

Tollymore Forest Park

By C. S. KILPATRICK

IN 1953 the new Forestry Act passed by the Government of Northern Ireland contained a clause granting power to the Ministry of Agriculture to set up Forest Parks and to proclaim bye-laws for their regulation.

The objects of such parks are to encourage the public to take an added interest in forestry and to offer the enjoyment of an area of great natural beauty to as many people as possible.

A forest park therefore must be an attractive forest in beautiful surroundings and either in a major tourist area or close to a large town or city.

Tollymore Park was an obvious choice as regards attractiveness and proximity to a city and being in one of the major tourist areas of the province, 30 miles south of Belfast and only 2 miles from the sea-side resort of Newcastle "where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea." It was, therefore, declared Northern Ireland's first forest park and was officially opened by the Governor, Lord Wakehurst, before several hundred guests on 2nd June, 1955.

The Park, which will be remembered by those members of the Society who visited it in May, 1952, has an area of 1,192 acres and lies in the valley of the Shimna River flowing eastward along the foothills of the Mourne Mountains in a rocky gorge before breaking out to the sea at Newcastle.

North of the river the land is undulating and similar in general topography to the farm lands outside and here are found the park lands, gardens, and fields of the estate. To the south the ground rises steeply and densely forested to the ridge known as the Drinns at 850 ft. and then falls again before rising to the main mass of the Mournes here represented by Shan Slieve and Slieve Corragh.

This area has a long and interesting history and is first recorded as having been granted by King James I to the Magennis family in 1611. Capt. William Hamilton, the father of the 1st Earl of Clanbrassil, had married Ellen Magennis and the property thus came into his possession in 1690. The 1st Earl of Clanbrassil began large scale planting and being a very keen horticulturalist and collector of rare and beautiful trees and shrubs he introduced many specimens to the pleasure

grounds beside the mansion house. An early nineteenth century source records that between 30 and 60 thousand trees were planted annually for about 15 years and a traveller writing in 1818 notes the excellent growth of larch which became locally famous.

In 1798 on the death of the 2nd Earl of Clanbrassil the estate passed into the possession of Robert Jocelyn who had been created 1st Earl of Roden in 1771 and it remained in the ownership of the Roden family until the twentieth century.

In March, 1930, the Forestry Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture acquired 808 acres, two-thirds of the estate, but excluding the mansion house, agricultural and ornamental grounds. Then in 1941 the remaining 384 acres were purchased giving the Ministry possession of the complete demesne.

Planting started in 1932, and continued as the old woodlands were cleared at the rate of 70 acres per year until the outbreak of war when it was reduced to about half of that area. The main replanting was completed in 1950 just 3 years after the first of the new plantations had been thinned. The total planted area is now 1,071 acres including 130 acres of old woodland retained largely in deference to local sentiment.

The main species used in the replanting was European Larch which had proved so successful on the medium, well drained, stony loams of the locality. Groups of oak and beech were mixed with the larch with the intention of obtaining one mature stem from each group. Douglas was used on the extensive area overgrown by laurel or rhododendron in an attempt to control these spreading shrubs by dense shade and *Tsuga* was underplanted where stands of oak were retained.

The mansion house constituted a problem as in spite of many attempts to put it to a useful purpose such as an old people's home, school, or youth hostel it remained disused and deteriorating. It was, therefore, reluctantly demolished in 1951 and the debris used as road material.

In 1953 when the decision was taken to open the park the first essential facility which had to be found was a suitable car-park in an attractive setting. The site of the old mansion house proved to be ideal and was transformed from an ugly scar to the focal point of the Forest Park.

Fortunately the forest headquarters and forester's house were on the original acquisition at some distance from the car-park and it was possible to keep the general public well away from the commercial centre of the forest.

A one-way traffic system was introduced for cars entering by the Barbican Gate on the Newcastle-Bryansford Road and leaving by the Bryansford Gate on the Hilltown Road. Cars were not permitted elsewhere as the forest roads are not sufficiently wide to allow cars and lorries to pass.

Caravan sites with a piped water supply were made by the Monument field on the side of the entrance road and a toilet and ablution building finished in wainy-edged oak and roofed with cedar shingles constructed nearby.

The open park land and old woodlands by the river allowed separate camping sites to be provided for boys' and girls' organizations, and for the Camping Club of Great Britain and Ireland without encroaching on the young plantations. Each site was provided with a source of good water either piped or from a reliable spring.

Admission charges were fixed at 1/- per car, 2/- per night or 12/- per week for a caravan and 1/- per night for each 10 campers.

The old pleasure grounds had become overgrown but a careful clearing of unwanted growth restored them to their former charm and provided the basis of an arboretum representing all the major coniferous genera and with many rare broadleaved trees and shrubs. The co-operation of several horticultural nurseries was freely given in identifying the many old varieties of rhododendron and azaleas which give such a show of colour in May and June.

Many new species have now been added to the collection of specimen trees and they have all been labelled.

A small cafe was thought to be desirable but in the first year until the park had proved itself to be an attraction difficulty was experienced in obtaining the services of a caterer and the forester and his wife took it over temporarily. Since then it has been run by a Newcastle firm of caterers and this arrangement has worked smoothly and effectively.

After the first season it was apparent that the public were loath to walk further afield than the river into the normal forest areas because they had no idea of where to go and some had a fear of being lost. This was overcome in two ways; firstly, by opening up new paths beyond the river with seats and occasional rustic shelters and sign-posting the routes to beauty points, archaeological remains and the various bridges; and secondly, by laying out planned circular walks of 1, 2, 3 and 4 mile lengths covering all parts of the forest. Each walk was given a distinctive colour which was marked on stones, trees, or on special wooden arrows on short posts. The success of these walks has been surprising and visitors are now to be found striding along confidently, even on the longest walks, certain that they will be led back to their starting point.

The large nursery had been abandoned in 1955 as the stony soil and steep slopes would not allow it to be fully mechanised. The opportunity was taken to establish in its place some seventy $\frac{1}{4}$ acre forest plots each of which is to be planted with a different species. The plots will not all be planted at once but seed has been sown and they will be completed over the next few years.

An illustrated Forest Park Guide, priced 1/-, had been published by the Stationery Office in time for the official opening and has been

so popular that already steps are being taken to have a second edition printed.

No exact figures can be given of the number of persons visiting the park as the charge for admission is not on a *per capita* basis but some idea can be gained by the number of cars admitted.

In the first year after opening 7,095 cars visited the park and in the second year, in spite of much poorer weather, this increased to 10,794 cars and 335 buses.

It is anticipated that this number will increase further as the park becomes more widely known as already on two occasions in 1957 the car park has been unable to hold all the cars, 602 being admitted on Easter Monday and over 500 on Sunday, 26th May.

During the first season 557 caravans spent a night in the park and this rose to 818 in 1956. In the latter year 1,584 campers stayed overnight on the three sites.

A model of the park on a scale of 3 ft. to 1 mile was exhibited at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society's show at Balmoral in May, 1957, and is to be put on permanent display in the park. The forest is represented on the model by small artificial trees and is accurate as regards species which are shown by different shades of green.

The response of the public has been beyond all expectations, not only as regards numbers but in the interest and appreciation shown and the care taken to avoid any damage to trees or structures. In fact, the amount of damage and vandalism caused by unauthorised trespassers was far greater when the public were excluded. There can be no doubt that the community as a whole will have a greater respect and love for trees and forests if encouraged to spend more of its leisure hours in such pleasant and instructive surroundings and this will in turn reap its own reward by instilling a sense of ownership and responsibility for our woodlands.