

Ardnabannon 2017

Shared Education Residential - Dromara Primary School and St Michael's Primary School 8th – 10th May 2017

Day 1

The sun was out and there was great excitement all round as our baggage handlers, Dean, Callum and Alex helped load the coach with enough luggage to do for a week. We collected our friends from St Michael's and set off on the scenic route to Castlewellan, there was no way a 55 seater was going to make it on the narrow windy roads across the mountain. It felt like more of a magical mystery tour to get us in residential mood.

On arrival at Ardnabannon we were greeted by Stephen who was to be our chief instructor for our stay. While the teachers were guided round the building receiving all the safety instructions we were taken to see our home for the next three days. It seemed like a maze of corridors, would we ever remember how to get from our dorms to the games room to the dining room?

Once we had seen around, we returned to our common room when we eventually learned who was sharing with whom!! Everyone seemed happy with their dorm buddies and after collecting our bed linen we then had the chance to prove that we could actually put on a duvet cover without vanishing inside it.

Then it was our first dorm inspection, seemed to be a favourite occupation for Mrs Burns and Mrs Collins. They were very particular and gave us hints at how to make the beds look even neater and how to arrange both towels and wellies in a professional manner.

After some time to explore the vast grounds we had our first experience of the delicious food. As Lucy told the dining room staff, 'it's as good as a five star hotel, can we bring you back to school?' We would soon understand why it was important to eat plenty to keep us going through all the activities.

Our first set of activities included archery, climbing 'the tower of doom' and zip lining. We were divided into three groups and met our instructors who had plenty of patience and encouraging words, which we needed.

Most of us attempted climbing 'the tower of doom', which is a 20 metre pole with small footholds and a very small platform on top. Simple, climb the pole, heave yourself on to the platform, stand up and step off. No problem to Daniel who was up before anyone even noticed. Everyone who attempted the climb felt a great sense of achievement, no matter how far up they managed to go.

Next was archery. We have some rivals for Robin Hood. Lucy, Matthew and Gabriel really stood out as champion archers and Matthew's team won the overall competition. We certainly learnt new skills regarding sharp tipped arrows and how to lift and handle them and even better how not to point them at anything but the target.

From archery to zip lining. We climbed the top field which has the most amazing views over Newcastle and the Mourne (Mrs Collins was obsessed with amazing views). After some nervous queue juggling where people didn't want to go first, Reuben climbed the ladder to the launch platform, got hooked up to the safety lines and he flew like a bird down the line nearly reaching the tyre at the far end, it was faster than normal apparently. Everyone who did it thought it was brilliant and would have loved a second go.

Afternoon activities over and safety helmets and harnesses returned we had a little free time to explore the grounds a bit more. More delicious food and practice of our table clearing and wiping skills.

Although we begged to go to our dorms (why?) we were straight into our evening activity with Stephen. We joined together with the other visiting school children who were from Drumaness. The sun was still shining as we were instructed in all the skills required for orienteering, we always had to remember where the road was and move ourselves but not the map when we turned. After a bit of map rotating we were ready to be let loose in our teams.

Around the grounds of Ardnabannon were 20 places with hole punchers to punch holes in our competition cards, of course they were miles apart, slight exaggeration but we certainly used all our cross country training to complete

the course. Although a team from Drumaness won overall our top team was Thomas and Fintan who showed planning and stamina.

The rest of the evening was spent either in the games room where Callum was challenging everyone and anyone to a game of pool and winning, or playing football on the front lawn. In case our tea hadn't been enough we then went back to the dining room where Mrs Burns had buttered mountains of toast for us, which we had as well as the famous Ardnabannon crispy buns.

And so to bed, well that turned out to be a long process due to numerous trips to the bathroom and general excitement and maybe too many sugar filled midnight feasts, the evidence was wrappers on the floor in the morning(see dorm inspection comment) and noisy neighbours. Silence eventually fell about 1.30 AM in the corridors that is!!!!

