



Silent Valley

Peace. Solitude. Adventure.

northern ireland
water



Introduction

In 1933 the successful damming of the Kilkeel River valley was the end of 30 years of work started by Belfast City and District Water Commissioners. They were responsible for supplying water to the city of Belfast. This set in place the Mourne Wall and then the huge reservoir in “Silent Valley”.

The reservoir was built to gather water from the mountains over most of the High Mournes. The Silent Valley and Ben Crom reservoirs supply water for most of County Down and a large part of Belfast. The two dams are ringed by mountains – while the reservoir grounds contain the parkland, lakes and ponds which were part of the original landscape design. Most of these areas are now open to the public.

Today you can enjoy splendid mountain scenery, woodland walks, and a range of facilities (including an exhibition centre and coffee shop). The story of how the dam was built continues to fascinate visitors to Silent Valley.



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 Belfast Water Commissioners were forced to look for a new source beyond the Belfast hills that surround the city.

The land around Slieve Binnian and Ben Crom was chosen as it was free from industry and pollution and had around 70 inches of rain each year. Three years later the Commissioners bought 9,000 acres of the High Mournes.

Increasing demand - the High Mournes

After a major survey of several possible sources of water the Commissioners thought the uninhabited Mournes would provide a good source of water. Having a source in the mountains meant that water could run freely down to Belfast. They 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 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. 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 took between 1949 and 1952 to finish and 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 of the Upper Kilkeel River and its tributaries in the High Mourne. This was done by adding an extra reservoir high in the mountains beneath Ben Crom. This work took 3 years and 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 about 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).



A green hairstreak – upland butterfly
Acknowledgement to Catherine Bertrand


The Mourne Wall

The Mourne Wall around the Mourne catchment provided jobs for people between 1904 and 1922. The wall stands up to 8 feet high and on average it is 3 feet wide. It is 22 miles long and connects the summits of 15 mountains. 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 Mournes 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 that can live in acidic conditions.

Since the Mournes 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 which created major problems during the building of the dam.





Children enjoying a day out at a Silent Valley event



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 possible only through the main gates located on Head Road. 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 during July and August).

Restaurant

A café providing light meals/snacks is open 10.00am to 6.30pm each day in June, July and August. During September – May (including Bank Holidays) the café will be opened from 11.00am to 4.00pm on Wednesdays and 11.00am to 6.30pm Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Visitor Centre

Close by the café is the Visitor Centre where an informative exhibition explains the Silent Valley's development using photographs, models and video. 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 address on the back of this leaflet.

Shuttle Bus

During the months of July and August an inexpensive bus service operates frequently between the Silent Valley car-park and Ben Crom.

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 (NIW).



Annual Events

Northern Ireland Water organise annual family fun days throughout the year at the Silent Valley Mountain Park.

The scale of activities organised for these events will ensure that there is something to suit everyone. Northern Ireland Water welcome the public to this beautiful Mountain Park where they can enjoy the splendid mountain scenery, woodland walks as well as peace, solitude and adventure.

The programme of events offers a range of activities including exploring the biodiversity within the Park, traditional crafts, Jazz music on the lawn, old fashioned children's games, teddy bear picnics, and 'action adventure'. Arts and crafts will also be available to cater for the artistic family members, while true peace and tranquility can be found among the many hill walks and nature trails.

Visitors will be encouraged to get outdoors, taking part in physical pursuits whilst enjoying the ever changing seasons.

Nature Trail (map opposite)

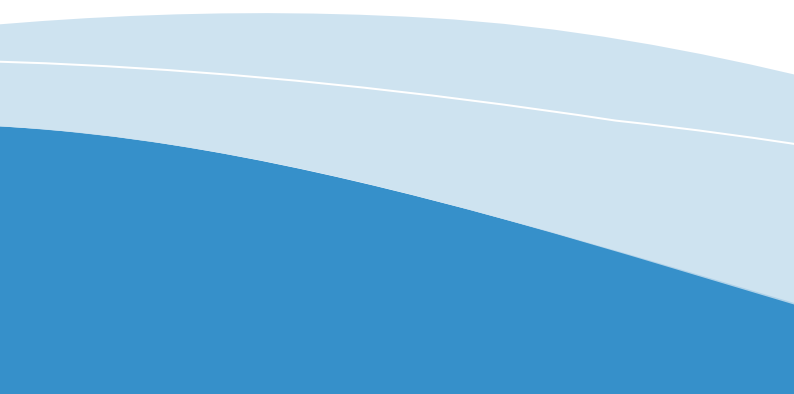
Wildlife

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 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 types of birds as well as many interesting heath and wetland plants (particularly at Sally Lough).

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



The logo for Northern Ireland Water, featuring the text "northern ireland" in a light blue sans-serif font above the word "water" in a bold, dark blue sans-serif font. Below the text are three stylized, white, wavy lines representing water.

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A scenic landscape photograph showing a large, dark blue reservoir in the foreground, a green field on the left, and a large, rocky mountain peak in the background under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. A white curved graphic element separates the landscape from the contact information below.

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