Forest Perspectives

The vernacular uses of Irish wood

Niall Mac Coitir[*]

Ireland is famous for the fact that most of its native woodlands are long gone. By the second half of the seventeenth century, for a variety of reasons, most Irish woodlands had disappeared, with the result that there is a lack of any tradition of good quality Irish vernacular furniture or woodwork surviving from earlier than the famine period. However, this does not imply that there is no vernacular tradition of using Irish timber. Smaller pieces of Irish wood were employed for a wide variety of uses, often in ingenious ways, and a detailed knowledge of the attributes of each kind of timber survived. There was also another source of timber that Irish people could access, namely bog timber, mostly bog oak (*Quercus* spp.) and bog pine or fir (*Pinus sylvestris* L.).

Bog timber underlay much of the boglands of Ireland, especially the blanket bog of the west. This is because the bogs had grown over waterlogged forests which had died, due to the climate in early Ireland becoming colder and wetter than it had been in the early post-glacial period. Bog timber was thus a very valuable resource, and Irish people grew adept at finding it and digging it out for use in their houses and farm buildings (Evans 1957, Lucas 1954). Finding where bog timber was buried took skill, and involved going out to survey the bog early in the morning while the dew was still on the ground. It was believed that the dew never lay[1] on the ground above where a piece of bog timber was buried, and following this rule, its location and general size and length could be established. The timber was then more precisely located by taking a series of soundings with a long iron rod called a "trying iron", which was stuck into the bog at various points. Once its dimensions and orientation were known, a trench could be dug, and the timber finally prized out of its resting place with the help of a massive "fir hatchet" and a "fir rooter", which was a kind of iron claw attached to a wooden pole (Figure 1).

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[*] Corresponding author: niallmccr1@gmail.com

[1] Or from where it evaporated quickest. Similarly, in colder weather the presence of logs below the surface was indicated by where frost and snow disappeared quickest (Tuohy 2018).

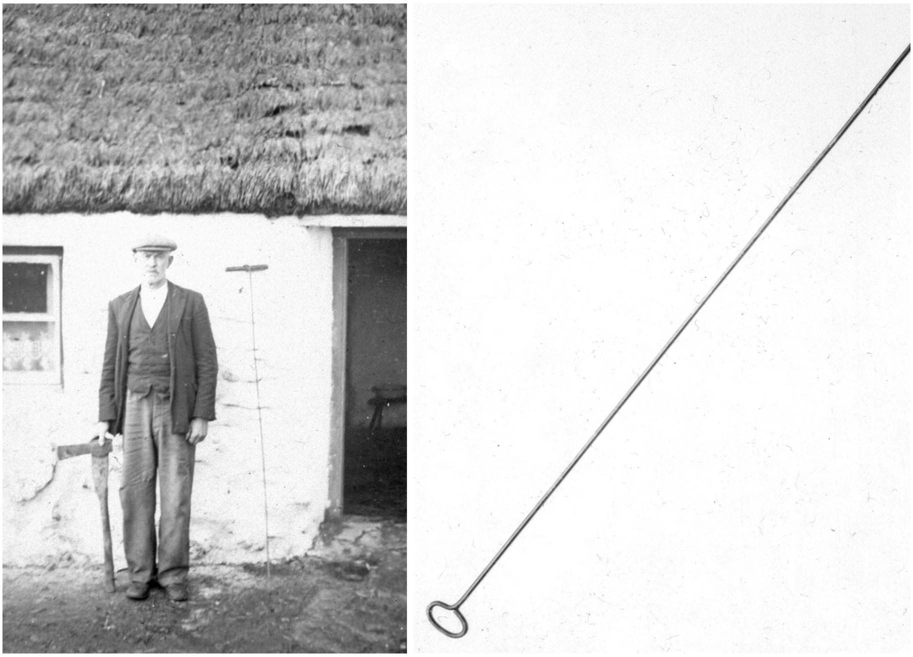

Figure 1: *Joseph Coneely, Rusheeny, Oughterard, Co. Galway (left-hand image) standing outside his house holding a bog deal axe, with a spit for locating buried bogwood standing against wall beside him. From photo by A.T. Lucas, May 1951. Published in Bealoideas xxiii (1954), Plate III GF. A bior or trying iron (right-hand image) for locating buried bogwood. Called locally a "try" (treagh). Made by Con Manning, blacksmith, Ballingeary, Co. Cork. Images are copyright of the National Museum of Ireland.*