Day 2

Why was Mrs Collins so bright and breezy when she wakened us and pulled back the curtains when we felt we had just dozed off? Anyway it was off to the dining room for breakfast, great selection of cereals, toast and boiled eggs.

We soon stopped smiling when we heard that a dorm inspection was going to happen, why did we throw so many wrappers on the floor, why were our clothes in piles and why was our sheet and duvet in a ball at one end of the bed? Well needless to say the scores for tidiness were not as high.

We met up in the common room to find out what we were going to do that morning and were excited to learn that it was bouldering. Bouldering, what was that? Well we needed, wet suits, three warm layers, a safety helmet and life jacket so it sounded good. After a lot of squeezing and hauling and struggling, yes Fintan we mean you and a few others, we set off in the buses for Bloody Bridge.

The sea was sparkling, the sky was blue, the gorse was yellow and the views were amazing(Mrs Collins again) when we arrived at the foot of the river. We divided into our groups and set off up stream with Martyn, Simon, Stephen and Andy to guide us over slippery boulders, shallow rockpools and tricky little

waterfalls. It wasn't long before we were encouraged to lie like otters in the pools of cold mountain water. Then after more climbing we reached the highlight of the climb, the deep pools for the best action of the morning. Most of us were brave enough to leap off the river banks, five metres above the pool and plunge into the icy water coming up like corks. Each different pool was better than the last with different jumping techniques needed to land safely in the water. It was fantastic but freezing.

With dripping faces and soggy feet squelching in our water filled shoes we made our way back to the buses, tired, wet, a bit cold but feeling a great sense of achievement.

The hot (or warm or well quite cool) showers back at base were very welcome even though it was difficult to peel off the wet suits; but all part of the skills we were being taught. Wet suits carefully left in the wind tunnel to be washed later we were really ready for lunch. After lunch we had to disinfect our wetsuits, rinse them and struggle with a hanger to get them ready to return to the store, where's mum when you need her?

It was a quick turn round for the afternoon activities which were to be rock climbing and abseiling for 2 groups and canoeing for the other 2. Our group were off to a disused quarry outside Castlewellan for the rocky adventures (no Hugo please don't sing, not that Rocky). Hard hats and harnesses on again, they seem to be our new uniform. Luckily the quarry was warm and sunny for us to sit in as we awaited our turn to either climb or abseil. After our safety instructions had been issued and our brave instructors had climbed, without the safety rope, we were ready to go.

We had a bit more of being polite by letting other people go first but those of us who tried the rock climb all succeeded and were rewarded with amazing views of the mountains (Mrs Burns bribed her group with sugar filled treats). Daniel as usual scrambled up as if it was a small rock and not a 20 metre high rock face. At the top legs were like jelly, so Gabriel says. As for the abseiling I must mention both Katie and Rachel who were not very sure if they wanted to do it at all but after the first go there was no stopping them as they tried it numerous times. Mrs Collins very bravely scrambled up to the top of the abseil

path to take in some sun and more of those amazing views(she pretended it was to take photos of us). Dean has decided it's going to be his new hobby.

After a couple of hours of learning how to climb and abseil and take responsibility for checking our safety clips and ropes we returned to base for a quick run around before dinner.

The sun was hotter than ever so there was no way anyone wanted to stay inside, so our teachers organised a scavenger hunt around the grounds. We scavenged and they sat in the courtyard!! It was great fun finding blue things, red things, yellow things, interesting pebbles that looked like animals and building a small tower from 7 pebbles to name but a few. The judges were very strict in their marking but if you argued with them you just lost a point off your total, so we didn't bother.

It was a close competition with the Pancake Boys, of Josh, Callum and Mr Murphy drawing with The Sparkling Rainforest, Amelia, Erin and Kilara in first place. It was the tower of pebbles that did it.

After a bit of free time we were treated to ice lollies before supper, we were limited to one drink, I wonder did the teachers not want us to make as many bathroom trips tonight.

