

# Day Excursion to Abbeyleix Demesne

11th May, 1964

DESPITE heavy rain some 40 members and their friends enjoyed a Sunday afternoon in the woods of the de Vesci estate at Abbeyleix. Lord de Vesci and his forest manager, Mr. Fyffer, accompanied the party and we were deeply indebted to them for their thorough preparations as well as for a very welcome tea under shelter in Bluebell Wood.

A feature of this estate is the extensive area of very ancient pedunculate oak woodland with trees over 300 years old, believed to be one of the very few remnants of the native woodland of the Central Plain. From the commercial aspect these woods are far beyond maturity but on Bluebell Hill a block is being carefully preserved in open canopy with clean floor which, at the time of our visit, was a magnificent sea of bluebells. This wood is open to the public in May and the view was expressed that the state should be prepared to assist in a practical way in the maintenance of such a botanical and tourist attraction.

Another 30 acre block of 250 year old oak was undergoing treatment for conversion to conifers. Stage one was the clearing of one third of the area by groups for planting with beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) silver, noble and grand firs (*Abies alba*, *A. Procera* and *A. grandis*), Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga taxifolia*), western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) and western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*). This work was extremely well planned, both amenity and extraction being fully considered. Estimates of the length of the regeneration cycle ranged from 10 to 30 years.

As in most Irish estates, the woodlands suffered in the past from the absence of a management plan or even of a clear definition of objects of management. Mr. Fyffer has now prepared a new Working Plan on practical lines with a detailed five year plan of operation covering 600 acres of conifers, 600 acres of broadleaves and 200 of blanks and scrubs. Forty acres have been planted in each of the last three years. Three hundred acres of conifers, aged 20 to 50 years, are receiving first or second thinning yielding some small timber for

the estate sawmill. A full-time forest staff is employed and a nursery for domestic supplies is maintained.

The red squirrel has caused considerable damage in young Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) crops and as an illustration a 27 year old plantation was inspected where leader breakage followed isolation of apparently good stems. This problem creates a difficulty in management and the only solution may well be early replacement. Close by, a 29 year old, Scots pine plantation, less heavily damaged, covering 3.6 acres was reduced to 280 stems per acre and underplanted with Norway spruce (*Picea abies*). The overcrop will be reduced gradually to 50 standards per acre to mature in, say, 60 years time with the Norway spruce. As the site should be far more productive under spruce and as spring frost is a problem this appeared to be an attractive solution. An adjoining 29 year old Norway spruce plot was of Quality Class I with a standing volume of 3,360 H. ft. High pruning to 18 feet was done two years ago on 100 stems per acre by schoolboys on holiday at the very reasonable cost of 3d. per stem. It was noted with approval that stumps of felled conifers were creosote treated against *Fomes annosus*, a dangerous fungus on afforested agricultural land.

The party was left with the impression of a private forest where problems are being tackled in a practical and scientific way which promises to be rewarding to the owner both in financial returns and in a personal sense of achievement.

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