

Notes on Kilkenny Woods and Nurserymen

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By 1600 the native woods of Ireland had been reduced to an area covering about an eighth of the country and the proportion of Kilkenny which still carried timber was about the same. The wooded areas of Kilkenny at this time lay on the whole in the north, south and west of the fringes of the uplands, and in the river valleys. The central lowlands south of Kilkenny were probably more or less free of woodland. Traditions of the woods survived until the early nineteenth century when old people recalled hearing of woods that covered large areas near Callan and the banks of the Nore near Thomastown.

During the mid-seventeenth century certain areas were surveyed and the findings recorded in the Books of Survey and Distribution. From this Survey we learn that timber was present in the parishes of Clonamery, Killamery and Inistioge. In Clonamery parish the townlands of Brownestown and Curraghmore carried 115 acres of "young wood growing on barren mountain". Butlerswood, in Killamery, contained 277 acres of wood and Powerswood, in Inistioge, covered 632 acres.

Because the Survey was only carried out on lands belonging to disaffected people it does not give a complete picture of the countryside. However such evidence as it does present, coupled with evidence from other sources points to woodland existing in the early seventeenth century in the following districts.

Areas of land in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are usually given in Irish acres. In this article all acreages have been converted to English acres.

In the north of Kilkenny it was wooded from Clogh to south of Castlecomer, around Ballyragget, around Johnstown and a small area west of Clomantagh. In the west there was a considerable amount on the slopes

of the Slieveardagh Hills stretching from Tullaroan through Callan to Kilmaganny. The timber on Courtstown demesne, near Tullaroan, once the seat of the Grace family, was cut after forfeiture at the end of the seventeenth century. On the other hand, over three hundred acres of natural oak survived on the Desart demesne, north of Callan, until the nineteenth century as did timber on the Ballytobin demesne, half way between Callan and Kilmaganny.

On the east side of the county the valley of the Barrow was wooded, probably most thickly south of Borris, and the Nore Valley was wooded from Thomastown to its junction with the Barrow. Small patches of brushwood and some larger trees survived into the nineteenth century; for example, in Ballyneal townland to the east of Tullaghan there were at that time two small woods of 35 and 40 acres.

In the extreme south of the country there were patches of woodland around Mullinavat and Piltown and a little to the east of Piltown about 70 acres of timber in Gurtrush wood lasted until the nineteenth century.

One of the main sources of information on woods in the eighteenth century is advertisements in newspapers. Advertisements for the sale of standing timber began to appear about 1730 and their numbers increased rapidly to reach a maximum during the 1760's after which time, as timber became scarcer, there were fewer and after 1780 advertisements for the sale of wood were few and far between.

The following list of advertisements of timber for sale in Kilkenny county is taken from Faulkner's **Dublin Journal**.

1739 The woods of Grovebegg, Kells barony.

1740 Coolcullen woods, 6 miles from Leighlinbridge oak, ash, birch, alder, with hazel and underwood for hoops and charcoal.

1741 Fall of large oak timber on Lord Dysert's demesne near Kilkenny fit for ship plank of all sizes, fine scantlings for joiners and barrel staves.

1743 Enisleague wood, near Woodstock. 480 acres entirely of oak on banks of Nore.

Wood of Coolnamuck, 96 acres of oak and ash on the Nore. Six to seven years allowed for cutting. Kilferagh woods, 2 miles from Kilkenny, oak, ash, some birch.

1746 Shankill wood, eight miles from Callan, well grown oak, Knocknatrina woods at Durrow. Full grown oak. Kilferagh woods, near Callan ironworks. Oak, some ash and birch. No wood in the Kingdom of this growth escaped the frost better.

Woods of Grange, two miles from Ross. 40 acres of well grown ash and some oak.

1747 Woods on Clonvallada, Corroghour, Drimine, and Baunmore, ten miles from Callan ironworks.

1750 Curraghmore, four miles from Ross. Great quantity of young oaks.

1755 Ballyfoyle, four miles from Kilkenny. Well-grown oak and other trees. Apply to the Wood ranger. Proposals in writing. Half money to be paid down on purchase, other half by agreement. After wood is cut land to be let.

1757 Castlemorris. 48 acres of 35 year old ash and oak. Clashacrow near Freshford. Oak, ash, but mostly oak.

1758 Ballyduff and Dysert. Young oak wood.

1760 Large well grown ash for sale at Ballyragget. All or part sold.

Kilkenny Archaeological Book 24 ems 10 pt Hpt

1762 Keatingstown, two miles from Kilkenny. 48 acres of oak.

Some of old and young wood of Dysert, the old wood as large timber as any in Ireland and fit for ship-building.

1763 Great wood of Dysert, six miles from river Nore, now cutting. Best oak timber fit for ships.

1764 Ballyknock, near Ross. 80 acres of 29 year old oak. Proposals kept secret.

1767 Bishop's wood. 160 acres full grown oak.

1780 Kilkenny Castle. 5,825 full grown ash.

A few sycamore, poplar and birch at Dunmore Park.

Iron-smelting was an industry closely bound up with a local supply of timber. Until the end of the eighteenth century a satisfactory method of smelting iron with coal was not evolved and charcoal was the usual fuel used for smelting the ore. As the transport of charcoal was difficult because it easily powdered into dust when it was carried any distance the ironworks was always situated near the source of fuel and the iron ore was brought to the works on the back of horses.

Between 1600 and 1780 about 160 ironworks were in use in various parts of Ireland. They included both furnaces for smelting the ore and making pig or cast iron and forges for making bar iron from the pig iron. These works were all owned by English settlers and they provided a landlord with a means of capitalising his woods and at the same time the ground was cleared for cultivation. Outside of Wicklow no attempt seems to have been made to ensure a continuing supply of timber for the ironworks and when the local woods were exhausted the works were blown out.