The lengths undergone to retrieve bog timber, as a substitute for live timber, were not solely related to a lack of the latter, but from a deep appreciation of the specific qualities of the preserved material. Bog oak or pine (also called deal) was put to a wide variety of uses. One of the most important uses of bog timber was for making the roofs of thatched cottages (Evans 1957). Bog oak was used for the rafters, which were joined or ”coupled” near the top with cross ties secured with wooden pins. After the rafters were secured, they were covered with a layer of branches, or thin lathes of bog fir, and then a layer of sods to keep out the cold and damp. Finally, the thatch was placed on top and also secured, usually with "scollops" or rods of sally (willow), hazel, briar or bog fir. Building styles varied in different parts of the country, and made use of the most available kinds of wood and thatch. Smaller buildings, such as the stone huts known as "booley houses" (where cattle herders lived in the uplands in summer time while they tended their cattle), also often had roofs constructed of bog timber. Other structural elements such as door and window frames, and room partitions were also often made of bog timber (Lucas 1954).

Bog oak or deal was also used for a wide variety of furniture (Lucas 1954). Tables, chairs, stools, benches, cupboards, dressers and bedsteads were all made from bog timber in various parts of the country. An important implement in the traditional cottage often made of bog oak was the "crane", which was a large post with a swinging arm for suspending pots over the fire (Evans 1957). Some cranes were capable of hanging pots with a capacity of 25 gallons or more in order to hold food for people and livestock, and were fitted with a windlass and chain for winching the mighty pots into position. Other miscellaneous uses for bog timber included marriage chests, spinning wheels and looms (Lucas 1954). Bog fir (among other woods) was also favoured for making small vessels, known as piggins or noggins, for holding water, milk or porridge (Evans 1949). Bog timber was also used in coopering; cut into staves for making barrels, churns and tubs for holding food (Lucas 1954).

Another major use for bog deal or fir was for making ropes (Lucas 1954). This might seem a strange use for timber, but the rope was made by shredding the wood into long strips and then twisting them together (Figure 2). Rope was made in a similar way from slivers of pine wood in Scandinavia, and it is likely that it is a widespread ancient European practice that was first carried out with living trees in Ireland, before switching to bog deal as a substitute. The main use for bog deal rope in Ireland was for cording beds. That is to say, that holes were drilled through the side and end boards of the bed, and

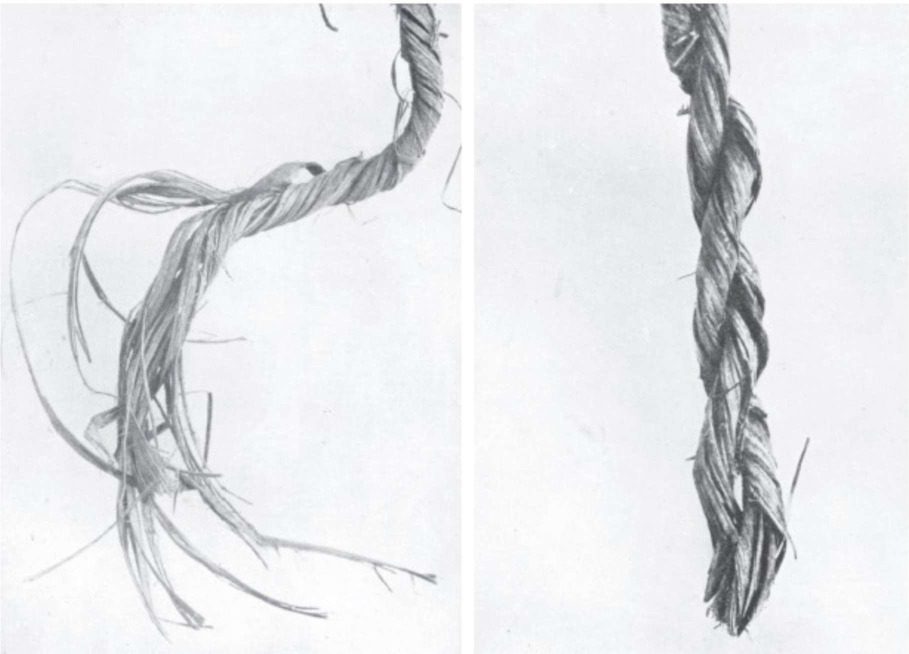

Figure 2: *Two-ply bog deal rope, opened out to show strands (left) and tightly twisted together for use (right). Images are copyright of the National Museum of Ireland.*

the rope then threaded through them to form a network as a support for the straw, chaff or feather tick (or mattress). The bog deal ropes were preferred for this purpose, as they were considered to withstand damp better than hemp ropes. Bog deal rope was also used for thatching, either by providing a foundation for layers of sods or thatch with cording in a similar fashion to beds, or by being used on the exterior to hold down the thatch.

