The George Best Trail
A Belfast boy

George Best was a football phenomenon. To this day he stands head and shoulders above most of the rest. On the field, he could dribble, tackle and score goals. Off the field, he was handsome, charming and witty. No wonder he earned the tag, “the Fifth Beatle”.

George was born on 22nd May 1946, the first child of a working-class family in east Belfast. His father Richard, or ‘Dickie,’ was a skilled lathe operator in the Harland & Wolff shipyard. His mother, Ann, was a warm, softly spoken mother who instilled respect in her children.

A phenomenon almost from the moment he could first kick a football, George’s talent was spotted by the Manchester United scout, Bob Bishop. He sent a telegram to the team’s manager, Matt Busby, which simply read; “I think I’ve found you a genius”.

So at 15, George left home for Manchester, but desperately homesick, fled back to Belfast after only 24 hours. Fortunately he returned to Manchester United two weeks later and in September 1963, he made his debut for them against West Bromwich Albion. He went on to make 490 appearances for Manchester United, scoring 179 goals.

In his day, ‘the Belfast boy’ was a global sports celebrity. Pelé, the legendary Brazilian footballer, famously called him “the world’s greatest player ever”. This guide will introduce you to the people and places that shaped George in his formative years and give you a flavour of his life in east Belfast, before he hit the big time.
George Best’s East Belfast

This trail will bring you up close to east Belfast as it was in George’s day. You’ll see the everyday places that formed part of his daily life - his local school and playing fields, the chippie where he went for a fish supper, the cinema where he watched the most recent films, the ice cream parlour where he’d get a ‘slider’ or a cone.

Whilst many places still exist, others are gone. But the warmth and humour of east Belfast folk remains strong, as does the pride they feel for ‘the Belfast boy’. You’ll find many loyal Manchester United fans among them, only too happy to discuss their team’s ups and downs.

So we’re off. Start your tour in the Cregagh Estate, where George grew up. You can catch a Metro 6 bus near Belfast City Hall, or ask any taxi driver to drop you off at Cregagh Estate. Then spend 1.5 hours or so exploring the sites on Map 1 - his home at 16 Burren Way, where he grew up and the pitches where he honed his skills.

Map 2 will take you on a 30-minute walk down the Cregagh Road. It has hardly changed since George’s day and you’ll enjoy a bit of craic with the locals. There’s more to see on Map 3 and you might take a taxi over to the Oval football ground, home of Glentoran Football Club.

Should you wish to pay your respects to George by visiting his grave at Roselawn Cemetery, details of how to get there are in Section 5.
By following Map 1, you can explore Cregagh Estate and the places that were closest to George’s heart - nowhere more so perhaps than his home at 16 Burren Way.

Cregagh Estate was built in the late 1940s and is characterised by its unusual flat roofs. This was George’s home turf until he moved to Manchester.

In the autumn of 1957, aged 11, he won a scholarship to Grosvenor High School, which at that time was in west Belfast. But George was far from happy at Grosvenor. His grades fell and he frequently ‘mitched’ off school. One of the reasons for this was that rugby was the chosen sport at Grosvenor, so George couldn’t play his beloved football. Ironically, George’s house in the Cregagh Estate was only a long-ball from Ravenhill Stadium, the home of Ulster Rugby. When George visited the stadium many years later he received a standing ovation from the crowd. www.ulsterrugby.com

HOME TURF

So the decision was made that George should transfer to the now closed Lisnasharragh Secondary School. Reunited with his friends and selected for the school football team, his grades quickly improved. George seems to have thrived at Lisnasharragh and before leaving, he was made a prefect.
“I think I’ve found you a genius”

Bob Bishop
MANCHESTER UNITED TALENT SCOUT
**Cregagh Estate**

As a boy, George played games of football on the open playing fields at the centre of Cregagh Estate, with his friends and team mates in Cregagh Boys’ Club. Their changing room was a cold, damp store room at the end of Burren Way (you can still see the store doors today), but George and his friends didn’t mind – all they wanted to do was play football.

George’s dad, Dickie, used to coach him for hours. Dickie had been a quick, agile footballer and he passed these skills on to his son. However, he didn’t go along to watch many of George’s games, as it made George nervous and he didn’t want to put his son off.

