He fell in love with walking in the wilds of Hertfordshire, while growing up in the suburbs of north London.

Today, Mark has worked regularly for the Trust’s Great British Walk and The Independent on Sunday. He is also a contributing editor to BBC Countryfile Magazine. He is however, still learning how to fold an OS map in a force eight gale.

Minnowburn is an area of semi-natural woodland, just three miles from the centre of Belfast. You can even walk there from the city in a couple of hours along the Lagan navigation that threads its way through the Lagan valley regional park.

“Minnowburn itself is just one big secret. It’s a cracking estate and one that’s really valued by the people of Belfast as there’s not a lot of green space in the city centre.”

– Craig Somerville, Estate Ranger

**The Giant’s Ring – a Neolithic burial tomb, built around 2,700BC and encircled by a turf embankment high just above Belfast.**

It’s the largest henge and stone circle in Ireland, with a diameter of around 180m and encircled with turf banks 18m high.

The entrance to the stone tomb is possibly aligned with sunrise or sunset on the longest day of the year.
We reach Shaw’s Bridge, which is today a double bridge - a pedestrian affair dating to the early 18th century, and a more modern road bridge.

In the past the river would have been busy with lighters and canal barges, today, as the river’s old industrial channels are redeveloped for recreation, you keep your eyes peeled for otters and kingfishers as well common seals (who have been known to jump over the downstream weirs and find their way up here.)

We catch a glimpse of Yellow rattle - named for the seeds that rattle in their casings. It’s a go-to plant for meadow lovers.

**Rattling along**

We begin by heading north along the River Lagan, making for Shaw’s Bridge in a there-and-back again diversion from the main trail. While the path is paved, our surroundings are immediately bucolic as we meander through a succession of three meadows.

The walk

Shaw’s bridge

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**The bank of beeches**

We return via a quiet road towards the car park in order not to miss the magnificent Minnowburn beeches. This striking plantation, is 150 years old, rises sharply on a bank and is very easy on the eye.

**The Giant’s Grass Ring**

– Craig Somerville, Estate Ranger

**A view of the docklands**

We climb to the Terrace Hill Garden. The brickwork and design dates to the 1930s. The garden also boasts a view to Divis and the Black Mountain that dominates the north and west of Belfast. As we walk a little higher up the hill, the iconic cranes of the Harland and Wolff shipyard just peak out on the skyline.

"This is the classic Lagan valley view. The river is hidden in summer but in the autumn the tree colour is outstanding."

- Craig Somerville, Estate Ranger

**A musical interlude**

We're nearly at the Giant’s Ring but before we get there we contour across another field, known as the Sandpit, with a natural-looking amphitheatre that is either glacial, or carved out by sand mining. In 1969 this was the scene for Pop for Peace, one of the last Woodstock-style festivals.

**Back to the river**

We follow a path around the lip of the plateau before dropping down through semi-open woods to re-join the River Lagan. The paths meet at a pleasant sweeping bend, where the sedge has coalesced picturesquely to huddle in one of the curves. It’s all impossibly scenic and I ask myself how, on a dozen visits to Belfast, I had never heard of this beauty spot and the prehistoric henge high above it. Craig was right: there are lots of secrets here, wrapped up in one big secret.

We return via a quiet road towards the car park in order not to miss the magnificent Minnowburn beeches. This striking plantation, is 150 years old, rises sharply on a bank and is very easy on the eye.

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