

# Off The Beaten Track:

## Fair Head



**\*Crown Copyright. Route and Distances are approx. Only for guidance.\***

### Fairhead and Grey Man's Path

Fair Head is one of the great headlands of Ireland, magnificent when seen from any view...from Ballycastle or Rathlin Island or any of the other headlands on the North Coast. The massive basaltic cliff falls sheer for nearly 180 metres and some of the columns are 15m wide and hundreds of metres high.

Its base and face are so inaccessible that a pair of golden eagles was reputedly able to nest here and rear two young in 1953. After that, their nesting was intermittent and ceased in 1960.

Benmore (the great headland) on Fair Head looks across to Rathlin Island and Kintyre in Scotland. On the clifftop there are dark loughs and a crannog, a cairn, a megalithic chamber and the remains of a motte and bailey Norman fort.

The whole area is steeped in myth and legend, including The Grey Man's Path, the Grey Man being a spectre that is supposed to be seen when the mist rolls in from the sea and he takes human form up this gully.

Evidence of human life and industry from a more recent age is dotted all along the coastal path from Ballycastle to Fair Head and further round the coast at Murlough Bay.

There were Porcellanite mines in this area in the stone age – but the tennis courts at Ballycastle are on the site of a harbour that was opened here in 1743, to export coal that was mined just outside the town. Coal mining was big business – beginning back in the 1600's, production peaked around 1750, when 5-8000 tons a year was being produced. The coal also powered other industries – a glass works between the tennis courts at the sea at the mouth of the Margy river – there were salt pans, a tannery, candles and soap production, a brewery and others. The last mine closed in the middle of last century.

**Height:** 180 metres (590 feet) maximum

**Round trip:** 8 Kilometres (5 miles)

**Time:** 5 hours

**Level 4:** Easy leading to Moderate and then Difficult

This starts as a fairly easy level walk along a coastal path but then requires a scramble up a rough track or grass banks, which are steep and can be very slippery in wet weather. The last part is a level walk along clifftop tracks, which can be very windy, and finally a tricky descent down an extremely steep gully. A good level of fitness is required for the ascent, a good head for heights along the cliff top paths and also the descent down Grey Man's Path, where great care must be taken

### **Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland Discoverer Series 1:50 000**

Map 05 Ballycastle

Map Coordinates: Start: 153420 Finish: 182438

### **Refreshments**

There are a lot of shops and cafes in nearby Ballycastle from which to get sandwiches, food and drink before you start on this walk.

### **Start and Finish**

The walk begins at what is known locally as Marconi's cottage (153420), although the truth of a link to the inventor of wireless telegraphy is questioned.

This is at the end of a single track road which is accessed from either of two left turns out of Ballycastle approx 1km or 2.5km along the A2 from Ballycastle to Cushendun.

It ends at the Grey Man's Path (182438) on top of Fair Head. It should be pointed out that the last part of this walk, although along the clifftop, is on private land. While the local farmer landowners are used to ramblers and visitors on this land, walking here is a privilege, not a right.

If you do not intend to walk all the way back along how you arrived, you should consider having transport ready to take you back. There is a National Trust Car Park about 1 km away near Lough na Cranagh (181425) and a local farmer has similar provisions.

### **Terrain**

The path along the coast is well defined and fairly solid, although it is very muddy in parts, particularly in wet weather. It undulates over grass, bog, rocks, fences and heather and through waist – high ferns. Eventually it peters out and if you continue around the base of Fair Head Cliffs, you are faced with gigantic boulders and rocks which can be both slippery and dangerous. You can slip down easily between them and run the risk of sprained or even broken legs and ankles. If you do decide to make the ascent up the cliff, it is best to do this through a couple of gullies (before you reach this boulder field), which can be crumbly and slippery. Alternatively you can scramble up various parts of the grassy face which can also be very slippery.

The clifftop track is over rock and bog and along peat paths through heather which although fairly well defined, are muddy and water-filled, particularly in wet weather.

The final descent of the Grey Man's Path is down rocks which have been smoothed and polished from the boots and hands of numerous climbers and walkers over decades. These can be very slippery, as can the grass and path and it is highly recommended that you do not do this alone. It is a remote location, open to the elements. If you are alone

and run into problems, it is possible that no-one would pass by there for some considerable time

## **Route**

As already stated, starting at the end of the road simply follow the path along the coast moving north eastwards. You will pass Ballyvoy Pier on your left as you enter Colliery Bay and several coal spoil heaps on your right, close to the path.

