



View from Murlough Beach showing the disused quarry on the side of Thomas's Mountain (with Slieve Donard above), the site of a proposed visitor centre served by cable-car from Donard Park, Newcastle, Co Down

# A Mourne Gateway ... or a dead end?

**Dawson Stelfox** reviews a proposal for a visitor centre and gondola in a protected part of the Mournes

For almost as long as I can remember there has been sporadic speculation of cable cars, funiculars or gondolas “up Donard,” invariably sparked by returning holiday-makers with alpine aspirations. But the Mournes are not Alpine massifs. Access is easy and the scale intimate, so intrusive engineering would cause damage to their special

character, protected as it is by designation and legislation. As a result, previous technological fantasies have faded away and there is always the temptation to put each successive proposal into the ‘it will never happen’ category.

But every once in a while a fundamentally bad idea gets a head of steam and starts bulldozing through good sense. One such development was the dam and reservoir proposed for **Kinnahalla**, below Spelga, in the 1980s, and it took a concerted effort by local residents and recreation and environmental groups to stop

it. More recently, a proposal to build a funicular railway up the line of the **Granite Trail** above Newcastle was stopped by local opposition.

Now, once again, a development is proposed, this time by **Newry, Mourne and Down District Council**, that will have a profoundly negative impact on the Mournes, and we just can't risk sitting back and saying ‘it will never happen.’

Back in 2013, the **South East Coast Masterplan** came up with a range of initiatives for the Newcastle area, many of them quite sensible. There was

also a proposal for a gondola ride from **Donard Park** to **Drinnahilly, Millstone Quarry, or Thomas's Mountain Quarry**, as a “premier visitor attraction for both the Mournes and the South East Coast.”

A **Mourne Mountains Gateway** study followed in 2016-2017. **Mountaineering Ireland** and others engaged in the consultation, putting forward proposals to enhance recreation experiences and the natural environment in the Mournes, and opposing the gondola as disruptive to the landscape and scenic quality of the area.



**AUTHOR:** Dawson Stelfox has been walking and climbing in the Mournes since childhood. He was a founder member of the **Mourne Heritage Trust** and is still involved in initiatives to protect the built, natural and cultural heritage of the area. He is a conservation architect and longstanding member of **Mountaineering Ireland**, having served on the board in a variety of roles.

Concept image of the proposed visitor centre and gondola released by the local district council



Photographs: Lesley Ashe (view from Murlough Beach), Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (concept of visitor centre)



The outcome of that process was not made public, nor the criteria that were used for deciding. It has only recently been made known that a gondola ride to a **visitor centre** in **Thomas's Mountain Quarry** was the 'preferred option,' and it went on to be the focus of a grant application to the **Belfast Region City Deal** fund as the **'Mourne Gateway'**

This was despite no Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) being carried out, or any form of environmental surveys beyond a checklist of what surveys would need to be done in the future. The SEA process is designed to filter out environmentally damaging projects before large amounts of public money are spent on them, but this necessary procedure was not followed and 'options' or 'alternatives' are not now being considered.

Instead of a broad range of mostly good initiatives, as envisaged in the Mourne Mountains Gateway consultation, the City Deal part-funded 'Mourne Gateway' is now entirely focused on the gondola ride from **Donard Park** to a new visitor centre in **Thomas's Mountain Quarry**. The projected visitor numbers



On rainy days or days with low cloud, a gondola from Donard Park car park would not offer much of a view

are 350,000 a year to what is claimed will be a 'world-class visitor attraction,' targeted at 'out of state' visitors, such as the cruise ship market, to supplement the likes of **Titanic Belfast** and the **Giant's Causeway**.

It is further claimed to create a "greatly enhanced and accessible Mourne offering" (whatever that is meant to mean) and will "celebrate Mourne stories and heritage."

The former granite quarry on Thomas's Mountain is a prominent landmark in the iconic view of **Slieve Donard** from Newcastle. Crucially, it is inside the **Eastern Mournes Special Area of Conservation**

(SAC) and **Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)**, and it is not owned by the council but by the conservation charity, the **National Trust**.

Quarrying has long since stopped, former workers' buildings have been removed, and the site is rapidly being recolonised by nature, as recorded by **Andy Carden** in his brilliant **Mourne Nature Watch** Facebook page. It is also in the area of hillside slowly recovering from the devastating 'wildfire' of 2021, with the National Trust having introduced conservation cattle grazing to support species-rich natural regeneration.

The attraction of the site to

the council is the view north over Dundrum Bay which, while interesting on a good day, is hardly 'world-class' and on many days is cloaked in cloud, mist and rain. The quarry faces and the steep slopes above obscure any view of Slieve Donard itself, unlike, ironically, the rejected Drinnahilly option, which is outside the SAC and ASSI.

The National Trust, owners of the quarry, have not agreed to lease the site to the council and have voiced concerns about it, stating they won't support it unless it can be shown there would be no environmental harm and that any works would be 'reversible.' There are many National Trust members, myself included, who believe those tests are incompatible with the very nature of the project and it should simply be rejected out of hand so that available funds can be spent more wisely.

As it currently stands, the council is starting to spend hundreds of thousands of taxpayers' and ratepayers' pounds on consultants' fees (the exact amount has not been disclosed). The consultants' brief does not consider alternatives and is limiting its consideration of impacts to the route between Donard Park and the quarry, rather than the wider mountainscape.