Well we were all very tired after our late night/early morning and of course all the activities and the fresh air so by 10.30 the corridors were quiet and most dorms were too as we caught up on our beauty sleep.

Day 3

It's great what a full night's sleep can do, although Mrs Collins still was annoying with her curtain pulling when we were still snoozing at 7.30.

Our final morning and we had to now start the task of clearing up our dorms, we should have been tidier as we went along. Our final breakfast over and it was off to the vast drying room to retrieve our washing (we actually were

congratulated on how well we hung our clothes up). Packing to go home is never as easy as packing to go, why would all our belongings not fit in as easily???(MUMMMMMMMM)

Eventually all dorms were cleared, all clothing claimed and our final briefing in the common room took place. For our final activities we did a straight swap, either abseiling and rock climbing or canoeing.

Our groups were off to Castlewellan lake to show off our paddling skills, we hoped. After our normal call in at the safety equipment stores for helmets and life jackets; we were getting very good at putting these on and helping each other with tightening straps and checking the fit.

After a short bus ride up the hill to the forest park we arrived at the sparkling blue lake with clear blue skies above. While our instructors launched our canoes and lashed them together we took a short walk towards the castle. It was exciting to see huge camera cranes and floodlights outside the castle. We later learned that they were making a new Disney film, The Lodge, so we look forward to seeing the finished product.

Ready to launch, but only after extensive paddle practice on dry land; reach, plant, pull and keep those knuckles in line with the blade. We climbed into our canoes and everyone managed to keep their feet dry. Then the two sets of canoes set off for the mile paddle to the end of the lake. Our instructors were really impressed with our natural skills as we learnt to keep in time with each other, not to splash and count to 2. Our canoe was so relaxed that we managed to sing our way along with as many songs from Cinderella as we could remember, top marks to Joel for knowing all the words.

Hugo's canoe reached the far end in record time, they must have put all their energy into paddling and not singing. Having safely docked, or whatever you do with a canoe we then did what no other park visitors get to do, tunnel exploring. Other groups got explore two islands with a short stretch of water between them. Amelia tried to jump across but didn't and ended up in the water. A quick pose for a photo in the sun and then it was time to paddle back. The trees were reflecting in the calm water and by now we were expert

paddlers. So expert in fact that when our instructor Hazel challenged us to see how many strokes we could do non-stop together we managed 180, WOW! Must have been our stroke counter Carrie that inspired us.

Back at the slipway we were privileged to be allowed to lift and stow the canoes in the trailer, great team work by all and another skill learnt.

Back to Ardnabannon to hand over our equipment for a final time, we were now experts at that too. Then it was time for our last lunch, we would miss all that good food, especially the teachers who had crispy buns after every meal!!!

Before we left it was time for the awards ceremony on the front lawn. Who had the neatest dorm? Well far and away it was Chimney Rock; Hannah, Rachel, Phoebe and Katie, they certainly deserved the best girls' dorm. Now for the winner of the boys' dorm, well they didn't live up to their name of Muck, anything but. Hugo, Ross, Kristian, Ben, Matthew and Iulian certainly knew how to keep a tidy room. Then we had prizes for bravery, speediness, scavenging, archery, climbing, abseiling, eating healthily(at mealtimes) and all being awesome at hanging clothes sensibly on the drying racks.

So loaded up with sugar we got our bags back on the coach for the return journey. We sadly waved goodbye to our instructors who had been brilliant fun. The return journey was a good bit quieter than the outward one but we were quietly happy. We waved goodbye to our friends from St Michael's; we would see them again soon on a post Ardnabannon trip.

Thank you to all the staff at Ardnabannon for a memorable stay and a special thanks to our own teachers, Mr McCaul, Mr Armstrong, Mrs Burns and Mrs Collins for organising the whole experience and putting in those very long hours. We have certainly made new friends, learned new life skills and had new experiences which we will remember for a very long time.