

Excursion to Wicklow Oak Wood

THE party assembled in the Square, Rathdrum, on the 24th of June. The leader for the day was Mr. T. McEvoy. Members then proceeded to Greenane Wood, where the first stop was made.

Mr. McEvoy informed the party that from this point the Glenmalur valley could be seen, where shortly before 1600, Fiach McHugh O'Byrne assisted by the O'Moores defeated the heavily armed English troops led by Lord Grey de Wilton. The site on which members stood was old woodland and had appeared as such on the original Ordnance Survey maps (c. 1840). It was typical of grazed woodland and its most obvious feature was the absence of a shrub layer. Mr. McEvoy made reference to *Melampyrum pratense*, an annual species very common in Oak woods—and to the irregular hump and hollow formation of the ground. He also pointed out the other ground floor vegetation such as *Vaccinium myrtillus*, and the diffuse bracken growth typical of grazed areas.

These woods, we were told, had been in former times coppiced on a 30 years' rotation, but after Napoleonic times the coppice woodland was allowed grow to high forest due to failure of the market for tan bark.

We walked across the road to a small area of fenced and ungrazed oak woodland where there was now a substantial understorey—mainly of holly—and a ground floor of *Luzula maxima*, typical of the moister humic soils. Sometimes a *Vaccinium* layer occurred under these conditions. Turner and Watt have described this type at Killarney as a *Quercetum-Ilicosum*—it appears capable of developing naturally in the mild climate of the Wicklow mountains. Beech invasion in the understorey was also noted.

The party then proceeded to Cronybyrne Property, Rathdrum forest, where a corner of young semi-natural woods was seen. Here a dense coppice oak—birch—holly canopy excluded light and so allowed good condition for germination on the ground floor. Mr. McEvoy said that in the upper storey of the forest birch dies out more quickly than the oak, though it survives germination better, and after 90-100 years, when disease and heart rot has ravaged the birch, a fairly pure oak wood is left.

At the next stop we saw a mature oak crop on a knoll. It was of open canopy growing on shallow soil and hard rock. The site was subject to drought. Quite a quantity of light was available to the forest floor and *Vaccinium* dominated the vegetation, but *Calluna* was also present due to the light conditions. We were informed that fires occur easily on these sites so that the vegetation is kept open.

At this point Mr. McEvoy mentioned the general topography of the Glendalough-Rathdrum area. It is an over-deepened glacial valley cutting through granite, mica schist, silurian slates and shales—with

some basic igneous intrusions further down near Shelton. The whole river valley from Arklow to Glendalough was oak covered until the First World War at which time heavy inroads were made into the forest.

Next, a large oak, more typical of that grown on alluvium, was seen. Here crown and stem were larger. Questions arose as to its use for ship-building. We continued to a park-woodland type growth, where stems stood 30 ft. apart, though canopy was closed. This was the best of the oak so far seen. Suggestions were made as to its preservation for seed purposes.

Ground vegetation, comprising the fern community, was next seen. The male fern, sweet mountain fern, lady fern, and hard fern were noted growing on acid soil. The prickly shield fern and harts tongue fern were noted growing on more neutral ground.

The party at this stage was given some information of the conditions under which oak grows here. 1,070 ft. approximately is its present upper limit where it grows bent and flattened and only some 12 ft. high.

Our last site was the location of an old iron furnace. These furnaces, we were told, were in use from Elizabethan times when the Earl of Stafford introduced commercial smelting and one family carried on the tradition amassing profits up to some £1m. until a dispute arose in 1741 and the industry folded up. Interesting pieces of clinker were uncovered at the site.

After a pleasant tea helped by excellent amenities provided by Mr. Healy, Forester-in-Charge, the Convenor proposed a vote of thanks to Mr. McEvoy on behalf of the Society.

G.J.G.