After approx 1 to 2 km crossing several fences and stiles, you come to a wide, open and flat grass area, with a fence in front of you and two small islands just off the coast to your left. These are the last remnants of the coal industry in this area. They used to have piers for the ships and boats but most of the evidence for these has disappeared.

To your left is a steep gully, with a waterfall, which leads up to the cliff top. If you choose to climb this, it will take you on to fairly flat grass pasture land, but it is private farmland. Further along the coast, there are other possible scrambles up steep grass and rock, none of which are very evident. There is one other gully which will take you up to Lough Doo. All of the land on top here is privately owned, although as mentioned, many walkers do cross it.

If you do continue along the coast, there is the previously mentioned boulder field which has virtually no routes up the cliff face, other than for experienced climbers and mountaineers. Once on the top of the cliffs there is a rough path along the edge over rock, bog, heather and fences as previously mentioned. Following the edge on your right, from a safe distance until you reach the Grey Man's Path, an obvious large gully, spanned at the top with a distinctive collapsed slab.

## **Local Walking Contacts and Association**

Walk Ni

<http://www.walkni.com/>

Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs

<http://www.ufrc-online.co.uk/>

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

<http://www.discovernorthernireland.com/>

National Trust

<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main>

Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland

<http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/lps/index/gi.htm>

## **Points of Interest**

The ruins of Ballyvoy pier and the remnants of the coal industry along the coast are fascinating. The views from the clifftop across to Rathlin and Scotland and back to Ballycastle are spectacular. Dark Lough Doo with its legends of a devil horse, the Crannog in the middle of the Lough which bears its name and Grey Man's Path and the sea views from it are all stunning.

## **Safety Information**

### **Be Prepared**

With a bit of forethought, common sense, the right equipment and knowledge, hill walking can be a fun, sometimes challenging and hugely rewarding experience. It is remarkable how many people go out hill and mountain walking, without the proper skills, information, clothing and equipment and preparation. National Outdoor Adventure Centres and rambling or walking clubs will always give advice.

- Whether walking with friends or alone, ensure you plan well and allow plenty of time for your walk. Be realistic in your estimates, allowing ample time for navigating/route finding, stops and breaks etc.
- Check the weather reports before you set off. Take note of extremes, especially heavy rain, high winds and high and low temperatures.
- Let someone know your intended route and when you expect to be back (and let them know when you have returned).
- A change of footwear and dry clothes left back in the car (if that is how you arrived at the start) will always be welcome.
- Don't take on too much and enjoy your day.
- Follow the Countryside Code, "Leave No Trace".

### **The following items should always be carried.**

- A comfortable well fitted rucksack with a waterproof liner will allow you to carry all the basic equipment for a safe and enjoyable day on the hill.
- The straps should be suitably padded and sit on the shoulders without rubbing. It should have a supporting waist belt and chest strap to keep it in place. As a general rule of thumb, a 30 litre sack will be plenty for a day walk and 45 - 60 litres should suffice for most multi day camping trips.
- Warm hat and gloves or mittens (sun hat in hot weather) - preferably thermal insulated. Up to 33% of heat is lost through the head. waterproof jacket, waterproof trousers, fleece or jumper. Sunglasses may be beneficial during the summer months.
- Thermal Base layer. Quick drying layers worn against the skin which can transport moisture away from the skin are an important addition in all sorts of weather conditions.
- A fleece is a useful thing to carry, either as a "mid layer" between base layer and outer jacket in cold weather or as an outer layer in slightly warmer conditions.
- Dehydration is an issue at any time of year so ensure you take adequate fluids for the day ahead. Consider the forecast temperatures and how strenuous your day is likely to be. For a full day in the hills 1 litre of water should be the minimum.
- Food for the day. Sandwiches are the easiest to prepare and fruit and chocolate are always good additions.

- Emergency survival bag. This is a brightly coloured plastic bag designed to reduce the loss of body heat.
- A compass and suitable map of the area (with waterproof cover) - and know how to use them.
- A small personal first-aid kit including plasters, bandages, dressings, insect lotions or sprays and sun screen lotion or sprays in the summer months.
- A whistle for attracting attention in an emergency (six short blasts on the whistle is the internationally recognised distress signal).
- Head torch and spare battery and bulb
- A fully-charged mobile phone (signal strength can be weak or non-existent in some areas, but better to have it than not). Do not rely on the mobile phone be self-sufficient in your planning.
- Tissue/toilet roll for sanitary requirements (and a lighter or matches to burn them afterwards). These can also be buried (away from water supplies) after use but that may require a small spade to be carried.

