

## FUNNY BUMPS IN THE WOODS! USING ARCHAEOLOGY TO IDENTIFY HISTORICAL CHANGES AND USES IN OUR NATIVE WOODLANDS

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### Abstract

The purpose of this short paper is to encourage those interested in identifying historical changes and uses in our native woodlands to move beyond written historical accounts and cartographic depictions of ancient woodlands and as a complementary methodology to conduct field survey, i.e. to walk through and particularly around and outside of them. It does not purport to be an academic discourse of the subject, but rather an ideas paper.

As will be illustrated by some Irish examples, considerable physical evidence for historical changes and uses of woodlands can be garnered from the aforementioned places. In addition to the commonly referenced forms of timber production, standards pollards and coppices, examples of charcoal-making, iron-working, deer parks, rabbit warrens, glass-making and lime production are identifiable.

### Introduction

Early maps, such as that held by the Manuscript Library of TCD illustrating Laois and Offaly c. 1562 AD (see Aalen *et al.* 1997) are temptingly deceptive for those interesting in identifying historical changes and uses in our native woodlands. The accuracy in form with which these woodlands are illustrated and their juxtaposition with readily identifiable towns, rivers and bog-land expanses would suggest that any vestiges of such woodland that survived the deforestation of the landscape from the seventeenth century onwards can be relatively easily located.

It might be presumed that sufficient endeavour would also result in the discovery of features within or on the immediate edges of such vestige ancient woodland closely associated with their historic demarcation and control, namely external boundary markers in the form of earthen 'wood banks'. In Britain medieval examples of these 'wood banks' consist of a wide bank, surmounted either by a sturdy hedge or fence with an external ditch. On later examples walls were built instead of hedges, whilst in other cases the exterior face of the bank was sharply revetted with dry-stone walling.

We also know from the historical sources that at least some of these woods, especially coppice woods, were intensively and conservatively managed from the medieval period onwards. As such, many would also have had an internal arrangement of banks and ditches, either indicating compartmented ownership or as a means of fencing off young coppices to prevent browsing by domestic animals and deer or other forms of trespass such as the collecting of nuts (nutting) or firewood, the latter having a significant economic value in their own right. A particularly good example of internal woodland division and management is recorded on a map of Ecclesall Woods, Sheffield, England dating from 1725 AD (Hart, 1993).

It might also be reasonably presumed that structures and features associated with charcoal-making and iron-working, and other processes requiring woodland resources such as glass-making furnaces and limekilns for lime production as well 'holly hags' for fodder in deer parks, would also survive relatively intact within or on the immediate edges of such vestige ancient woodland (Neeson, 1991; Rackham, 2000).

However, despite nearly three decades of research only a handful of such features have been recorded within the older woodlands in Ireland, Rackham's work in Offaly and Waterford probably being the most noteworthy (Rackham, 1995). That is not to say that such features do not exist, but rather that we need to revise our ideas of where we should look and what it is exactly we should be looking for.

### **'Seeing the wood in the trees' or where to look**

Whatever the cause of their demise, the four-fold increase in population on the island between 1700 and 1840 AD undoubtedly having as significant an impact as the demands of the aforementioned earlier industries (see Rackham, 2000), it is evident that at national level surviving vestiges of ancient woodland are for the most part likely to be exceedingly small and fragmentary. Much more importantly, it may be more productive to think of them as surviving in a 'mobile form'. To put it another way, if they have survived for the last two centuries it is more likely that their genetic progeny have been 'hiding out', if not 'floating' around within a given townland or locality, rather than staying put in fixed place maintaining a continuous ancient woodland cover since the late seventeenth century.

In his paper on 'trees outside forests', Meyen (2003) argues that trees surviving in linear field boundaries may be in part the 'remnants' of ancient woodland. Whilst acknowledging the impact of the trend from the mid-eighteenth century onwards for many large landowners to improve their lands by planting trees, as well as the Royal Dublin Society prizes and medals for tree planting, one need only extend the 'genetic progeny' argument a little further to come to the conclusion that within many small broadleaf or mixed conifer/broadleaf copses as well as demesne woodlands surviving in the Irish countryside today there are the genetic progeny of ancient woodlands.

Whilst detailed research on this subject is still being undertaken in Northern Ireland by Thomas and Smithers (2003) even a cursory examination of any number of rural first edition OS six sheets from the Irish midlands, followed by their subsequent revisions, will undoubtedly produce numerous examples of small 'floating' woodland belts or copses. Consequently, the environs of both these demesne woodlands and small 'floating' woodland belts or copses would seem to provide a good geographic location to begin archaeological fieldwork.

### **'Funny bumps outside the woods' or what to look for**

The question that then follows this assumption is what to look for. Again, on the basis of the documentary and upstanding physical record in England, it might be presumed that even where the original trees are long gone extensive complexes of external 'boundary' banks or related 'internal' banks and ditches would survive, if only in an ephemeral way. The situation could well be similar for 'saw pits' and charcoal-making mounds or pits. Whilst there is good documentary evidence for the activities themselves, there are only a limited number of real physical examples.

#### ***Wood banks, deer park boundaries and rabbit warrens***

Survival of internal woodland banks is rare, but two examples have been brought to the attention of the author: within Glending wood, Co. Wicklow (Grogan, E., pers. comm.) and at Balrath, Co. Meath (Dunne, S., pers. comm.).

