

Carving a woodland future

Ben Simon

Forest of Belfast, 4-10 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BP

Abstract

Public appreciation and enjoyment of landscapes can be heightened through the medium of the arts, and parks and woods often provide an appropriate setting for public art. Timber sculptures on a wildlife theme are being commissioned for Belfast parks to promote the aims of the urban forestry initiative, and offer a model that can be used elsewhere.

Introduction

The Forest of Belfast was launched in 1992 as an urban forestry partnership to develop the tree resource throughout Greater Belfast. Increasing awareness of the value of urban trees and community participation in tree planting and tree care is central to the initiative. One of the most effective ways in which urban trees are being promoted is through the visual arts.

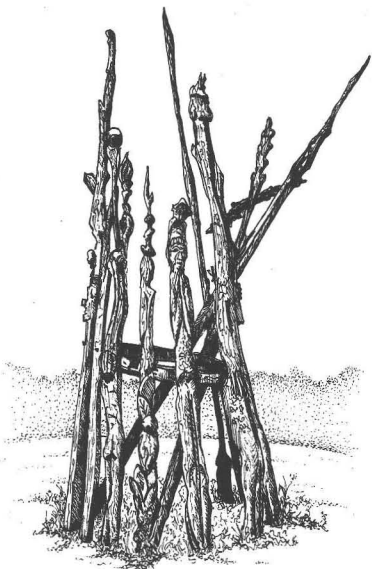
Wood sculptures in the Forest of Belfast

Many of the events promoted by the Forest of Belfast have involved the arts. Early projects included holding the first Tree Dressing Day in Northern Ireland, commissioning four community murals on the theme of people and trees and organising painting and creative writing competitions about trees (Johnston, 1995, 1998). The visual and performing arts also played an important part in the highly successful two day Tree Fair at Belvoir Park Forest in the south east of the city in June 1993. To mark the event, a sculpture carved from 30-foot (c. 9m) ash poles and entitled 'Tree of Life' was created in a forest clearing by Owen Crawford.

The 'Tree of Life' was followed by a second sculpture, of a kingfisher at Belvoir Park Forest. Carved by Jim Russell and Owen Crawford from a beech tree trunk, it was sited at a viewing point overlooking the forest and the River Lagan, where kingfishers are sometimes seen. The kingfisher is also the symbol of the Lagan Valley Regional Park, which includes the Belvoir woods.

It was recognised that wood sculptures had the potential for increasing awareness of the urban forestry initiative, encouraging residents to visit and revisit parks and woods and to promote the sustainable use of local wood (Simon, 2000). The Forest of Belfast Steering Group agreed to commission further sculptures for woodlands, subject to funding. Long term maintenance was seen as an important issue. Most of the sculptures were to have a lifespan of 5-10 years, after which they could be removed and other sculptures commissioned. It was decided not to create formal sculpture trails, but to site individual works and groups of sculptures in woodlands, initially in parks in the Lagan Valley to the south of the city centre.

In 1996 three further wood sculptures were commissioned. The site chosen for the sculptures was by an informal path that follows the bank of the River Lagan, at Morelands Meadow near Belvoir Park Forest. This extensive riverside area is managed as an informal park with wetlands and meadows shaded by ancient oaks. During the summer months



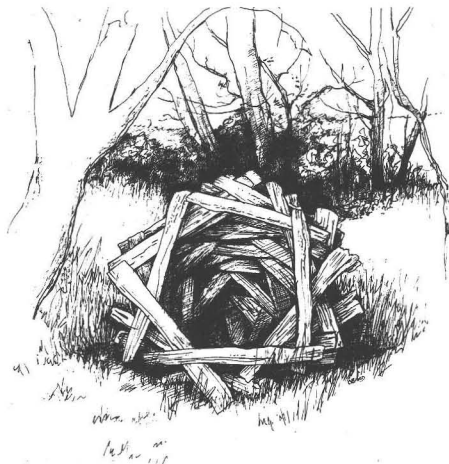
Tree of Life

by Owen Crawford

the area is grazed by cattle. Artists were asked to submit proposals for sculptures to be made of local wood on the theme of wildlife and mans' interactions with wildlife

In July 1997, following a short ceremony held at the Belvoir Forest Centre, 'Nest' by Tim Johnson, 'Horn of Plenty' by Owen Crawford and 'Acorns' by Betty Newman-Maguire were unveiled.