George’s mum, Ann, played her part too. At half time on winter days, she would arrive on the pitch with mugs of hot Oxo for the team, or in the summer, slices of fresh, juicy orange. She used to take great pride in washing the team’s kit, scrubbing the jerseys on a washing board and even pegging the socks out on the line so they all faced the same way.

**Bells Bridge Roundabout**

The Irish Football Association is the organising body for association football in Northern Ireland. Its logo is emblazoned in herbaceous plantings on the roundabout adjacent to the Cregagh Estate, known locally as Bells Bridge Roundabout.

George won 37 caps for Northern Ireland scoring 9 goals, but he never reached a major international final. In 1982, there were rumours that Billy Bingham would select him for the World Cup finals in Spain. It’s fascinating to wonder what if . . .
16 Burren Way

In January 1949, Dickie and Ann, and their young family of George (aged 2) and Carol, moved into their new home at 16 Burren Way. The Cregagh housing estate, designed by Thomas Rippingham, was brand new and the house featured the very height of luxury – an inside bathroom. George’s sister Barbara was born in 1952 and after he moved to Manchester, 16 Burren Way became home to his twin sisters Julie and Grace and then his young brother, Ian.

George’s room has been restored to how it would have looked in the 1950s and is now available for holiday rental. George’s childhood bedroom has been recreated including a laid out Wolverhampton Wanderers football kit – the team that he supported growing up. Downstairs is the dining table that George ate at when visiting home, as well as family portraits, images from his football career and old school reports donated by the Best family. But any visit to 16 Burren Way must also be tinged with sadness. For on 3rd December 2005, George’s body was carried from this small red brick house for the last time.

www.georgebesthouse.com

Schomberg House

Schomberg House, on the Cregagh Road, is the headquarters of the Orange Order. This institution remembers and celebrates the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, when King William III defeated King James II in Ireland. George’s father and grandfather were members of the Orange Order and the Royal Black Perceptory. One year, George took part in the annual celebrations and Dickie got him a collarette to wear, which is on display at Schomberg House.

www.grandorangelodge.co.uk
Dear Mum & Dad,

Well we done it! We won 3-0. It was fabulous.

Steve said the crowd think I’m another Johnny Berry. I started on the left wing but switched with Willie Anderson. I laid on two of our goals. Everyone was very pleased they said I was the best forward. It was a great feeling playing in front of such a big crowd. The noise kept bugging in my head!

Sheridan!

We play Sheff Wed. now in the quarter-finals (Away). I’m just going to the ground to get my wages. I think I’ve earned them. I’m dead beat. Maybe if I’m lucky Joe will give me something extra (Bonus). Wilf Maguire told me after the match he had put my name forward for Ireland’s youth team. Well that’s really not much to say. I just wanted to let you know how we went on.

Love to Carol & Bucks.

Your loving son,

Gertrude George

xxxxx x x xxxxxxx
Map 2 will take you along the Cregagh Road, which in George’s day was a thriving commercial road, lined with local, family-owned shops. Fortunately, it remains very much the same to this day. However, some landmarks, such as the Ambassador Cinema, have changed their function – it is now a large department store.

Other places, like Malone Rugby Club are stronger than ever. George’s mum played hockey on the club’s playing fields. George used to run along the sidelines practising his football, while his mum was playing hockey on the pitch.

It should take no more than half an hour or so to walk the length of the Cregagh Road. But take your time and make sure you call in and refresh yourself at one of its many coffee shops or bakeries.

Map 2 will take you along the Cregagh Road, which in George’s day was a thriving commercial road, lined with local, family-owned shops. Fortunately, it remains very much the same to this day. However, some landmarks, such as the Ambassador Cinema, have changed their function – it is now a large department store.

Other places, like Malone Rugby Club are stronger than ever. George’s mum played hockey on the club’s playing fields. George used to run along the sidelines practising his football, while his mum was playing hockey on the pitch.
Growing up

George came from a solid working class background. His dad brought home his pay packet every week, while mum, who sometimes worked part time, managed the home and raised their family.

In the 1950s and 1960s, money was tight and working-class families like the Bests didn’t enjoy the sort of luxuries that are taken for granted today. A typical 1950s’ home had a cooker, vacuum cleaner and a plug-in radio, but only one third of households had a washing machine. Few households owned a car or a refrigerator, so food shopping was part of the daily routine. It was quite normal for a housewife to visit separate shops to buy bread, meat, vegetables and fish. This meant that the Cregagh Road was an important shopping hub for the Best household, and others in the Cregagh Estate . . . and of course, it still is.