External woodland banks or ditches, subsequently re-used and/or re-modelled for field boundaries, are less rare. The best examples known to the author are those documented in association with 'deer parks'. There appears to be little published research on 'deer parks' in Ireland. Despite their importance in the historical record in Medieval England, they receive scant reference in the main medieval archaeology textbooks for Ireland. Of those that are discussed, more often than not in local journals or pamphlet-like publications, most

are of seventeenth century date and later. These include the Phoenix Park in Dublin, which was bought by the Duke of Ormonde in 1663 AD, who then enlarged the area, built an enclosing wall and introduced deer, partridge and hawks. However, there are some one hundred and twelve 'Deerpark' townlands recorded in the *General Alphabetical Index to Townlands, Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland* (published in 1861, hereinafter referred to as the "Index") and it seems not unreasonable to speculate that some of these may be of earlier Anglo-Norman origin.

At Glending, Co. Wicklow a significant portion of the circuit of seventeenth century external 'wood bank' and 'deer park' earthen boundary bank survives. On the western side it is incorporated into the later demesne boundary (where it is surmounted by an impressive stone wall) and on the eastern side as an internal demesne field boundary (where its exterior face is revetted with dry-stone walling). Another example is that at Leap Castle, Co. Offaly. To the east of the sixteenth century towerhouse and at the far eastern side of the 'demesne' the present field banks and ditches preserve much of the original circuit of the 'deer park'.

Rabbit Warrens are another Anglo-Norman introduction associated with woodlands and which have, like deer parks, maintained an association with the successor to the Anglo-Norman manors, namely landscaped Demenses and Parklands. There are some twenty-three 'warrenstown' townlands and seventeen 'coney' townlands recorded in the *Index*. Rabbit warrens within woodlands are known from Castle Bernard Demesne, Co. Offaly where there is a 'Coneyburrow Wood' and at Templehouse Demesne, Co. Sligo where there is a 'Rabbitburrow Wood', both areas which are still under tree cover.

#### *Charcoal-making platforms, mounds or pits*

Like woodland banks, good physical examples of charcoal-making platforms, mounds or pits are rare. The one notable exception is at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow where over eighty charcoal-burners' mounds have been recorded, most of which are presumed to date to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries (Eogan & Kilfeather, 1997).

Yet we know that there was an ever-increasing demand for charcoal for iron production across Europe from the mid-sixteenth century onwards following the development of 'blast furnaces' and that Ireland was no exception. By the mid-seventeenth century historical documents record over one hundred and fifty large ironworks around Ireland, some quite industrialised in scale. These included very large works at Draperstown, Co. Derry, Mountrath, Co. Laois, Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim and Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, areas in relatively close proximity to major outcrops of iron ores as well as woodlands (Neeson, 1991; Rackham, 2000).

However, recent archaeological excavations undertaken in relation to the *Bord Gáis Éireann* gas pipeline to the west project has thrown some light on these features and may explain the difficulty in identifying them. At Aghamore, near Kinnegad, Co. Westmeath an area of medieval charcoal making and metalworking (dating to the twelfth to thirteenth centuries AD) was identified and excavated (Byrnes, 2003). The site was situated in what is now a grass meadow, on a level platform slightly raised above the surrounding boggy land and overlooking the course of the Kilwarden River. In total nine ore-extraction pits and scoops, three shallow sub-rectangular charcoal making pits, eight bowl furnaces and three shallow linear features were uncovered and excavated.

The interesting point about the site is that none of the features were evident before the site had been stripped of the turf (humus) and cultivation soil and more importantly, whilst in an area which historically was probably always open grassland (Aghamore being the anglicised version of *Achadh Mhór* or the large field), the neighbouring townland name of Derrymore indicates there was also an extensive woodland nearby in Early Historic and medieval periods.

### **Glass working**

Glass working is another woodland dependent post-medieval industrial activity for which there is good documentary evidence. This is particularly so for the early seventeenth century in Cos. Offaly and Laois where glass furnaces were recorded at Lusmagh, Shinrone, Birr, Blueball, and Portarlinton. More recently one of the extant furnace sites has been excavated at Glasshouse, near Shinrone, Co. Offaly (Farrelly and O'Brien 2000).

### **Lime production**

Last but not least in the woodland dependent activities under discussion is lime production. Limestone blocks were reduced to a powdered form by burning in these structures, and subsequently used either as an agricultural fertilizer (particularly in hilly areas with acid soils) or as lime mortar or white wash for buildings. Its use as an agricultural fertilizer continued until the nineteenth century when it was replaced by imported guano and other artificial manures. Lime mortar and whitewash were still commonplace in the 1950s.

The size and form of the structures vary considerably. Small round kilns are common in the western part of the country, whilst more substantial and architecturally impressive examples are found in the east and south west, especially where associated with demesnes or estates (see Aalen *et al.* 1997). In addition to the association with woodlands, these examples are also often associated with quarries. A particularly impressive example is that on the Blessington to Naas road (R410), to the west of Glending Wood, Co. Wicklow, whilst another example was identified by the author in a small vestige broadleaf copse at Torreen, near Fermoy in Co. Cork. Woodlands with the name 'Limekiln wood' are also known from Garryhinch Demesne, Co. Offaly and Templehouse Demesne, Co. Sligo.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst physically identifying ancient woodlands in the flesh, as it were, is a difficult, if worthwhile task, archaeological field survey as a complementary methodology has the potential to identify important edge- or near-woodland dependent monuments and features. As such it can significantly contribute to our understanding of the historical location, nature, extent, and of uses of these natural resources as well as being a particularly enjoyable and productive past time.

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