There were at least three ironworks in County Kilkenny, at Castlecomer, Clohoge and Callan. Nothing is known about the Clohoge works except that it ceased working about 1730. The Callan works, described as "a great ironworks" was in use in 1738 and in 1759 it was to let with the lease having 29 years to run. It was in good repair, in production and there was a constant supply of local timber. Proposals were to be made to the widow Lanigan in the town, or to Mr William Lanigan in Danganmore, Co. Tipperary.

The Castlecomer works ran from 1635 to 1770, that is for 135 years. This was a long period for an Irish ironworks —only thirteen in all are known to have outlasted a century and only five were in existence longer than the Castlecomer one.

The Castlecomer ironworks belonged to the Wandesfordes and was erected at a cost of £1,500 and placed under the care of a Captain Steele. The iron was shipped down the Nore to New Ross in canoes

about twelve feet long and four feet in the beam. As well as pig iron and bar iron ordnance was also cast.

The mention of these canoes, or cots, is interesting. A. C. Lucas has shown that “down to the end of the seventeenth century the normal craft of Irish inland waters was the dugout canoe” but because of “the wood famine experienced by the ordinary people of the country . . . the dugout became extinct in Ireland at an earlier date than it did in many parts of Europe”. The following advertisement from Faulkner’s **Dublin Journal**, 22nd May, 1753, would appear to lend weight to the suggestion that the cot survived on the Barrow for a longer period than on the other Irish rivers.

“For sale, part of the woods in the Deerpark of Monasterevan. Full grown oak fit for ships, mills, buildings. The timber may be carried away by cots and boats.”

The disappearance of native timber in Ireland gave rise during the eighteenth century to a rather limited amount of planting. One of the difficulties which the early planters experienced was the lack of public nurseries from which to obtain plants. They could be obtained from Dublin but they arrived in poor condition, after rough handling in transport over poor roads. Recognizing the need for public nurseries outside of Dublin which was well served with nurseries — the Dublin Society from 1760 until the end of the century offered special premiums to country nurserymen and three in Kilkenny received them. However, the proportion of premium money which came to Kilkenny was very small, only £34 out of £4,000. Twelve counties received more than Kilkenny and Galway, Kerry and Louth between them netted £3,125.

The Dublin Society also gave premiums to land-owners for planting and between 1766 and 1806 awarded £8,500 of which £252 was received by Kilkenny men. Four of the people who received premiums were:

1770 James Kearney of Kearneyville, £20 for planting 2,000 five-year-old oaks eight feet apart.

George Roth of Dublin city, £12 for 855 perches of

ditching planted with English elm twenty one feet apart and two other trees between every two elm.

1795 Walter Kavannagh, £40 for planting ten acres.

Robert St. George, £40 for planting ten acres.

There were five nurserymen around Kilkenny town during the second half of the eighteenth century from whom planters could obtain supplies. These nurserymen were :

Austin, Nathaniel, The Three Flower Pots, High St., Kilkenny. He imported supplies from Holland and England.

Brophy, James. Received a premium from the Dublin Society in 1790 on two acres of nursery ground.

Byrne, Peter. Received a premium on one acre in 1784.

Magrath, John. Received premiums on six acres between 1768 and 1770.

Robertson. In 1764 William Robertson had an established nursery at Thomastown between Cashel and Tipperary and imported plants and seeds from London. Later he moved to Kilkenny. His son, John, carried on the business and died in 1839 aged 78.

John Robertson was an eminent horticulturalist and contributed articles to learned journals including one to the Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1821, on combating mildew on fruit trees with a superfactant in a sulphur spray. His nursery is one of the few Irish nurseries mentioned by J. C. Loudon in his **Arboretum et fruticetum Britannicum** where he states that William Robertson introduced into Ireland most of the foreign trees and shrubs cultivated in London nurseries. By 1800 the Robertson nursery occupied about fourteen acres at a rent varying between £4 and £10 an acre. It's sales were chiefly in seedlings of Scots pine, larch and beech, of which about a hundred thousand were sold annually.

John Robertson was a member of the Royal Dublin Society and when he died he bequeated his library of four hundred books on botany and horticulture to the Botanic Garden, Glasnevin, which at that time belonged to the Society. The curator, David Moore described the

bequest as being of the greatest assistance to apprentices and pupils who previously could "only obtain information as they saw it practically performed, but now have the assistance of many of the leading works on those subjects".

KILKENNY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Christmas Party, 1968

Talk: "Cromwell in Good Humour" ... Master John Bradley
Song Mr. Pat Curran
Talk: "Fr. Quigley in 1798" Mr. Frank McEvoy
Song Mr. George Wilde
Talk: "Dr. Lawlor and Kilkenny Mental
Hospital" Dr. McKeogh
Song Mr. George Vaughan
Talk: "Coming of Age of James, 3rd Marquis
of Ormonde (1865)" Mrs. Margaret Phelan
Song Mr. Thomas Fitzgerald
Talk: "The Murder of the Lovets" Mrs. E. Fitzmaurice
Song Mr. Thomas Coyle
Talk: "Explosive Adjectives" Mr. Thomas Lyng
Song Mrs. George Vaughan
Talk: "Local Families" Mr. Eoin O'Mahony, K.M.
Song Mr. W. Holmes
Talk: "The Butler Mss." Mr. George Butler
Song Mrs. M. McCarthy and Miss B. Phelan
Talk: "Finding of King St. Louis Crown" ... Mary Kenealy
Talk: "Amusements in Kilkenny" Mr. W. Monks
Talk: "Statues of Kilkenny" Mrs. C. Murphy
Joseph O'Carroll, M.C. Mary O'Carroll at the Piano.

Mr. T. Hughes, President, spoke and thanked the helpers.