Another important use for bog pine or deal was in the use of splints as candles for domestic light, as the resinous wood burned with a bright flame even after its long immersion in the bog (Lucas 1954). Bog pine was also used to help light fires, particularly in assisting wet turf to burn. The splints were cut from a straight grained log with a knife and were usually about a foot and a half long. After being cut, the splints were tied into bundles and hung up to dry. A limitation of the bog deal candles was that they would only burn brightly if the charred wood was continually removed, which meant they had to be constantly held to be of any use. Often a child was employed for this purpose while the adult carried out whatever household task needed doing. Sometimes the bog deal splints were used for outdoor tasks as well, not just to help people find their way, but as a useful tool by fishermen. This involved the fishermen using the splints as torches to lure fish (particularly salmon) at night in order to spear them.

Outside the home, bog timber was also used for making slide-cars, which is a horse-drawn wheel-less kind of primitive cart (Evans 1957). The slide-car simply consisted of two parallel poles, serving both as shafts and runners, which were fastened together by cross pieces to make a carrying platform. The slide-car was usually used for more simple tasks, such as carrying turf down mountain sides, or creels of potatoes from the fields.

Despite its scarcity as a living tree, some smaller items were also made out of oak timber (Evans 1957). The small vessels known as noggins were sometimes made of staves of oak, held together by a thin band of ash fastened with interlocking tongues, and churns were also usually made of staves of oak. Oak was also used for barrel staves, pegs, mallets, and other everyday objects. In addition, the bark of oak was used for tanning leather and for making a black dye (Nelson and Walsh 1993). When oak timber was still plentiful medieval Irish craft workers used it for numerous purposes, from buildings and furniture to constructing crannogs and bog trackways (Nelson and Walsh 1993).

Scots pine or fir became extinct in early Ireland as the climate became colder and wetter, so there is no vernacular tradition of using it other than from bogs. As early as the seventeenth century, Irish furniture makers were importing pine wood or deal from Scotland, and in the eighteenth century from Canada (Evans 1957). In many traditional Irish houses the dresser and kitchen table were made of deal (Evans 1949). The dresser, probably one of the more most prized pieces in a home, provided much-needed storage, but also as a mark of personality in an otherwise very functional, work-orientated space. In ancient Ireland pine resin was collected from living trees and made into a pitch used for caulking boats and preserving wood (Kelly 2000).

Bog yew (*Taxus baccata* L.) was sometimes also extracted from peatland, although never in anything like the quantities of bog oak and pine (Nelson and Walsh 1993). It was used to make a variety of objects, such as chests, tables, gate posts and roofing timbers. In early Ireland, yew wood was much prized for its beauty and durability, and was used for making household containers such as bowls, pins and buckets. It was also used in early Ireland to make spears, and was used in Medieval archery to make bows.

Despite the lack of forests, there were always enough living trees in the Irish countryside to provide a source of fresh timber. Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior* L.) timber had a wide variety of traditional uses beyond that of firewood (where it could be burnt "green" without much seasoning because of it's inherent low moisture content), including in buildings, fences, and furniture. The Ordinances of the Government of Ireland of 1534 stipulated that "Every husbandman having a plough within the English Pale shall set by the year twelve ashes in the ditches and closes of his farm" (Evans 1957). The ash is still considered the most useful timber for general farm use in the Pale region, and throughout the east and north of the country. For instance, ash timber has been used for making handles for tools such as bill hooks and in domestic, often home-made furniture, e.g. hedge chairs made from a plank and some sticks (Figure 3). In the past, ash splits were used in the home for sieves, riddles (a kind of coarse sieve), and shallow baskets, and the small vessels known as noggins were sometimes often held together by a thin band of ash fastened with interlocking tongues (Evans 1957). It was a popular species for food containers because the wood imparted no taste. Ash timber is both strong and elastic, and so was a favourite for farm implements such as the handles of shovels, pick-axes and the rungs of ladders (Nelson and Walsh 1993). The staff or "helve" of a flail (the part which was held) was also usually made of ash (Evans 1957). In addition, the hay rake or "sweep" with its long wooden teeth was generally made of ash, as well as the handles of the traditional Irish spade and the loy (a specialised kind of spade used for cutting sods of turf) (Evans 1949).

