

CHARLEVILLE: THE OWNER'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE NATIVE WOODLAND SCHEME

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Abstract

This paper gives a brief description of Charleville woods, drawing attention to the decline of native woodland in the last 50 years using the Tullamore area as an example. It compares the prices of native woodland trees over the last 200 years.

The paper discusses the factors that have influenced woodland owners during the last 50 years, particularly land reclamation and agricultural expansion following Ireland's entry to the EEC. The effect of the drive to plant softwoods in the middle of the 20th century is also discussed. The paper examines the emerging problems relating to native trees in the context of the overall development of Ireland and raises the issue of public insurance.

The paper explains personal reasons for welcoming the Native Woodland Scheme (NWS) and the preservation of biodiversity. The woodland, which has been entered into the NWS, is described briefly and the importance of prioritising work in order to achieve the best possible result from the finance available is illustrated. The importance of timing in wet woodland activities is highlighted and personal experiences of difficulties of NWS deadlines and the interval between actual expenditure and receipt of grant are discussed.

Introduction

I have been blessed to grow up in an area, with over 500 hectares of broad-leaved woods within a five-kilometre radius of my home. This has given me a love of trees and all the living things associated with woodland.

When I became a director of the company that owns the Charleville woods, I realised that there is a great deal more to woodland than economics. In 1982, I looked after some 250 hectares of a neighbour's woodland and oversaw the closure of an outdated sawmill and the subsequent disposal of the woodland.

History of the Charleville woods

Sources of information regarding the history of the Charleville woods include a survey of Charleville Demesne carried out by Michael Cuddihy in 1785, a plan of intended improvements drawn by Thomas Leggett in 1786 and the 1838 Ordinance Survey maps. These, in addition to some improvements suggested by the great landscaper John Claudius Loudon and my own personal memories of the woodland as a child, indicate how little change had taken place in the woodland, from the late 1700s to the 1950s. Beech and sycamore were planted along the carriageways, in some cases probably to improve the bluebells, and Douglas fir and European larch had been planted in the areas of the great wind-blows of the 1890s and 1902. Lime, Spanish and horse chestnut and specimen exotics had also been strategically planted but apart from beech and sycamore, there was very little seeding of non-native species.

Until the 1950s, there was very little tree felling and the woodland staff spent winters clearing up windblow and planting and protecting seedlings from weeds and rabbits. Most of this work was financed by a steam driven rip-saw, which was replaced in 1948 by a diesel engine and ripsaw. My understanding is that timber was cut as fuel in the morning, thus allowing planks or stakes to be cut in the afternoon with sufficient fuel left to allow the process to be restarted the next day. However, the late 1950s, 60s and 70s brought massive change to the woodlands and today, probably less than 15% of the semi-native woodland that I remember as a child remains in the Tullamore area.

The Charleville forester's notebook of 1813 records 34,417 commercial native trees, valued at £43,012 and the area which is now in the Native Woodland Scheme, as having 3,043 oak valued at £6,984, ash valued at £1,921 and 196 birch at £48. At that time, rural wages were one shilling and one penny a week. The oak trees, mentioned in the notebook, valued at an average of £2:8:0, were sold in 1963 for an average of less than £10 when rural wages were around £6:1:0 per week. When these figures are compared with the current average value of a 250 year old tree at Charleville (approximately 200) and the current industrial wage (approximately 500 per week), it is hardly surprising that there has been very significant changes in the attitudes of owners, towards native woodland. From an economic point of view it is incredible that up to the abolition of rates on land in the early 1980s, the ratable valuation of land under trees at Charleville was £0.525 (£0:10:6) an acre compared with £0.50 (£: 10:0) also an acre for farmland.

The replacement of the crosscut with the chainsaw and the introduction of the bulldozer, allowed land under native woodland, particularly good land, to be converted into farmland at little or no cost in the 1950s and 60s. This land then began to produce an annual income. The entry of Ireland into the EEC in 1972, together with the rapid growth in agricultural prices, further fuelled this temptation. Ireland was a country that needed rural employment and if land was allocated for forestry, landowners were considered by many as unpatriotic if they did not grow Sitka spruce, which was deemed to be of most economic benefit by reason of its short rotation. What was happening at Charleville was happening everywhere.

At the same time, the use of pesticides, weedkillers and the replacement of biodegradable packaging with non-biodegradable materials was having devastating consequences on biodiversity. For me, as well as many other woodland owners, there came the realisation that much of what we had loved as children would not be seen again; but how could what remained be saved in such a dreadful economic climate.

With the abolition of rates, I decided that I would not fell any more oak trees at Charleville, except in the case of compulsion and this is a policy that I have never regretted making. However, new threats have now arisen. Woodlands near a town are affected by development; dangerous trees become huge insurance risks, wider roads mean felling roadside trees, houses built on neighbours' land can result in an obligation to fell. Well over 150 mature oak trees have been felled in the last 20 years at Charleville, for these or similar reasons. What can a landowner do about roadside trees, particularly oak and ash that reach such heavy weights? Ten years ago I was offered £2,000 for a group of trees, some of which have now become dangerous. Last month a person with new equipment quoted an estimate which resulted in a net loss of over 3,000 to remove the trees. Fortunately I was able to find an old man with great experience, who had made all his repayments on old but reliable machinery, to do the same job for a small net loss. Increasingly, periods of wet weather and high winds are having major impacts on the woodland. The island in the middle of the lake is a NWS site, which in 1813 had 107 oak and 77 ash. In 1967 the same area had 130 large oak and 48 large ash but today more than 50% of the trees are windblown. On average, Charleville appears to be losing nearly 2% of its oak per year as a result of windblow.

