

Discover Silent Valley





Introduction

The Silent Valley reservoir is one of Northern Ireland's 'must see' visitor attractions. The huge reservoir was built to gather water from the mountains over the High Mournes. Along with Ben Crom, the reservoirs supply water for most of County Down and a large part of Belfast.

The impressive Mourne Wall surrounding the Mourne catchment is 22 miles long and connects the summits of 15 mountains. The dams are ringed by mountains while the reservoir grounds contain parkland, lakes and ponds.

Visitors can enjoy splendid mountain scenery, woodland walks, a children's play area, exhibition centre, coffee shop and conference centre.

In Search of Water - Belfast's Dilemma

As long ago as 1678 the Corporation of Belfast saw the need for a "plentiful supply of good water". By the turn of this century a growing population and the growth of the linen, ship-building and engineering industries led to an increased demand on Belfast's water supply.

The High Mournes

The uninhabited Mournes were chosen for their plentiful supply of pollution free, fresh water. The land around Slieve Binnian and Ben Crom was chosen as it had around 70 inches of rain each year. Three years later the Water Commissioners bought 9,000 acres of the High Mournes and started an ambitious programme of work.

The first stage was to divert the water from the Kilkeel and Annalong Rivers and transport the water through pipes to a new reservoir at Knockbracken (near Carryduff). This reservoir could store 100 million gallons of Mourne water.

The Dam Builders

The second stage was to build a dam across the Kilkeel River, in what was then called the Happy Valley. This project began in 1923. In the next 10 years, the Mourne area was a busy place with 2,000 local workmen, new quarries, huge steam pumps and a railway, which brought men and materials from Annalong to the dam. At first the work went quickly, but because of silt, gravel and huge boulders, a lot of digging had to be done. The dam was finally finished in 1933.



Increasing Demand

The Commissioners didn't want to build a second reservoir in Annalong Valley because of the geological condition of the rock in the valley. Instead they dug a tunnel through Slieve Binnian to carry the water from Annalong into Silent Valley. The Slieve Binnian tunnel started in 1949 and finished in 1952. It measures 7 feet x 8 feet (2.1 metres x 2.4 metres) and is nearly 2 1/4 miles (3.6 kilometres) long.

In the 1950s there was a demand for more water as Belfast and other towns in County Down grew. This meant further development along the Upper Kilkeel River and its tributaries in the High Mourne. This was done by adding an extra reservoir in the mountains beneath Ben Crom. This work took 3 years with a workforce of 186 men. The reservoir was finished in 1957. This dam is made up of concrete, unlike the earth and rock dam of the Silent Valley.

The Silent and Annalong Valleys provide approximately 400,000 people with up to 30 million gallons (130 million litres) of water a day. We have also renewed and improved the unseen underground pipeline – the Mourne Conduit – which carries the water to Belfast (56 kilometres).

Today a computer helps check the quality, flow and distribution of the water in Belfast.

Facilities at Silent Valley

Hours

The reservoir grounds are open daily from 10am until 6.30pm (summer) and 10am until 4pm (Oct – April).

Traffic regulations and parking

Vehicle access is only possible through the main gates located on Head Road, Kilkeel. A charge is payable at the entrance.

Drivers are required to obey the one-way traffic system which leads to a single large car park at the south end of the reservoir grounds. From here further access is on foot only (or by Shuttle Bus to Ben Crom).

Restaurant

A coffee shop providing meals/snacks is open 11.00am to 6.30pm each day in June, July and August with week-end/Bank Holiday opening in April, May and September.

Visitor Centre

Close by the coffee shop is the state-of-the-art Visitor Centre where an informative exhibition explains the history of Silent Valley. Photographs, models and an interactive computer programme give visitors an insight into the experiences of those involved in developing Silent Valley from the first plans to the completed project. Admission is free and the Centre is open during normal Silent Valley opening hours.

Conference Centre

A Conference room is available for hire all year round. Enquiries to 08457 440088.

Shuttle Bus

During the months of May, June and September at weekends and July and August daily an inexpensive bus service operates frequently between the Silent Valley car-park and Ben Crom. Ulsterbus also operate tour buses to the park from Belfast and other centres in the summer.

Bye-Laws

These are designed to safeguard your enjoyment of the Silent Valley as well as to protect the area itself. Please observe them and follow the country code. Dogs should be kept on a lead.

Administration

The Silent Valley is administered by Northern Ireland Water which is a Government Owned Company.

Enquiries to 08457 440088
email: waterline@niwater.com
www.niwater.com

Water Use

We use more water every year because of rising living standards and more leisure facilities.

On average, each person in Northern Ireland uses 145 litres of water every day.

For example:

- a washing machine uses up to 80 litres per cycle
- a bath uses up to 80 litres
- an ordinary shower uses 35 litres
- a power shower uses virtually the same amount as a bath
- a dishwasher uses between 22 and 35 litres per cycle
- a toilet uses between 6 to 13 litres per flush.

Providing new reservoirs and water treatment works is expensive and uses up valuable land, often in remote and beautiful countryside. We are constantly renewing our treatment works and water pipes to meet the increasing standards at your taps.