With regard to furniture, a traditional type of Irish three-legged chair known as the Tuam or Sligo chair (Figure 4) was usually made out of ash wood (Hamilton 2013). Commonly found in Connaught 100 years ago, the Tuam chair had a distinct construction. The single back leg and back rest were made from one piece of wood, while the two splayed front legs were attached to each other on top by a rectangular board. The back leg and rest were then attached to the front rectangular board by three other smaller boards in a truncated triangle or T-shape, in order to make the seat of the chair. The three legs were also attached by a T-shaped stretcher near the bottom of the legs. The Tuam chair was most likely brought to Connacht by

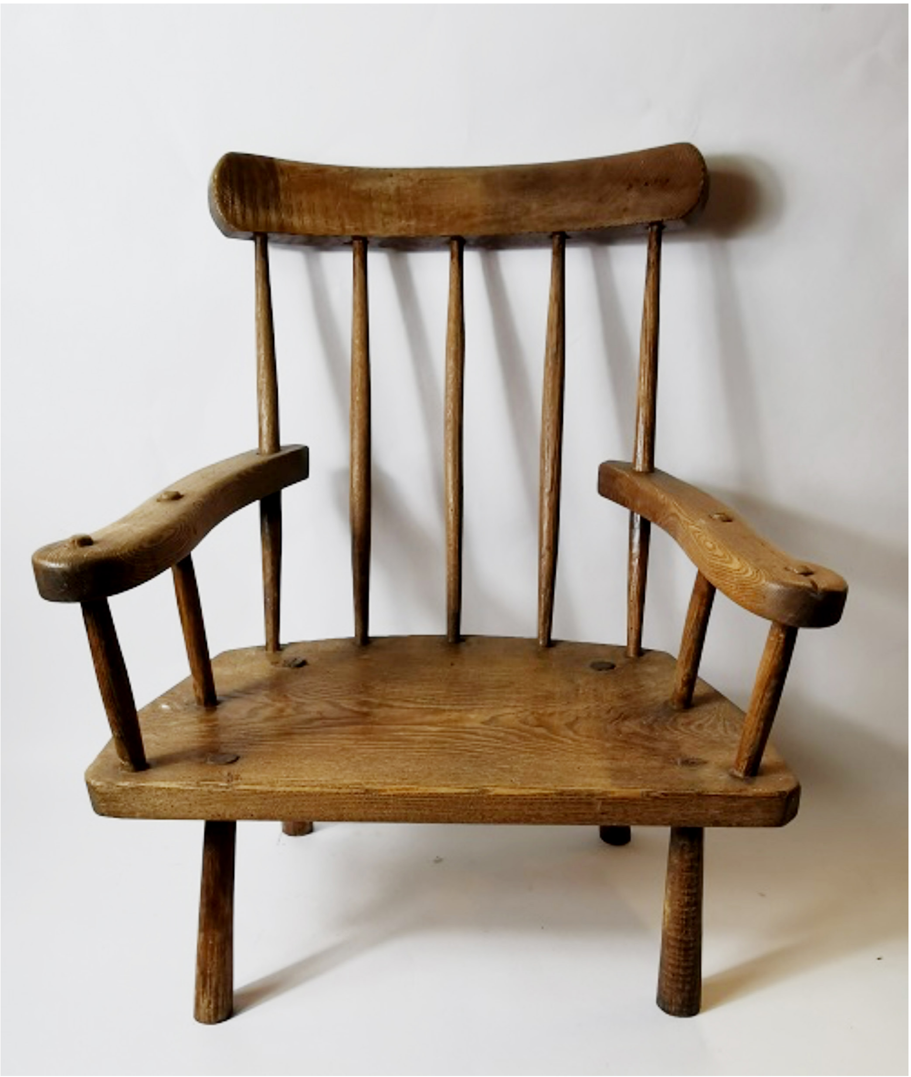

Figure 3: *A 19th century Monaghan ash hedge chair, recently featured at an auction of Irish country furniture in 2020 at Victor Mee Auctions in Cloverhill Belturbet (Available at https://www.victormeeauctions.ie/irish-country-furniture-vernacular-furinture/) (images are copyright of the National Museum of Ireland).*

