

EXCURSION TO BIRR

9th APRIL, 1949

The Society's outings for 1949 began auspiciously with a visit to the Earl of Rosse's estate at Birr on Saturday, 9th April.

Members totalling over 40 assembled at noon at the estate sawmill in the town, where they were met by our valued fellow-member, Mr. Chisholm, forester and sawmill manager to the Earl of Rosse. He showed members over the very well-equipped sawmill and workshops, where timber from the estate woods and purchased plantations is worked up for use on the estate's extensive house property and for local carpenters and cabinet-makers. Of particular interest was the extensive selection of home-grown timbers in the plank on display. Pedunculate and sessile oak, wych and English elm, were contrasted, while Hornbeam, Plane, Cherry, Wellingtonia, Abies grandis, Japanese larch, Cedar and Douglas were among the more unusual species. Some very fine carved oak panelling was also examined.

The party was most generously invited to lunch at Dooley's Hotel by the Earl of Rosse, after which we were conducted over the estate woods by the Earl and Mr. Chisholm. These woods are situated on a complex system of esker ridges consisting of coarse limestone gravels, on which drought and the extreme alkalinity of the soil combine to produce a rather difficult site for the cultivation of timber. The older woods are mostly of hardwood type, with oak predominating. Douglas is frequent in the middle-aged plantations, while Scots and larch appear in the younger stands.

The status of the pedunculate oak, whether native or originally planted, has been the subject of discussion, and it is difficult to give a definite verdict. Historically, this district was noted for its oak woods up to the coming of the Parson's family, and it would not be surprising if they preserved some of the woods near their residence, especially on soils of little agricultural value. The surprising absence of beech and the presence of the rather rare *Mercurialis perennis* in quantity on the floor of the woods also suggest that the oak here may be native.

Unfortunately, the site is unfavourable to the production of very large oak in long rotation, although some of it is of medium size and good quality. There is an interesting example of oak regeneration on one area. Ash, too, suffers from lack of moisture, and, although very vigorous and in fact a weed in the early stages, it falls off markedly in growth rate in the pole stage. Evidently ash can only be worked on a short rotation.

Amongst the conifers, Japanese larch seems to withstand the unfavourable site conditions very well, and several thriving plantations were inspected in the thinning stage. Some successful natural regeneration from three older Japanese larch trees was also observed. Douglas, we were informed, goes into check in the thicket stage—

about the eighteenth year.—but recovers well in a few years after the first thinning. Mr. Chisholm advocates heavy thinning as a remedial measure.

On moisture flats there were some fine Douglas, about 35 years old, and a specimen of *Abies grandis* of similar age must rank amongst the finest in the country. A few small groups of *Pinus insignis* were remarkably vigorous and appear to be deserving of wider use on this soil type. Corsican Pine was doing well, but Scots Pine and European Larch are rather disappointing. A Norway Spruce plantation, about 40 years old, was making slow progress, limited, no doubt, by water shortage.

When the circuit of the woods was completed the Earl and Countess of Rosse entertained members to tea at Birr Castle, and very kindly showed us over the castle with its many family portraits, antiques and period pieces. Of professional interest to foresters were the magnificent yew staircase and the remarkable panelling in elm with cherry insets, designed and prepared by Mr. Chisholm. Capt. Ryan expressed our sincere thanks to the Earl and Countess of Rosse for their magnificent hospitality and kindness.

Finally, our hosts showed us over the beautifully laid-out garden and the arboretum with its many rare specimen trees.

As darkness fell, members took leave of our hosts with renewed expressions of thanks for a most interesting and enjoyable day.

