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Noel Parker, retired forester living in Fermanagh

# 25 Walks in Fermanagh

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## Introduction



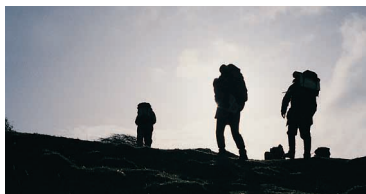
County Fermanagh which is very roughly rectangular in shape is situated in the south-west corner of Northern Ireland, adjoining Co. Tyrone to the north-east. The other sides of the rectangle adjoin the Republic of Ireland, with Co. Donegal to the north-west, then Co.s Leitrim, Cavan and finally Monaghan to the east.

The area of Co. Fermanagh is about 1875 square kilometres of which about 176 sq. km is water. The county is divided lengthwise by the River Erne, Upper Lough Erne and Lower Lough Erne. Strategically placed at the centre between the two lakes is the county town of Enniskillen. There are two road crossings of Upper Lough Erne but it is not possible to cross Lower Lough Erne by road, until the watercourse narrows again into the River Erne at Roscor, with a further crossing a short distance down river at Belleek.

The River Erne rises in Lough Gowna on the border of Co.s Longford and Cavan. From Lough Gowna the river winds its way northwards to Lough Oughter, then flows through Belturbet before entering Co. Fermanagh and widening out into Upper Lough Erne with its numerous islands.

Just south of Enniskillen the River Erne becomes a single channel again. After passing through the Killyhevlin narrows, round Enniskillen and through the Portora Barrage the river quickly widens out again to form Lower Lough Erne. A short distance north of the Portora Barrage is the island of Devenish, an important early Christian monastic settlement founded in the 6th century. The island is perhaps best known for its round tower.

At first Lower Lough Erne contains numerous islands but soon widens out further into what is known as the "Broad Lough". This large open area of water becomes quite rough in strong winds.



Near the Roscor Viaduct the river is once again a single channel now flowing west. After passing through Belleek, the River Erne leaves Northern Ireland. A short distance from Belleek in Co. Donegal is the

Cliff hydroelectric generating station. Here sluice gates regulate the flow of water from Lower Lough Erne. Depending on the demand for electricity the level of the lake can fluctuate quite a lot within defined limits. The river now flows into the man-made Assaroe Lake at the end of which is a second hydroelectric generating station just above Ballyshannon. Quite soon the River Erne enters Donegal Bay on the Atlantic coast of Ireland.

The landscape is dominated by evidence of the last ice age. This evidence is seen in the lower lying areas in the form of frequent lakes, boulder clay deposits and numerous low drumlin hills, some of which appear as islands in Lower and Upper Lough Erne. The drumlins, clayey nature of the soil and to some extent the climate make for poor drainage. In parts there are extensive areas of marshy and boggy ground. On the higher ground there is generally a covering of peat.

The geology of much of Co. Fermanagh dates from the Carboniferous period which resulted in deposits of limestone, sandstone and shale.



The higher ground to the west of Enniskillen has the most spectacular scenery, mainly because of the nature of the limestone deposits. In places the limestone is covered by hard sandstone type deposits as on Cuilcagh, the highest point in Co. Fermanagh at 665 metres (2188 feet). This long flat topped ridge situated on the border between Co.s Fermanagh and Cavan dominates the landscape in this area. The geology in this part of Co. Fermanagh has also resulted in some spectacular cave systems, the best known of which is the Marble Arch Caves.

At the 1991 Census the population of Co. Fermanagh was just over 54,000 of which almost 11,500 lived in Enniskillen. It is interesting to note that in 1841 prior to the famine the total population of the county was almost 157,000.

The county is very rural with agriculture the main form of land use. Another important form of land use is forestry. Almost one third of the total area of about 75,000 hectares owned by the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland is in Co. Fermanagh. Not all this land is plantable so within the forests there are open areas mostly on the high, poorer land. These forests were generally started in the 1950's so clearfelling of the older plantations has already started. As clearfelling takes place in the future, the landscape will change quite markedly in places, thus opening up new vistas.