Scottish settlers in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Ash was widely used for other types of furniture as its wood can be steam bent into various shapes, a quality that made it useful in boat building also (Nelson and Walsh 1993). Another famous vernacular use for the strong and elastic properties of ash timber is of course for making hurleys. In ancient Ireland ash was used for spears and bowls, and yokes for livestock (Kelly 2000).

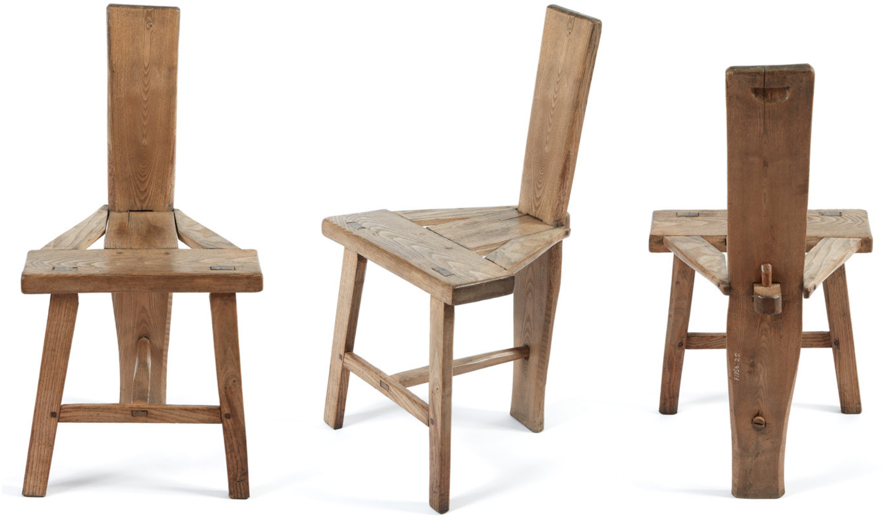

Figure 4: *An interesting example of a three-legged Irish "Tuam chair", was collected by The Folklore Society of Ireland and is from the Tuam region of Co. Galway. The third image shows the tenon wedge construction. Images reproduced with kind permission, The Irish Folklore Society.*

Both beech (*Fagus sylvatica* L.) and sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus* L.) had many uses, even though neither are native trees (Evans 1957). Sycamore probably came to Ireland with seventeenth century planters, while the beech most likely arrived in medieval times. Both were favoured for dry-coopering, in others words, for the provision of casks and butter firkins[3]. Beech was also particularly valued as it can be steam-treated to bend, and so was used for the keels of boats, and for furniture (Nelson and Walsh 1993). Sycamore with its white easily worked wood was also a favourite for making wooden dishes, ladles, and skimmers, which were turned on a pole-lathe (Evans 1949). Like beech, the wood of sycamore can be steam treated, and it was moulded to make the bodies of violins and harps. The harp of the famous blind harpist Turlough O'Carolan was made entirely of sycamore (Nelson and Walsh 1993).

The native Irish Wych elm (*Ulmus glabra* Huds.) underwent a catastrophic decline in ancient Ireland, probably as a result of a disease similar to Dutch elm disease (Nelson and Walsh 1993). It survived only in rocky hillsides, and so elm does not really appear in vernacular wood working traditions. However, considerable numbers of English elm (*Ulmus minor* "Atinia") were planted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the resistance of elm timber to water made it a valuable wood with

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[2] A smaller version of the common barrel, but close lidded and with a specific quantifiable measure. Butter, fish and soap were commonly sold by firkin.

many uses, such as shipbuilding, and water pipes. The wych elm seems to have had some uses in medieval Ireland as fodder for cattle, and its bark was used for making rope (Kelly 2000).

