

# WALK 16 - THE BRANDY PAD FROM EAST TO WEST

**START:** Bloody Bridge on the A2 coast road south of Newcastle – 388271.

**FINISH:** The Cecil Newman car park at Trassey near Bryansford – 311314.

**DISTANCE:** 12 kilometres (7½ miles).

**TOTAL ASCENT:** 590 metres (1935 feet).

**MAPS:** OSNI Discoverer Sheet 29. OSNI Mourne Country Outdoor Pursuits Map.

**TERRAIN:** Mountainous. Good tracks and paths for the most part, but some stretches are rough and bouldery and can be wet underfoot.

**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** Ulsterbus 37 links Bloody Bridge with Newcastle and Kilkeel. Ulsterbus 34 is an infrequent service running close to Trassey.

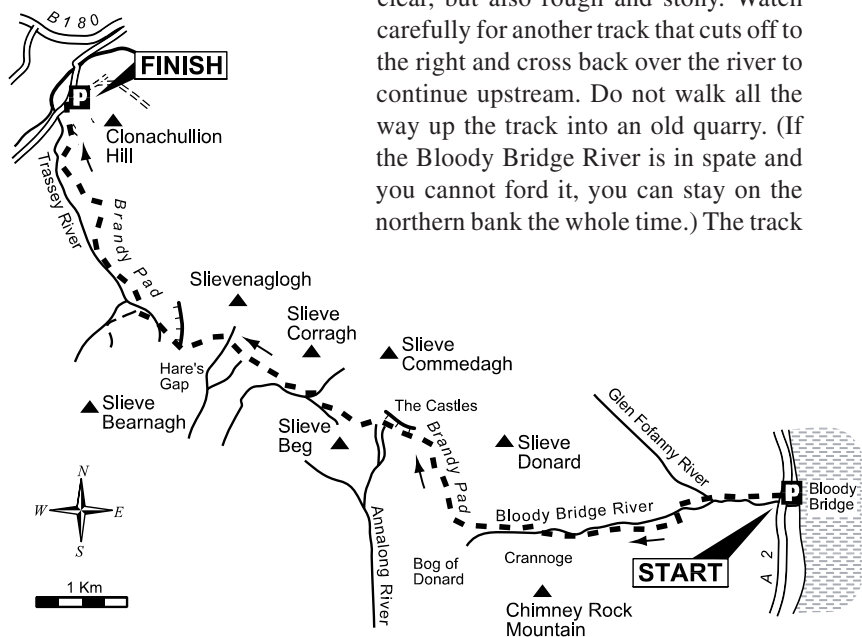
## THE WALK

The Brandy Pad is an old smuggling path that has become one of the classic walking routes through the Mountains of Mourne. In the eighteenth century the rugged coast south of Newcastle was a favourite place for landing contraband goods shipped from the Isle of Man. Brandy was a favourite, but other goods included tea, coffee, tobacco, soap, wine and indeed anything that attracted a heavy enough rate of duty to be worth the trip over the mountains. Pack ponies were loaded and funnelled up the Bloody Bridge River to the Bog of Donard. After contouring around the head of the Annalong Valley and the Silent Valley, the ponies reached the Hare's Gap and exited from the mountains by way of Trassey. Now well inland, away from the eyes of the excisemen, goods were conveyed to Hilltown for further distribution. No doubt the Brandy Pad was very lightly trodden in its early days, but it became a popular walking route and is now a very obvious line on the ground. Some sections of the path are badly eroded and parts have been reconstructed. As this is a linear route through the mountains, you need to be sure you have transport at the finishing point, or be absolutely sure of the bus times.

## THE ROUTE

Bloody Bridge is on the busy coastal road between Newcastle and Killeel. There is a car park and toilet block beside the bridge, and the walk starts on the opposite side of the road, where a National Trust plaque reads 'Bloody Bridge'. Go through a small gate and a wooden squeeze stile. The old Bloody Bridge lies off to the left, a single stone arch over the Bloody Bridge River. It was the scene of a massacre in 1641, when the Magennises ambushed a band of Presbyterian prisoners being led between jails in Newry and Newcastle. The path to follow runs straight upstream between banks of gorse, becoming rather rough and bouldery by the time a footbridge spans the inflowing Glen Fofanny River.