### Footwear.

- Comfortable mountain boots with a suitable sole, and ankle support.
- There are many types available in leather or fabric often with a breathable waterproof membrane.
- Boots also vary in their rigidity. Generally speaking the more technical the terrain the stiffer the boot,.
- To avoid blisters and rubbing they should be laced snugly and broken-in over a series of progressively longer walks.
- To help minimise blisters use medical tape or sticking plasters on the normal rub points - back of the heel and sometimes where the top of high ankle boots rub against the leg.
- Do clean and dry them afterwards (slowly - overnight if possible) and waterproof them regularly with a suitable agent.
- Good quality wool mix socks often help avoid blisters especially on warm sweaty days.

### Waterproof Clothing.

- Jacket and trousers should be waterproof and preferably breathable. The jacket should have zippered pockets and a roomy hood with draw cord.
- Trousers should not be restrictive and should have lower leg zips to ease fitting over boots.
- Waterproofs act as a barrier against rain and wind/chill.

The following items are not essential but advisable to have them.

- A pair of adjustable walking poles. These certainly help with balance and support when ascending a mountain and are particularly helpful when descending
- Binoculars
- Personal GPS (Global Positioning System). This should only be used as an addition and never a replacement for map and compass.
- Well fitted and adjusted gaiters are very useful when travelling through bog land. They help to keep the mud and moisture away from the boots and are an extra waterproof protection. In warmer, drier conditions they are a good

alternative to over-trousers, especially when walking through rough gorse, brush or thorn bushes!

If you are intending to camp overnight you will need:

- Tent or Bivy Bag
- Sleeping bag
- Insulating mat (or inflatable mattress)
- Spoon, knife and fork. Bowls and mug.
- Stove, fuel and pans.
- Food (boil-in-the-bag packs are light to carry and provide good hot meals)

## Do's and Don'ts - the Countryside Code

### Land and its owners.

- Keep the number of cars to the minimum (use public transport where possible) and park appropriately allowing for easy access to property, especially for farmers and landowners. Farm machinery and emergency rescue services may need wide space to turn into a field or gateway.
- All land is owned by somebody. Agreed access to that land is often with the goodwill of the owner, not as a legal right. If unsure, check with the owner and observe signs regarding access agreements/restrictions.
- Use agreed routes in these areas.
- Be friendly and courteous when you meet landowners and local residents.
- Respect private property and do not interfere with machinery, crops or animals.
- Avoid taking dogs into the hills, especially with livestock around.
- Keep noise to a minimum.
- Be careful not to damage fences, walls or hedges.
- Use stiles and gates where they exist.

### The Environment

- Take care not to disturb plants, birds and animals and in particular, nests.
- Where possible stick to tracks, or the most durable surface available.
- In heavily used areas, walk in single file in the middle of the path, even if it is wet and muddy. This helps reduce soil erosion and minimises path widening.
- In more remote areas, disperse use to prevent the creation of new tracks and campsites and try to avoid places where impacts are beginning to show.
- Avoid taking short cuts on zigzag paths as this creates new lines for run-off water and increases erosion.
- Leave cairns as they are: old cairns could have archaeological value.

### Litter, waste and camping

- Apart from being unsightly litter is a hazard to wildlife. **As a general rule take out what you bring in.**
- Leave no litter behind: even biodegradable items like banana skins and teabags can take a long time to disappear and they are unsightly.
- With caution, pick up and remove litter when you see it.
- Human waste should be buried 6 inches deep and at least 30 metres away from watercourses and walking tracks and shelters. Toilet paper takes a long time to biodegrade. It and sanitary towels and tampons should be taken home in a sealed bag. Even if buried, they may be dug up by animals.
- Washing should never be done directly into a water-course, even if biodegradable soap is used. It is better to use a pot for washing and dispose of the dirty water away from the bank.

- Always ensure landowner's permission before wild camping.
- Choose unobtrusive sites at least 500m away from roads and buildings.
- Use a stove for cooking. Campfires leave their mark and poorly set fires, especially in hot summer may be dangerous.

To prevent damage to vegetation, tents should not be left on the same spot for more than two nights. In many wild areas tents should only be pitched between dusk & dawn.