Ambassador Cinema

The Ambassador Cinema opened in 1936, the boom period of cinema history. Art deco in style, its 1030 seats offered the residents of Cregagh an escape to the glamour and razzmatazz of Hollywood. During the Second World War, cinemas like the Ambassador played a vital role in boosting public morale. Newsreels kept the audiences informed on what was happening on the front line.

The young George Best would have come here with his friends for many a Saturday afternoon matinee, shouting support to their heroes, and booing the villains in such films as Hopalong Cassidy, Quatermass and the Pit, Shane, The Robe, Spartacus and Zorro. He may not even have had to pay – a glass shortage when George was young meant that the cinema would let you in for free if you turned up with a jam jar!
This section of the George Best trail lets you explore the Woodstock Road area of east Belfast where George went to church and also enjoyed a traditional ‘fish supper’.

WOODSTOCK

George took a bus to Nettlefield Primary School and every morning he would dribble a tennis ball from home to the bus stop, then jump off the bus and dribble the ball all the way into school. The process would be repeated on his way home. Needless to say, the tennis ball became very bald!

As his 1953 school report shows (see overleaf), George was happy and conscientious and was described by his teacher as an “excellent” pupil.

Break times were spent playing football in the school yard. This usually meant playing with George’s old tennis ball, because due to post-war rationing, plastic and rubber balls were hard to come by. The boys might even have used an old, burst leather ball, stuffed full of rags or newspapers to keep it in shape.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>MARKS</th>
<th>GRADE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Fairly Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arithmetic</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Order of Assessment: 1st December 1959. Place in class: 7th. Name of pupil in class: George. List of spells: "BELFAST TRUISM".

---

**MARADONA**

**BEST**

GEORGE

PELE

GOOD

**BETTER**

*BELFAST TRUISM*
George spent a lot of time with his maternal grandparents, the Withers, who lived on Donard Street, close to Nettlefield Primary School. He would often go to Granny Withers for lunch . . . not that he stopped long to eat. For George, that meant wasting precious football time.

George, his parents and sister Carol, lived in the Donard Street house for a year before they moved into Burren Way. It was here that George started to kick a ball. There is a wonderful photograph of him (above and on page 2), wearing his nappy and kicking a ball outside his grandparents’ house at the entrance to the alleyway (pictured below). Even at that tender age, the image reveals the poise and balance that were the hallmarks of his footballing artistry.

Donard Street

Ravenhill Presbyterian Church

George was very fond of his Grandad Withers and on Sundays, he and the other Best children would go with him to this church and sit in the family pew for the service.

Just before the minister delivered his sermon, all the children left the main church and went into another room for Sunday School. Afterwards, the family usually went back to Donard Street for Sunday lunch.

Spence’s Chip Shop

Eddie Spence’s Chip Shop was, and still is, something of an institution in east Belfast. It was founded in 1921 and some would say it serves the best fish and chips in the area.

The Bests certainly loved to go there . . . George was particularly fond of the crispy scrapings from the fryer.

If you visit Spence’s look out for the small exhibition dedicated to George in one corner of the chip shop.
Football is part of the lifeblood of Belfast, particularly in its working class areas. The city supports 31 Association Football Clubs, most of which are, like local club Glentoran, semi professional.

**GLEN TORA N**

George's dad, Dickie, played football when he was young and was spotted by a scout for local team Glentoran. He signed for Cliftonville for a while and continued to play in various leagues right up until he was thirty seven.

Interestingly, Glentoran was the first club to notice George's talent, but they dismissed him on the basis that he was too light, too weak and too small to be a footballer.

Manchester United's local scout, Bob Bishop, made a very different assessment of his talent and soon the young George was off to Manchester to start his career.
The Oval

Glentoran Football Club has a history that goes back to 1882, and the Oval on Mersey Street has been their home ground since 1892. George’s paternal grandfather, James ‘Scottie’ Best, lived nearby. As a young boy, George was a keen ‘Glens’ supporter and he came here to watch them play almost every week with his father or grandfather.

