

Inchagoill revisited: Report on the Society of Irish Foresters Field Trip to Inchagoill Island, 18th October 1997

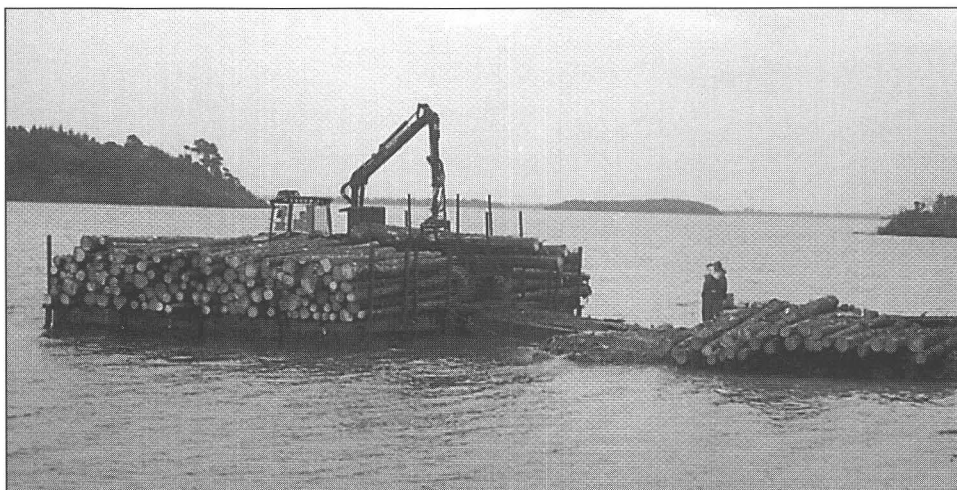
The Society of Irish Foresters visited Inchagoill Island, Lough Corrib, on 18th October 1997. Hosted by the Coillte Galway Region, the tour studied the progress achieved to date in the woodland restoration programme for the 40 ha island. The Society last visited the site in 1993, an account of which is contained in *Irish Forestry* 51(1&2). Inchagoill has a rich heritage and is regarded both locally and internationally as an important archaeological site. Apart from its scenic beauty, Lough Corrib provides excellent fishing for salmon, trout, pike and perch, and is particularly renowned for its mayfly trout. It is also one of the few lakes in Ireland containing char, a species now protected under an EU habitat directive. The woodland restoration project therefore had three dimensions, viz. silvicultural, archaeological and environmental.

Coillte avoided potential local and international controversy by adopting a proactive communications approach from the outset. Initially, the company began wide-ranging discussions with local and national groups to ensure that the company's woodland restoration objectives were clearly understood. The Galway Region staff, led by Vivian Ryan, Region Manager, developed a comprehensive plan after consultation with Coillte's own specialist staff and research scientists, the Forest Service, Galway County Council, the OPW and various fisheries and tourist groups in Galway.

Many local groups had concerns about the harvesting of 13.5 ha of mainly Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis* (Bong.) Carr.) on the island. Fears were expressed regarding possible damage to tourism, especially in relation to an archaeological site on the island and fishing on the lake. The Western Fisheries Board, who expressed concerns about the project, were involved in the preliminary planning stage and invited to inspect the operation at all stages of development. The company facilitated the Board in a number of ways. For example, Coillte co-operated in a monitoring programme which included unscheduled inspections of the harvesting and loading of timber. Kevin Rogers of the Western Fisheries Board told the tour group that they had received excellent co-operation from the company from the outset. He added that a number of unscheduled inspections had already taken place and Board officials had received no complaints.

In addition to seeking the views of outside groups, Coillte adopted their own stringent safety and environmental standards during timber removal. Anglers and tourists were facilitated by the rescheduling of timber felling and removal to October. When the group visited the site, work had been underway for about three weeks. Michael Cox, Environmental Officer, explained the consultative process which resulted in the construction of two loading piers on the island and one unloading pier in Cong. A further pier was built at Inishannagh Island where a small volume of timber was removed. Careful attention to detail during loading and unloading has resulted in no pollution from either oil spillages or siltation. In addition, felling and transport was planned well clear of pathways to the archaeological site, to ensure that access by tourists and interest groups was maintained.

The main challenges facing this project are (i) the removal of the existing crop and (ii) replanting with species which originally colonised the island. Vivian Ryan pointed out that the area was planted during 1960 and 1961. The crop was now vulnerable to windthrow. Indeed, the storms of 1961 and 1974 caused extensive damage to previous crops including Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris* L.). The existing harvested area comprised 75% Sitka spruce along with Norway spruce (*P. abies* (L.) Karst.) and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*



Loading timber onto a barge on Inchagoill Island.

(Mirb.) Franco). All species were highly productive, with yield classes as high as 28 for Sitka spruce, and standing volumes between 340 and 790 m³/ha. Tom Grunnell, former Divisional Inspector in Galway, first visited the island in the mid 1940s and was involved in the original planting during the early 1960s. He provided the group with an interesting insight into how timber had been harvested and floated to Cong and how the workers came across by boat to replant the area.