The primary use for willow or sally (*Salix* spp.), with its long pliable rods, was for wickerwork and basket making, and willows were sometimes grown especially for this purpose (Evans 1949). Willow also had a variety of other uses. An important use was in thatching roofs, which were traditionally secured with scollops, as described above (Evans 1957). Willow was also used in the making of the wattle smoke canopy, which took the place of the chimney breast in many traditional Irish houses (Evans 1957). This varied in shape and construction in different places, but was generally made of lathes and wattles of willow, hazel and briars, plastered with a mixture of clay and cowdung or ashes, and coated with limewash. Willow was also used in the making of various implements. The hoops used to hold the staves of churns together were often made of willow; while lobster pots or creels were also traditionally made from hazel or willow rods (although furze or heather could also be used) (Evans 1957). In the west of Ireland until famine times, the common shovel was made out of a single piece of willow, shod with a narrow strip of iron along the edge (Evans 1957).

Another important use for willow was in the making of the traditional Irish currach (McDermott 2016). The tradition of the wicker frame currach goes back at least as far as the early Medieval period in Ireland, and it is likely that the construction of the currach has remained largely unchanged since that time. There are regional differences in currach construction, but the basic shape is that of a vessel about twenty feet long, with a hull made of a lattice of wickerwork ribs and laths. The hull was traditionally then covered with animal hides, or in later times with canvas. In modern times the currach adhmaid has also appeared, where the wickerwork hull is replaced with laths or planks of oak, ash or deal. Harps were traditionally made of willow in Medieval Ireland, and a famous example is the Brian Boru harp in Trinity College Dublin (Nelson and Walsh 1993). The white willow (*Salix alba* L.) is also the traditional wood for making cricket bats, as it is strong but light-weight.

Hazel (*Corylus avellana* L.) wood has been used in making furniture, fencing and wickerwork, often alongside or instead of willow. For example, hazel was often used instead of willow for thatching scollops, and was used in many traditional Irish houses in the construction of wattle smoke canopies (see above) (Evans 1957). Like willow, hazel was also used for making lobster pots, and for the hoops used to hold the staves of churns together (Evans 1957). In traditionally built houses in the north of Ireland, windbreaks made from bundles of birch and hazel (known as wassocks) were set up on the windward side of doors (Evans 1957). The beater of a flail (also known as the swingle or souple) was usually made of hazel or sometimes holly (*Ilex aquifolium* L.) (Evans 1957).

The traditional Boyne coracle or currach was made from hazel rods (Evans 1957). The pointed hazel rods were thrust into the ground at a distance of nine inches apart to make the long oval outline of the coracle. Withies (of sally) were then woven around the base of the rods to construct the gunwale, and once this was done the hazel rods were bent over and their other ends thrust into the opposite side of the coracle's outline to construct the frame. After several other measures to strengthen the structure of the coracle, ox-hides were then lashed onto the frame to complete the coracle. Along with its other uses, hazel was used to construct wattle houses in early Ireland, and indeed until Medieval times, when it was used for the houses of Viking Dublin (Nelson and Walsh 1993). Also, hazel nuts have been eaten as an important food source in Ireland from the earliest times.

Although it is a small tree, its tough wood meant that holly was used for a variety of objects in the vernacular tradition. In many houses, cooking was done over the fire, with a ”crookstick” of holly, from which a pot-hook was suspended for holding the cooking pots. The crookstick was a stout peg stuck high in the back wall of the fire (Evans 1957). The beater of a flail (also known as the swingle or souple) was usually made of hazel or holly (Evans 1957). Another use for holly was to make the keel of traditional clinker-built boats. The wood of holly was considered suitable for this task as it was smooth, and able to slide well along gravel beaches (Evans 1957). In early Ireland holly was also valued for its smoothness and used for chariot poles, and the fresh shoots of holly were fed to livestock as fodder. Holly was also used in Medieval Ireland for making open air cooking spits (Kelly 2000).

Birch (*Betula* spp.) wood is heavy and has a good grain, but it is not durable, and consequently was not usually used very often in the vernacular tradition, except for small household items and for clogs (Nelson and Walsh 1993). In traditionally built houses in the north of Ireland, windbreaks made from wassocks (as above) were used to shelter exposed doors (Evans 1957). The main traditional use for birch was tying its thin springy branches together to make brooms, and a dye made from birch bark was also used for tanning leather and for preserving fishermen's lines (Nelson and Walsh 1993).

