

# Duke of Edinburgh's Award

**Mr Miskelly - Duke of Edinburgh Coordinator.**

Due to the pandemic, we have not been able to run the award as normal for 2 years. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award comprises of 5 sections. In school we coordinate the Expedition section. To prepare for our expeditions, we met each Friday afternoon for some classroom sessions which focused on expedition skills such as: - camp craft, cooking, first aid, map, compass skills.

With restrictions on camping and sharing tents finally easing this year, it was great to get pupils back into the hills. This is a summary of what we experienced this Expedition season.

### **Practice 1**

Our first practice took place in March; this was a 2-day practice. We started at Hen track and headed towards our campsite at Gorsehill via Pigeon rock mountain. This was an opportunity to practise some basic navigation skills and get used to carrying the rucksacks. The weather on this occasion was great and ideal for walking. Some of the groups were caught messing about in the forest searching for their inner Ray Mears. When we caught up with them, we were not happy and chased them on. All groups arrived safely at camp in good time, where they put up a tent and cooked an evening meal, before parents arrived to pick them up. The next morning once all groups were back at Gorsehill, we then headed over Hare's gap and along the Brandy pad. The weather was very different, it was quite cloudy and windy on the higher ground. As some of the groups were not carrying big rucksacks, we thought we would bring them on a ridge walk to slow them down a little. This walk took us to Hare's gap; we then followed the Mourne wall along to summit Commedagh, the second highest peak in the Mourne. On the way up the climb at Commedagh the groups got some refreshment at 'Paddy's pipe', a natural spring on the side of Commedagh. All the groups then

made their way down to Slieve Donard car park in Newcastle to be collected by parents and get an ice cream!

### **Practice 2**

Our second practice was on the first weekend in April. We started at Gamekeeper's Lodge in good conditions. Now that the groups had the experience of navigating in the Mourne, they were ready for the challenge of finding their own way to the campsite. Day 1 saw the groups head past Loughshannagh and Foffanny Dam and make their way towards Trassey track. All groups managed to navigate well and again made good time to camp, even after stopping for a hot chocolate at Meelmore Lodge Café. At Gorsehill campsite each group cooked a meal and pitched tents before parents picked them up.

Day 2, once parents had dropped all groups back at Gorsehill the routes took us through Tollymore forest park on a loop walk. This would test navigation skills with the maze of tracks in Tollymore. All groups made it back to camp in good time, without any coffee stops on this occasion. We had hoped to camp but as the temperature at night was forecast to be -2 degrees, we decided to wait until the third practice.

Day 3, after another night at home and well rested the groups were set for a longer day. With the clear sky at night, it was a cold start with blue skies. From Gorsehill we headed over to Trassey track and Hare's gap with each step the temperature was increasing. From Hare's gap some groups followed the Brandy pad, a route used by smugglers in the past, this brought them to the Bog of Donard for a welcome lunch stop. Other groups headed along the ridge walk taking in Commedagh before coming down to the Bog of Donard. From here it was a

simple walk down to Bloody Bridge car park in the heat, some groups took the opportunity to cool off in the river on the way down.

### **Practice 3**

Our third practice started in the rain, the first time we experienced any rain during our training. We started at Gamekeeper's Lodge, a familiar spot. With waterproofs on the groups headed up Bann's Road to meet the Mourne wall, following the wall over Carn Mountain. The weather wasn't great as the groups made their way across to Ben Crom reservoir. The first camping the group experienced was a little further at Carricklittle track. The groups arrived a little damp and tired as they were carrying full packs now. The rain eased as the groups set camp and started to cook evening meals. This would turn out to be an experience that many would rather forget. During the night/early morning a bug hit the camp and throughout the next 2 days it affected several pupils. One pupil down at this point, the groups started off Day 2 in dry conditions, heading over Long Seefin following the wall. This route was quite boggy; Ronan Quinn ended up waist deep in a bog much to the delight of his group. The Blue group took some time to share a snack with a horse enroute, I think they were hoping to get their bags transported in return.



Following the wall to lunch at the Bog of Donard and then the familiar route along the Brandy pad and back to Gorsehill campsite. The second night camping took its toll and several more pupils were hit with the tummy bug.

# Review 21/22

Day 3 was a long day, many struggled after 2 days walking with a full pack and 2 nights in a tent. We ended up cutting the walk a bit shorter on the third day as many more were struck with the tummy bug. The Red group was the only group to complete the full day that had been planned, so they earned the bragging rights. Special mention though to the Blue group, many suffering with tummy bugs decided to climb Slieve Muck on their route. All the groups were picked up at Hen track car park and nursed home by parents, armed with crocs for aching feet and basins for anything else!

## Qualifying expedition

Any other year we normally travel to Wicklow for our expedition. With issues around Covid we were allowed to complete the Expedition in the Mourne Mountains. This meant that the groups were all now very familiar with the Mourne Mountains and their routes, however the weather we experienced certainly made for a challenging expedition.

As can be seen from the group photos, we experienced a lot of rain. Day 1 started out wet and the route took the groups over Ben Crom reservoir and down towards Carricklittle track. Most of the groups stopped here for lunch and some even managed to have a nap. Crowded House sing about 'four seasons in one day' and we experienced that on Day 1, we even had snow flurries on top of the Dam wall.

Day 2 was a pleasant day for walking; we had quite a bit of sunshine which was a welcome change but brought its own challenges. With the 'Taps aff' type weather we were thankful that the tops stayed on but there were quite a few legs out. Many of the groups arrived at Gorsehill campsite with red legs and faces due to the lack of sun cream applied during the day. The staff were on hand to give out bottles of after sun to those in need. The mood in camp was good as the tents were up in the dry and all were well fed. The night would be a different matter! All were in their tents at 11pm and then the rain and wind came throughout the night. When the staff arrived to check

the campsite at 7am we were faced with carnage! Throughout the night the ground had become saturated. Sleeping bags were wet, tents were blown down, tent poles were snapped, tents were ripped. The pupils were moved out of the tents and put into the Barn at Gorsehill for some shelter before starting Day 3.



The route for Day 3 was changed due to the terrible weather and the groups were sent through Tollymore Forest Park as it provided a bit more shelter. We avoided crossing at the stepping stones for obvious reasons. The groups returned to Gorsehill to pack up camp and return home to get dried out. With restrictions on camping due to Covid we didn't have to camp, this allowed us the opportunity to send pupils home for one night.



Day 4: the last day. After a good sleep and all dried out, the spirits were high for the last day. The route was familiar to all the groups. Thankfully the rain had stopped and the sun came out again. The groups made their way past Foffanny and Spelga Dam, which were nicely topped up after the previous night's rain. Safely navigating the river crossings and climbs enroute, all the groups arrived in good spirits at

Leitrim Lodge car park, the end of their qualifying expedition.

Thanks to Mr T. Baxter, Mrs E. Spratt and Sammy for all their help and support throughout the year.

## The Groups 2021-22



Red Group



Orange Group



Green Group



Purple Group



Blue Group