Mountaineering Ireland is fundamentally opposed to this proposal because we believe it will cause irreversible harm on multiple levels:



The view from the quarry



# MOURNES



The disused quarry on the side of Thomas's Mountain



Thomas's Mountain and Slieve Donard viewed from Newcastle

- It introduces a large-scale building into a prominent site within the strongest nature protection designations we have (SAC and ASSI), something contrary to planning policy unless 'exceptional' public interest is proven. There is no need for this visitor centre on Thomas's Mountain - all the exhibition and event space, interpretation galleries and café could, and should, be in Donard Park, not above the treeline in a prominent site in a protected landscape. The example of the visitor centre on **Ben Lawers** in Scotland -

demolished after it was clear its presence high on the mountain was contributing to damage to the environment it had set out to protect - should be a cautionary tale.

- The line of the gondola from Donard Park inevitably passes through the **Glen River** section of the ASSI, causing physical, visual and noise pollution impacts to protected broadleaf trees and an historic demesne landscape.
- The project aims to bring 350,000 people a year into an area with currently a very small number of visitors, which will lead to

- The shortest way to Donard from the new visitor centre will be up the steep slopes behind the quarry. Apart from the erosion, this steep ground presents a safety issue, especially to those tempted, in descent from the summit, to head straight for the gondola as an easy way down. Unlike the Glen River path with the Mourne Wall as a handrail, the route to or from Donard and the quarry is on open mountain, requiring competent navigation to avoid cliffs, very steep ground and the quarry faces.

new 'desire lines' - including a traversing line to the Glen River and a direct route to and from Donard. The Glen River path is by far the most popular route up Donard, with circa 100,000 users a year, a volume that requires almost constant maintenance to control erosion. Both of those new desire lines will take people onto ground highly vulnerable to erosion and just recovering after the 2021 fire - major damage is inevitable. The laughable idea of corralling visitors to the confines of the quarry is already being rowed back on, and, as the Cairngorm funicular experience has shown, not allowing visitors out is unworkable.

Projected costs have already risen from the original £33m to £44m (council figure) or £50m - **Department for the Economy** (DfE) figure. The City Deal grant is capped at £30m, so every penny above that will come from the local ratepayers.

Costs are likely to rise further, especially as it is only now 'gondola engineering experts' are being asked to advise, and it is likely extensive traffic management measures around Newcastle will have to be included to try to mitigate the impacts on a town that is already congested on the good summer days when the gondola would be at its most alluring.

And therein lies the nub of the issue. Newcastle does not need a good weather, view-



Hikers on the Glen River path up Slieve Donard



dependent attraction with international tourists passing a few hours before returning to their cruise ship or Belfast hotel, but instead a sustainable level of year-round visitors, staying locally and supporting local businesses, shops, bars and restaurants. Activity tourism already provides that and could be supported to offer a lot more.

There is no shortage of good ideas, many coming out of the **'Forever Mournes'** project, led by the **National Trust, Mourne Heritage Trust, Woodland Trust** and **NI Water**, and the post-Covid, DfE-funded report by the **James Hutton Institute**.

Mountaineering Ireland made a detailed submission to the council in April 2023 and we have recently updated our summary of alternative options.

Many of these ideas – such as a **Bloody Bridge/Donard forest/Tollymore trail** – could be implemented for a fraction of the cost of the gondola. Newcastle could build on its reputation as a year-round activity resort with new indoor sports facilities, restoration of the Rock Pool baths, water sports facilities at the Harbour and an Avondale-type tree walk experience in Donard or Tollymore forests.

A 'Mourne Gateway' is a good idea, but it should be in Donard Park, not halfway up a mountain, as the Ben Lawers' experience in Scotland proved. All the interpretation of Mourne heritage, environmental and safety messages can be told much more accessibly and efficiently in Donard Park.

Instead, the rising costs of an unwanted gondola will suck up all available funds, especially as other areas will demand their fair share, given the amount being spent in the Mournes, ill-advised as it is.

Mountaineering Ireland is not alone in opposing the gondola – there is a strong local **Mourne Gateway Information Group**, with an online petition that has garnered almost 5,000 signatures – see [www.bit.ly/stop-gondola](http://www.bit.ly/stop-gondola) – and the recently formed **Friends of Donard**. Within the council,



View of the quarry in its protected mountain landscape setting

the **Alliance Party** has consistently opposed it, so far against the majority of councillors.

Mountaineering Ireland has put forward a series of what we believe are better alternative developments and it is not yet too late to have

these adopted and funds re-directed. We are calling for:

- The consultants' brief to be amended to consider alternative options;
- A detailed options appraisal to be put into the public domain and consulted on,

including outline business cases;

- A genuine partnership developed between the **council, National Trust, NI Water, Forest Service, Woodland Trust** and **Mourne Heritage Trust** to deliver a coordinated plan for sustainable, all-year-round activity tourism, protecting the natural heritage and supporting the local community.

In the absence of this, Mountaineering Ireland will continue to campaign against the gondola-focused project, which is not a Mourne gateway but a dead end. ■



A raven in the quarry



Slieve Donard from Commedagh