Alder (*Alnus glutinosa* (L.) Gaertn.) wood is easily turned and not liable to crack or split, and was traditionally used in Ireland for making barrel staves, hat blocks and clogs (Nelson and Walsh 1993). Alder was also coppiced and the resulting poles used for making charcoal. The catkins and bark were also used to make a black dye. In early Ireland alder was used to make a variety of objects, including warriors' shields, bowls, masts and tent poles (Kelly 2000).

Some of the smaller Irish trees also had specific uses. Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia* L.) wood is tough and was used for a variety of implements, such as bows (Nelson and Walsh 1993). Rowan was considered to have protective powers against evil forces, and it was considered lucky to make the hoops used to hold together the staves of churns from rowan wood (Evans 1957). Spindle (*Euonymus europaeus* L.) wood is hard and tough and was used in many countries for making items such as skewers, toothpicks, pegs and spindles – hence the name (Nelson and Walsh 1993). It was probably coppiced in Ireland for these purposes. The wood of the arbutus, or strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo* L.), seems not to have any vernacular uses in Ireland, but its wood was used for making charcoal and for small pieces of decorative inlay in ornate furniture, as the wood is a rich reddish brown when polished (Nelson and Walsh 1993). The fruit of arbutus is edible, but it is insipid and to some people indigestible. However, baskets of it were apparently on sale in Killarney in the nineteenth century (Nelson and Walsh 1993).

Although they are not trees, the wood of both blackthorn and furze (or gorse; *Ulex europaeus* L. and *Ulex gallii* Planch.) had vernacular uses in Ireland. Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa* L.) was prized for its hard wood and shillelaghs were often made out of blackthorn. Faction fighters at fairs and other public gatherings would often carry a blackthorn stick or ashplant with them as a weapon (Evans 1949). The spiny branches of blackthorn were traditionally placed on the top of fences in Ireland, as an early form of barbed wire (Kelly 2000). Sloes were not completely useless either, as sloe gin was widely made. The wood of furze was also sufficiently strong and sizable enough to be used for a variety of objects, including walking sticks and hurleys, and for the handles of tools, whips and umbrellas (Lucas 1960).

Early Irish law

In pre-Christian Irish society, brehons or judges were arbitrators of land management laws (Kelly 1999). This early body of largely case law is now recognised as probably the oldest European example of a sophisticated legal system. The Brehon law was used throughout the Early Christian period and up to the time of the arrival of the Normans. There were specific Brehon laws dealing with trees. Under these laws, certain trees and shrubs were protected because of their importance to the community. There were four classes of tree, roughly mirroring classes in early Irish society. These were the airig fedo ("nobles of the wood"), the aithig fedo ("commoners of the wood"), the fodla fedo ("lower divisions of the wood") and the losa fedo ("bushes of the wood"). Which group a tree belonged to depended on its economic importance, usually related to its fruit, timber or size when fully grown. Penalties for the destruction or harming of trees was decided based on this hierarchy. The status of the species described above are included in Table 1.

Table 1: *Tree species were assigned among four hierarchical classes based on their potential importance to the local community by the Brehon system.*

Species	Class of tree	
Oak	*Airig fedo*	Nobles of the wood
Pine	*Airig fedo*	Nobles of the wood
Yew	*Airig fedo*	Nobles of the wood
Ash	*Airig fedo*	Nobles of the wood
Elm	*Aithig fedo*	Commoners of the wood
Willow	*Aithig fedo*	Commoners of the wood
Hazel	*Airig fedo*	Nobles of the wood
Holly	*Airig fedo*	Nobles of the wood
Birch	*Aithig fedo*	Commoners of the wood
Alder	*Aithig fedo*	Commoners of the wood
Rowan	*Aithig fedo*	Commoners of the wood
Spindle	*Fodla fedo*	Lower divisions of the wood
Arbutus	*Fodla fedo*	Lower divisions of the wood
Blackthorn	*Fodla fedo*	Lower divisions of the wood

Conclusion

As has been shown, wood was used in the Irish vernacular tradition in a wide variety of ingenious ways. This required a detailed knowledge of the attributes of each kind of wood, in order to create a wide variety of objects around the house, farm and workshop. This knowledge arose when wood was usually the only material available to make those objects. Most of this knowledge has since fallen into disuse, particularly in the modern era as plastic objects have replaced wooden ones. Given the increasing environmental problems with plastic, however, perhaps it is time to rediscover some of the technical skills and knowledge that our forebears possessed, and look again at the value of working in wood.

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