These works were created using a range of woods appropriate for the different themes and were sited in appropriate habitats: 'Nest' was constructed from scrap timber from a sawmill, the finished work being located in scrub woodland, an area frequented by birds such as moorhen, blackbird and crow. 'Horn of Plenty' comprises a figure emerging from the ground holding a bowl, through which a wild rose was planted. It was carved from a beech trunk and was not treated with preservative, the sculptor intending the figure to become colonised with fungi and to slowly decay. 'Acorns' were carved from a fallen oak and sited near an ancient oak tree. The sculptor used the material to focus attention on the cycle of life and to create seating.



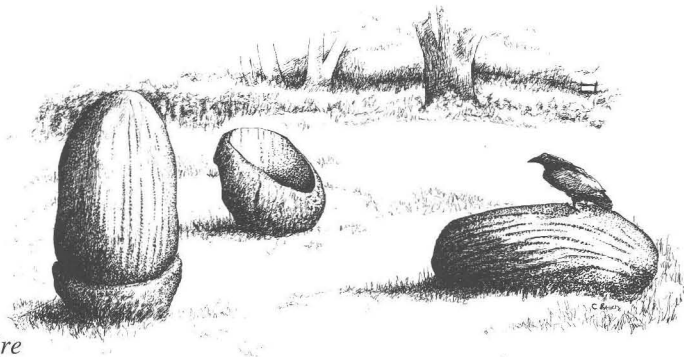
Nest

by Tim Johnson

The wildlife theme chosen for these works added an informal educational aspect to the project. It was decided that future commissions should also reflect the plant and animal life of the woods and parks. The sculptor Niall Timmins was commissioned to carve several red squirrels, slightly larger than life



Horn of Plenty
by Owen Crawford



Acorns
by Betty Newman-Maguire

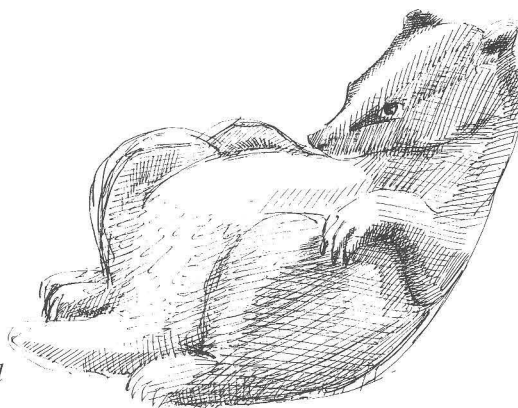
size, on logs in the garden of Malone House in Barnett Demesne, South Belfast. There is a resident population of red squirrels in the park and the sculpture draws attention to this increasingly rare species. This work was unveiled at the end of September 1997 during Red Squirrel Week, when the importance of our native squirrel was highlighted throughout the UK. Each of the guests attending the ceremony was given a small tree grown from local seed, to encourage them to plant native trees to support local wildlife.

In 1997 funding was also obtained for a project entitled 'Woodland Workshops and Woodland Sculptures'. Groups of school children from different communities worked with educational staff from two voluntary organisations involved in the Forest of Belfast, discovering more about woodland wildlife and suggesting ideas for two wildlife sculptures. One group of children investigated the lifestyle and threats to urban badgers. They worked with Owen Crawford who carved an oak trunk into a sculpture of a large badger which children can play with and sit on. This is sited by the Nature Study Centre at Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park. The other group searched for and studied mini-beasts, exotic and native plants and other features of the Botanic Gardens. They worked with Niall Timmins, helping him create a wildlife obelisk from thick ash planks on a metal frame, that has been sited in this park.

The following year, a group of sculptures was created for Barnett Demesne, in wood-

