enormous fries for breakfast!

I will not describe the walk in detail – you will have seen Ian's photos and know that the Mourne were at their scenic best! Once again along the Trassey Track, through the Hare's Gap, along the Brandy Pad, up Donard, down Donard, up Commoda, down Commoda and heading back to Trassey.

All kitted out in the best of gear, wall to wall Gortex and Berghaus outfits, Scarpa Boots rucksacks and walking poles and Denise, for some as yet not fully explained reason, in "*a small man's trousers*". There was no obvious sign of the small man but maybe that goes without saying!

And all the while members (and Associates) took advantage of the additional service now being provided as part of the walking package. Sex therapy!

You read that right! Mary – apparently – has been studying the subject in great detail using some of the most up to date studies but relying mostly on Oprah. So we took it in turn to walk with her to have a private reading (session?) – for confidentiality, you understand. It seems that it all comes down to timing. Or at least the number of times! Twice a week seems to be best and can be on your own or with company. And what we were reared on – that it can make you blind, gives you hair on the palm of your hands and makes you insane – seems to be a total myth! It, according to Mary (and Oprah) is actually good for your mental health and sure, you only have to look at Bernard to see how true that is! And what a wonderful evangelist Mary can be! To stay on the subject right through a 5 and a half hour walk takes stamina, dedication and more than a little obsession!

On a rocky outcrop overlooking the Trassey Track we stopped for our second break of the day, an idea being tested at the suggestion of our Associates and one to which I think will stick! Sitting admiring the view before heading back to the car park Denise announced – loudly, it has to be said – that she had discovered elastic in her small man's trousers. Elastic that you could tighten! With a toggle! To keep your trousers up! So you don't have to walk for 5 hours holding them up with your hands! What an innovation! What will they think of next? In a kind, warm and caring manner Peter expressed the view that "*Elastication is a great invention*". Ian mumbled something about having a very strong preference for rubber and Mary again reiterated her view that twice a week was best. It would seem that Mary was continuing her sex therapy sessions in her head and accidentally said it out loud! To be fair she did have a rock solid excuse. She had mistakenly misinterpreted something Peter had not said – so there!

Once again back to the cottages for a wash, unless you were Bernard and Peter, and off to the Maghera Inn. We had arranged to be there at 6.30 and this time they were ready for us – all 17 of us and were served promptly at 8.00. Excellent food, excellent company with Denise getting through enough to threaten her ability to get into a small man's trousers the next day! And,

much to Wendy's unbridled joy, a complete programme agreed for the rest of the summer. And, I must say, again with some fantastic walks planned across counties Tyrone, Donegal and Down. The highlight of course will be Ken leading for the first time and one of the relatively few walks in County Derry - as we attempt Shipquay Street. All of it! From the Gate! In one day! In his new boots. (Again not all of us together in his boots)

Day 3: Sunday – and we all go together!

Once again Ita's ability to cater for all shines through as we head up to Leitrim Lodge to begin another scenic trek across some gently undulating (steep) terrain stopping for the obligatory break in lee of the wind. Today Denise was off like a gazelle, her borrowed walking pole flashing in the sunlight as she enjoyed the new-found freedom of not having to hold up her small man's trousers. Wendy and Pauline taking encouragement from Father Brendan's supportive, caring approach - and his slow pace. Mary trying to explain to Jenni how the whole misunderstanding of yesterday was Peter's fault for not saying what she expected him to! Bernard wondering if the twice a week would apply to him and would he be up to it! Gerry expressing resentment and bitterness at the lowly status of Associate Membership (while he held his hands above his head to avoid any rash accusations that he was testing Mary's teaching). Diane sustaining her usual quiet dignity, somewhere in the middle. Peter, Lori and Ita walking quietly ahead and trying to ensure that everyone was getting full enjoyment from the day out. Johnny taking photographs. John taking photographs. Johnny taking photographs of John taking photographs.

As Lori said: "Great weekend – enjoyed immensely!" I think we all did!