As a result of careful planning, the harvesting and transport operations were being carried out efficiently. At the time of the group's visit, half of the total volume of 7,000 m³ had already been felled and 2,300 m³ had been removed from the island. Kieran McLoughlin, Production Manager, explained that the Valmet harvester was ideally suited to the reasonably level site. It caused no site damage and was capable of harvesting in excess of 200 m³ per day. The lengths were segregated and loaded at the pier onto two customised barges, each with a capacity of 60 m³. Timber was then towed to Cong where it was loaded directly onto lorries and transported to a number of mills throughout Ireland. Destinations for sawlog and boxwood included Murray Timber Products in Ballygar, the nearby ECC mill and the Coillte's sawmill at Cong. Pulpwood was dispatched to Claremorris railway station and transported by train to the Louisiana Pacific Coillte OSB mill in Waterford Harbour.

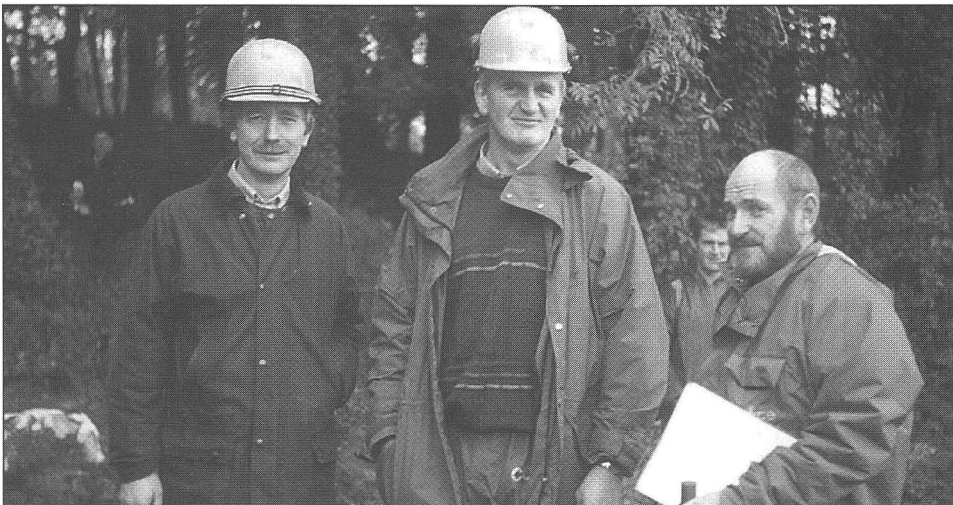
Vivian Ryan said that, even though the total operation was carried out efficiently, the objective was not to maximise financial return but to carry out the harvesting and transport in an environmentally sensitive way. (Maybe it was out of respect for the rich heritage of Inchagoill, but this was the first day tour this writer has ever attended where costs were not mentioned.) The same philosophy will apply during restocking, which will commence in early 1998 with native species, with particular emphasis on the island's original species, including oak (*Quercus* spp.), ash (*Fraxinus excelsior* L.) and Scots pine. In addition, some areas have been allowed to regenerate naturally and these are quickly returning to their original state, helped no doubt by the absence of browsing animals on the island. The group saw examples of excellent natural regeneration comprising 75% ash and 25% sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus* L.).

At the ecclesiastical enclosure and graveyard located a short distance from the clearfell area, Michael Cox provided the group with a fascinating insight into the rich heritage of the

island. It was first inhabited around 5,000 BC by nomadic hunters. In the early Christian period, monks founded a monastery here and the island appears to have received its name *Inis ha Ghaill* ('Island of the Devout Foreigner') from this later colonisation. Within the graveyard are the ruins of two churches of different styles and periods. Teampall an Naomh has an impressive example of Irish decorative art on its western gable doorway and probably predates the 12th century Norman invasion. Inside the church there is an etching of an ancient Greek or Byzantine cross which is part of the original building. The second church, Teampall Padhraig, is believed by Professor Etienne Rynne, University College Galway, to be approximately 1,000 years old. There is still a great deal of mystery attached to the Luaedon Pillar, an inscribed slender four-sided silurian stone widening at the base. This is due to the two-line inscription containing 23 old Latin characters: LIE LUGUAEDON MACCI MENUH. It may have been the grave of Lugnaed, son of Mermuch who is believed to be a sister of St. Patrick. Michael Cox, who holds a degree in archaeology in addition to his forestry qualifications, believes that the stone inscriptions may date back to the 6th century and that it may have originally been part of an Ogham stone. The old Irish word for stone is *gall* and some believe that Inchoigoill should be translated as 'The Island of the Stone'.

The visit to the forest and archaeological site illustrated the importance of a balanced approach in the restoration of Inchoigoill. The management team has maintained the rich natural and historical continuity of the island. The restoration of Inchoigoill is a unique project unlikely to be repeated again in Ireland. It has been an extremely worthwhile community and national exercise in proactive communications by Coillte and a demonstration of what a well-motivated workforce can achieve in managing a unique part of our heritage in accordance with best environmental and silvicultural practices. Despite persistent rain, the field trip was regarded as a tremendous success. Before boarding the *Lady Ardilaun* ferry for the two mile trip back to Ashford, the Society President, John Fennessy, thanked Vivian Ryan and his team for hosting the tour and for providing the group with a diverse and interesting view of forest management on an environmentally sensitive site.

Donal Magner



On Inchoigoill Island: Coillte's Billy Carroll, Peter Raftery and Michael Cox.