It is in all our interests to save water by using it wisely in the home and at work. We want people to take extra care in preventing leaks and waste. Water audits for schools, the home, agriculture and business premises are available free of charge.

Request your copies today and check how your usage compares to the average. You may be surprised!

Contact us:

Waterline 08457 440088

Report all leaks on roads and footpaths to free phone

Leakline 08000 282011

Text phone 08457 023206

email: waterline@niwater.com

www.niwater.com

How to Get There



The Mourne Wall

The Mourne Wall was built as a boundary around the Mourne catchment. The construction of the wall stands up to 8 feet high (just under 3 metres) and on average it is 3 feet wide (just under 1 metre). This wall is a monument to the skill of the men who built it.



Nature's Building Forces

Unlike the rest of County Down, the Mourne are made of granite. The mountains were slowly formed around 50 million years ago when the much older sedimentary rocks weakened and gradually sank deeper into the earth's crust. This allowed 'younger' granite to rise and replace the old rock on the surface in a dome shape.

Granite is a hard, tough rock with a grainy appearance. Unfortunately it contains few natural minerals and develops a thin 'peaty' topsoil. So it only supports plants such as heather and certain grasses.

Since the Mourne were formed they have gone through periods of extreme heat and cold, the most recent being a series of ice ages which ended 10,000 years ago. Glaciers in the Silent Valley widened and deepened the valley and left the valley floor covered with glacial soil and rock, creating major problems during the building of the dam.

Wildlife

The combination of mountain, moorland and woodland makes the Silent Valley an ideal place for seeing a range of Mourne plants and other wildlife. A spectacular heather bloom colours the valley sides during the summer when dragonflies, lizards and naturally-reared mountain birds such as wheatears, ravens and occasionally red grouse and falcons can be seen.

The woods, lawns and ponds of the reservoir grounds contain different sorts of birds as well as many interesting heath and wetland plants (particularly at Sally Lough).

There is also a healthy badger population. Other legendary beasts are reputed to live in nearby mountain lakes – particularly Lough Shannagh.

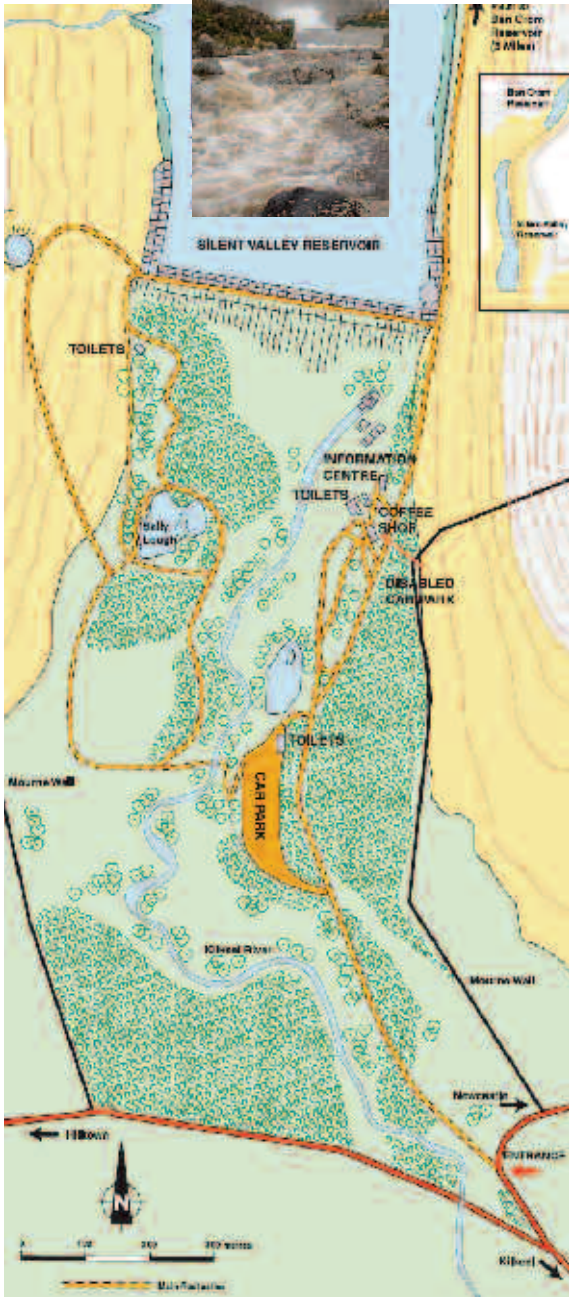
Walks

For more information on walking in the Mourne Mountains, contact the Mourne Heritage Trust, 87 Central Promenade, Newcastle
Telephone: Newcastle 028 4372 4059

Nature Trail

The site of the old railway line that linked Annalong with the Silent Valley reservoir is now a nature trail. Covering approximately a 1.5 kilometres, the trail allows visitors to get closer to the vast variety of wildlife and wild flowers that are flourishing in the area. Visitors can stop at the picnic spot close to the Kilkeel River, while bird watching enthusiasts have their pick of excellent places for catching sight of a variety of breeds along the route.





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