Continue following the path upstream beside the Bloody Bridge River, crossing a wooden step stile at a point where two pipelines cross the river. These carry water from the Silent Valley to Belfast. The path runs further upstream until it passes a part of the river where the water slides down tilted slabs of granite. Cross over the river and follow a fenced track uphill. Turn right at a junction with another track, which twists and turns, then follow it straight uphill parallel to the Bloody Bridge River. The surface is broad and clear, but also rough and stony. Watch carefully for another track that cuts off to the right and cross back over the river to continue upstream. Do not walk all the way up the track into an old quarry. (If the Bloody Bridge River is in spate and you cannot ford it, you can stay on the northern bank the whole time.) The track



is grassy in some places, but is a stony groove in others. There is a heap of quarry spoil on the other side of the river, and at this point the track makes a curve away from the river. Further upstream, the path is bouldery and braided, cutting through peat and heather as it climbs. A single broad path finally reaches the Mourne Wall on the edge of the Bog of Donard. There is a view from the boggy gap of Chimney Rock Mountain to the south and then, turning clockwise, Rocky Mountain, Slieve Binnian and its North Tor, followed by Slivelamagan, Cove Mountain, Slieve Beg, Slieve Commedagh and lofty Slieve Donard.

Cross a stone step stile over the Mourne Wall and follow the path away from the wall. The Brandy Pad drifts to the right, roughly contouring across the mid-slopes of Slieve Donard at around 550m (1800 feet). Keep to the left at a junction of paths to pass beneath the prominent gap between Slieve Donard and Slieve Commedagh, then walk beneath the wrinkled rocky outcrop known as the Castles. These blocky buttresses are well named, featuring fanciful turrets, towers, crenellations and Cyclopean masonry. The Castles are the preserve of acrobatic ravens, while the heathery slopes below, leading into the Annalong Valley, are home to a few grouse. A couple of gullies riven through the Castles have funnelled water down onto the slopes and washed the heather away to expose the gritty soil beneath. Some parts of the path have been resurfaced, leading up to a large cairn on the gap between Slieve Commedagh and Slieve Beg. Views at this point take in Slieve Beg, then stretch across the head of the Silent Valley to Slieve Meelbeg to the west, the jagged peak of Slieve Bearagh and Slieve Meelmore. Hare's Gap comes next, where this walk is heading, then Slievenaglogh and Slieve Corragh lead the eye to Slieve Commedagh, which towers above the buttresses of the Castles. The domed summit of Slieve Donard is followed by the Bog of Donard and Chimney Rock Mountain.

Follow the rugged path downhill from the gap, passing an eroded cleft in the granite where there is a curious upstanding pillar of rock. There is a view down to the Ben Crom Reservoir, which is overlooked by the rugged peak of Ben Crom. The Brandy Pad leads gently down to the Hare's Gap, where there is a cairn built around a metal post. The Mourne Wall crosses the gap, while the steep and rocky slopes of Slieve Bearagh tower overhead.

Go through a gate in the Mourne Wall and walk straight downhill. The slope at the head of the valley is bouldery and usually wet. Take care not to turn an ankle on the way down. The path is vague but gets



The Brandy Pad, looking towards the Ben Crom Reservoir.

better as it levels out, fording a river and joining a track. Ford the river again and simply follow the Trassey Track down through the rugged, heathery valley. The track is roughly parallel to the Trassey River, but drifts away from it in a broad loop to reach a gate beside a sheepfold at the corner of Clonachullion Wood. Follow the track onwards, with the forest to the right and gorse bushes to the left. Go through another gate and enter part of Clonachullion Wood. At a final gate, cross a stone step stile beside the gate to reach a minor road. Turn right and walk a short way down the road. Just to the right is the Cecil Newman car park and picnic site. Anyone needing to link with the occasional Slievenaman Ulsterbus service should continue downhill, cross the bridge over the Shimna River, then walk up to the top of the Trassey Road to intercept it. Be sure to carry an up-to-date timetable, as this service is quite limited.