Badger

by Owen Crawford

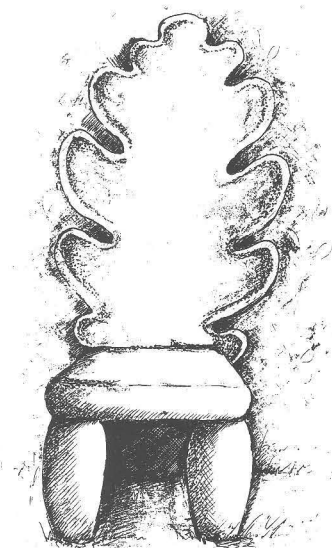


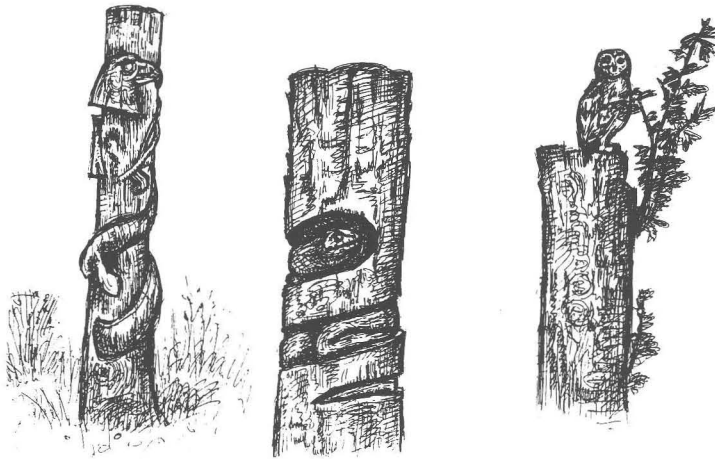
land but near paths to permit easy access. Sculptor Ned Jackson Smyth constructed an 'Oak Throne', a giant chair of local oak, the back carved like an oak leaf. His colleague Niall Timmins carved a 'Frog on a Log' and, when two old sycamore trees had to be felled, the stumps were left for him to carve two more animal sculptures, 'Owl' and 'Lizard'. These have proved to be the works to which park users are most attracted.

A single large tree trunk was also chosen for the most recent work, by Scott Butt from Newfoundland. His placement was arranged as part of the 'Wood Exchange Project' which is developing creative links between sculptors in Ireland, Newfoundland and Labrador. He worked in Barnett Demesne and transformed the trunk of a recently felled ash tree into a carved Pole with images of Canadian wildlife and culture, including an eagle head, canoe, eel, feather and wigwam. The sculpture was unveiled by the Honorary Canadian Consul on Canada Day, the 1st of July 1999.

Oak Throne

by Ned Jackson Smyth





Ash Pole by Scott Butt, Lizard and Owl by Niall Timmins

Discussion

The sculptures are appreciated by tourists, visitors and park staff. There has been widespread press coverage and the scheme has been highlighted on local radio and television. Many of the sculptors have also attended environmental festivals organised by the Forest of Belfast in partnership with other organisations. These Tree Fairs, held with the Forest Service at Belvoir Park Forest (in 1993 and 1996) and with Belfast City Council Parks and Amenities at Barnett Demesne (in 1998 and 1999), have allowed members of the public to talk to sculptors and to see them at work undertaking commissions for the Forest of Belfast.

Most of the finished works have been easy to place, by simply digging a hole and back-filling around the base with gravel. However, transporting heavy wooden sculptures to chosen sites in parks, sites that are often away from roads and in dense woodland, has caused some problems. Additional expenditure has been incurred in hiring rough terrain vehicles and lorries with telescopic cranes to transport and site each work.

There is growing interest in the visual arts in Belfast and there is no shortage of ideas for new sculptures. The project is increasing exposure for the Forest of Belfast and for sculptors interested in public art. The sculptures are also recognised as having an important role in environmental education. With assistance from sponsors and grant awarding bodies, the momentum is growing, as this paper is being written two new wood sculptures are being created by Ned Jackson Smyth and Owen Crawford. Two sculptures are also to be commissioned for sites near the new cycle path by the River Lagan. As well as increasing the number of sculptures, it is also hoped to gradually develop the scheme, by introducing a broader range of materials and themes and by extending the project to encompass woodlands throughout Greater Belfast.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the sculptors for their interest, enthusiasm and creativity and members of the Forest of Belfast Steering Group for their support and help. The assistance of artists who kindly made drawings and sculptures and allowed them to be reproduced for this paper is very much appreciated. The illustrations are by Niall Timmins (Tree of Life), Carol Baird (Nest and Acorns), Owen Crawford (badger and The Horn of Plenty), Ned Jackson Smyth (Oak Throne) and Diana Oxlade (Ash Pole, Lizard and Owl). I also thank Sean McCrum for organising the placement for Scott Butt and all of the sponsors (The Forest Service, Belfast City Council Arts and Belfast City Council Parks and Amenities, NORTEL Networks, Belfast European Partnership Board and Sustrans).

REFERENCES

- Johnston, M. 1995. The Forest of Belfast: Healing the environment and the community. *Arboricultural Journal* 19(1):53-72.
- Johnston, M. 1998. The development of Urban Forestry in Northern Ireland. *Irish Forestry* 55(1):37-58.
- Simon, B. 2000. The Forest of Belfast – a growing success. In: Proceedings of Ireland's Third National Conference on Urban Forestry, Galway. 22-24 April 1998. Ed. Collins, K. D. The Tree Council of Ireland, Cabinteely House, Cabinteely, Co Dublin. pp 11-15.