

A VIEW FROM THE HILL

It was a steep climb up Scrabo Hill for someone of my age. However the seats provided by the Environment Service came in handy. After negotiating the hill with some difficulty, I sat down on a rock to rest and enjoy the view. Strangford Lough looked most impressive; its broad expanse stretching away in the distance. It was a sunny Spring afternoon and the tide was in. No sand was visible on the foreshore. The water was smooth and mainly dark green; but in a few sunlit places it was a lighter green colour.

After a short rest, I walked past the Tower and sat down on a grass bank. Below me was a golf course bathed in sunshine. A golfer made a fine pitch shot which ended up close to the flag. I congratulated him on his shot; however he missed the put. Meanwhile his colleague lost his ball in a gorse bank.

I moved on to a spot where I could look down on the town of Newtownards. Traffic was flowing on the recently-opened bypass. All three new roundabouts were in view. The bypass is clearly reducing congestion in the town, especially at rush hour. The Industrial Estate looked busier than in the past. Cars arrived regularly at the Vehicle Testing Centre just below me.

Looking in the Bangor direction, I could see a large upland area covered in yellow gorse. This must be Whitespots Country Park.

Newtownards airfield seemed relatively quiet. I wondered if this was due to the Icelandic volcano. The flying ban had already been lifted in parts of Ireland. No doubt planes would be taking off shortly. Soon after a small plane did take off. It headed down the Lough before circling back over the town. Another small plane took off soon after. Then a helicopter lifted off from another point.

My mind went back to 1933 when the Marquess of Londonderry built an aerodrome on the old racecourse. The first civil airport in the province opened the following year. Its runway was only 18 feet above sea level, so planes could land even in thick fog. In stormy weather, one person would grab each wing, and another the tail, until the plane came to a standstill. Planes flew to all the major cities of the British Isles. The Royal Mail was also brought to Ards. Passengers travelling to London were collected at 8.00am at the Midland Hotel, York Road and driven to Ards Airport. The flight began at 9.00am sharp. After a brief stop at Liverpool, the plane flew south to Croydon, landing at noon. The passengers were driven to Victoria Station.

The Airport flourished from 1934 to 1938. However, when Belfast Harbour Airport opened in 1938, business collapsed and never recovered.

Returning to the present, I could see that the Floodgates walkway was stopping Lough water from flooding the airfield, and the town generally. There was a significant area of yellow gorse beside it. Behind the Floodgates cars appeared and disappeared in the outlets and inlets of the Portaferry Road.

I moved to a spot where I could look down on the Comber area better. Islandhill was indeed an island at the time. However it did not take long for the walkway to reappear. The entrance to the Comber River looked particularly smooth.

There was just enough time to have a look inside the Tower. The view from the top should be good on a clear day like this. It is 135 foot tall and has 122 sandstone steps. The walls are about four foot thick. It cost £3,000 to build in 1857; but there are some structural defects due to cost cutting. I was by no means the only visitor in the Tower. Passing others on the narrow stone steps proved difficult.

In the first floor Museum 'Roary the Scrabosaurus' has pride of place. He's a lifesize model of a ferocious flesh-eating reptile. He's ten foot long and about three foot high. His footprint was found in the Scrabo quarries in 1938. It's the only evidence of reptilian habitation in Ireland in the Triassic era (200 million years ago).

On the second floor I watched a short film about the Tower and the Country Park generally. Then I continued my climb to the top.

The view in all directions was incredible. However I was so absorbed in the many places of interest that I did not hear the clunk of footsteps on the stone steps. It was a senior member of staff. She was very surprised to find anyone up there. The Tower was closed. I needed to come down immediately or I would be locked in for the night. Apparently a man did get locked in some years earlier; but he used his mobile phone to get help. I do not carry a mobile phone! Needless to say I got down those 122 steps in record time. I didn't want to spend the night cuddled up to Roary the Scrabosaurus!

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April 2010