Fallow deer have been present at Charleville for two centuries or more, from large numbers in the 1940s they nearly became extinct in the 1970s. While this enabled much natural regeneration to take place, the methods by which deer were poached, left much to be desired. The current explosion of the deer population at Charleville is causing severe damage to young trees.

Experience of the Native Woodland Scheme from the owner's perspective

The NWS, which recognises that woodland is a community of living things as well as having the capacity to produce timber, pays not just for woodland improvement but also pays the woodland owner a yearly premium.

Last year I entered nearly half of the Charleville woods, which is located in one block, into the scheme, and I was absolutely delighted by the speed with which the participating forester and ecologist drew up the management plan. Without deer control it would have been impossible to establish any young trees, so I was pleased when it was agreed that the whole area could be deer fenced at the same time. This was the only cost effective method to fence bearing in mind the total grant per hectare. The site itself requires various operations including the removal of groups of exotic species and some conifer plantations, which were established in the 1960s, blocks of mature beech and areas where sycamore is the second species. Much of the area is low-lying and very wet. All of the Charleville woodland is part of a large SAC, and I am also encouraged to participate in a plan drawn up by the National Parks and Wildlife Service for the area.

The time scale for operations carried out on the area under the NWS was as follows:

- Management plan approved September
- Line for deer fencing prepared early October
- Deer fence started end of October and completed December
- Some Rhododendron clearance carried out in November
- Young home grown oak seedlings established
- All bills submitted early December
- Work inspected and approved January 2004
- Payment received June 2004

There were huge difficulties with the time scale and on several occasions work had to be abandoned due to deep tracks caused by tractors in wet weather. These are difficult to eliminate without causing root damage to shrubs and changes to the ground flora.

As well as the operation itself, considerable time has been spent answering questions from the public. At one point, a controversial article appeared in the local newspaper in relation to deer. The article could fortunately be modified before going to print, thanks to the intervention of people from Woodlands of Ireland, the Forest Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service and all false allegations were removed. All operations in relation to Charleville woods have to be carefully dealt with because of the sensitivities of various interest groups, which were originally established as a result of differing views on the Tullamore Bypass. Because the Charleville woods are considered to be of European importance, they attract the attention of a number of state bodies, as well as individuals who are interested in landscape and ecological heritage. Much as I welcome the public's appreciation of native woodland, public access can also create problems such as disturbance and the need for public liability insurance.

It is my understanding that this year there will be a number of changes to the Native Woodland Scheme. In particular, multi annual projects such as that at Charleville need to be managed as an entire entity. At present, the Native Woodland Scheme requires that operations be carried out on an individual section of the total area of the woodland, corresponding to the area funded for that year. The NWS payment applies only to work carried out in that particular section. This creates some disadvantages to the woodland owner with regard to the cost and level of work carried out each year. Other issues that require further exploration are outlined below.

- *How can regeneration in an SAC area be facilitated?*
- *If plants are not home-grown how can plants of local origin be obtained?*
- *Can felling and planting be done in one year if confirmation of acceptance for a particular year is not obtained very early in the year?*
- *Is it fair that a landowner may have to provide funding for two years if payment is not hastened after inspection?*
- *Will there be ecological consequences if work has to be undertaken in wet weather because of time scale?*

Having participated in many schemes, I am aware of the need for constraints if schemes are not to be abused and seen purely as a means of getting money. However, I am also extremely conscious of the fact that felling causes the least amount of damage when the leaf is not on the tree and conditions are dry. Consideration should be given to the fact that juvenile plants are easier to recognise in leaf, and the breeding season of animals and birds needs to be recognised. In practice, I suspect that from the time of acceptance in any one year to the final submission date for completion, the interval for doing work is probably at best nine months. This is a very short time frame for an area, which requires mechanical work, particularly considering Irish weather conditions. On a large block of woodland where it is intended to include several plots over a period of 3 or 4 years, it is often more cost effective to use specialist machinery, or personnel at the most suitable time and minimise transport costs to one visit. Another question I would like to pose is that where pot planting might be used is it not advantageous to study the immediate re-growth before strategically planting?

In the case of oak, a landowner is not likely to think beyond the economics of the yearly premium with regard to planting. They will not know the ultimate beneficiary and future legislation could remove the possibility of a dreamed windfall. Any valuable timber production will be attributed to the owner's sense of pride. Such pride can however be more immediately rewarded by the achievement in establishing some of the richest biodiversity in our natural heritage. Considering the 250 year lifespan of an oak, the brief time scale available for the initial establishment of the ultimate dominant layer of woodland allows the long term objective of the NWS to be governed by short term criteria.

In the case of ash, where there are markets for hurleys, handles etc., the owner can gain more immediate economic returns. While less damage is likely to occur in a restricted time period; if the shrub layer is severely disturbed, the ground flora can change considerably because of light variation and changes in humidity can effect ferns, mosses and insects. In the case of heritage woodland this is of concern to many bodies, including those associated with landscape.

Up to the 1970s large yew trees featured prominently in some of the Charleville woods but when huge prices became available for veneer, economic advantage was taken, as was the case on many other old estates. This loss of hundreds of years of growth, perfectly illustrates the perilous nature facing native woodland.

Arboreta, parks and specimen trees undoubtedly will always have important aesthetic value but they will never be a substitute for habitat.

Conclusion

I believe there is immense vision within the NWS, a new beginning in how we view woodland. The trunk or core thinking in the case of the NWS will have to grow if large branches, which I see as the richness of biodiversity, are to be supported. I hope the NWS will be well supported financially by successive Irish governments because when these native trees blossom, the fruits will fall in the form of education in the ears of our people. I know that those who sought to introduce the scheme have waited many years for it. Hopefully in 5-10 years many more emerging taxpayers will realise that our woodland heritage is worth supporting, so that in years to come, their children whether living in the city or country, will have sufficient native woodland to enjoy and experience.