Many former Glentoran players such as Danny Blanchflower, Peter Doherty, Billy Bingham, Jimmy McIlroy and Terry Conroy have gone on to play for teams in England and Scotland.

www.glentoran.com

Desano’s Ice Cream Parlour

Desano’s is a local favourite and George loved the ice cream from this family owned shop. To this day, Desano’s traditional Italian ice cream is served either in a cone, with a chocolate flake, in which case it’s a ‘99’, or between two wafers, called a ‘slider’ in Belfast.

George always loved to visit here when he returned home. His sister Barbara even managed to take some Desano’s ice cream to the Cromwell Hospital in London when George was ill.

To Manchester

“At Old Trafford there are seven or eight youths aged 15 to 18, who are known as apprentice professionals. They are paid £9 a week, £4 of which is for lodgings. If the team wins, there is a bonus of ten shillings for each player . . . Besides matches in the winter, we play in a summer tournament in Switzerland, which United have won for the last five years . . . It’s a great life and I wouldn’t give it up for anything.”

George writing in the Lisnasharragh School Magazine
A return visit

In August 1982 Glentoran were lined up to play a friendly against Manchester United. The occasion was to mark the club’s centenary.

In the starting line up for the Glens that afternoon was none other than George Best, who had been turned down by them some twenty years previously for being too small and weak!
George Best passed away in London’s Cromwell Hospital at 12.55 pm on 25th November, 2005, aged 59.

For his dad, Dickie, there was never any question that his son would be brought back to his home city to be buried. On 3rd December, after a private blessing at the family home and a public service at Stormont, the cortege moved off to a private burial at Roselawn Cemetery.

George was buried beside his mother as per his wishes, their grave (5295) is marked by a plain and simple headstone.

The cemetery is situated on the Ballygowan Road, in the Castlereagh hills on the outskirts of east Belfast. To get there, take Ulsterbus no. 12 from Laganside bus centre, Oxford Street in Belfast city centre.

THE FINAL WHISTLE
HIS FUNERAL
HIS LEGACY
& FOUNDATION
On the 3rd of December 2005, tens of thousands of people braved a wet winter’s day to line the route from Burren Way, up Price of Wales Avenue to the steps of Stormont Parliament Buildings, home to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

George was buried from Stormont, where three hundred invited guests attended the special service in the Great Hall, which featured school choirs, readings and performances from Belfast singers Brian Kennedy and Peter Corry. The service was broadcast live to the large crowd of over 25,000 people, who had gathered to pay their respects.
“He was the finest player I ever played with or against. I treasure my memories with him even though on occasions he made me look rather foolish.”

Pat Jennings

NORTHERN IRELAND, TOTTENHAM AND ARSENAL GOALKEEPER
A while back I was invited to become a Patron of the George Best Foundation and I was delighted to accept. When I was growing up in Belfast football was just about the only thing on my mind. Manchester United was the team and of course George was the hero. I followed in his footsteps to Old Trafford and the parallels in our lives were uncanny, both from Belfast, reared in strong working class areas, commanding first team places with United and playing for Northern Ireland.

Therefore being invited to be a patron of the foundation carrying George’s name was a great honour especially when you look at what it has already delivered. It has contributed £100,000 to medical research and partnered the Manchester United Foundation in bringing together young people from Belfast and Manchester to compete in the George Best Memorial Trophy.

The foundation has also sponsored the “Best Way Forward” initiative which worked with Formula One driver Eddie Irvine to deliver health and social education to over 4,000 young people through participation in sport programmes. The charity also supported the Belfast Giants in their “H.E.R.O.S.” cross community and border social inclusion programme along with many other projects involving young people throughout Northern Ireland, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and overseas.

George’s memory lives on in the work of his Foundation which continues to “Remember, Support and Share” the legacy of ‘the Belfast Boy’.

Norman Whiteside

www.georgebest.com
The George Best Trail has been developed by the Connswater Community Greenway, a £32 million investment in east Belfast. The Connswater Community Greenway will create a 9km linear park through east Belfast, following the course of the Connswater, Knock and Loop rivers, connecting the open and green spaces. The greenway will create vibrant, attractive, safe and accessible parkland for leisure, recreation, community events and activities.

The project has been developed by the East Belfast Partnership and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund, Belfast City Council and the Department for Social Development.