

Heritage Week 2014  
Sunday, August 24<sup>th</sup> 2014  
Carrigacunna Castle Grounds, Killavullen, Mallow, Co Cork



### ‘Restoring our Relationship with the Self through Biodiversity’

At the invitation of *Dia Dhuit*, a Suicide Prevention Charity, Teddy Cook and Kevin Corcoran guided a heritage walk the length of Carrigacunna’s stunning Beech Avenue – likely the longest continuous Beech Avenue within the island of Ireland.

Participants were joined by Seanie Nagle, a local historian and direct descendant of the Anglo-Norman family of the same name.

Carrigacunna’s late Norman Manor House was home to James 1<sup>st</sup>’s Attorney General, Sir Richard Nagle. In his *Concise History of Ireland*, Joyce describes Sir Richard’s descendant, Edmund Burke as ‘the greatest Political Philosopher in history.’ Burke’s first cousin Nano Nagle founded the Presentation Order of Nuns during the early 1800’s. Nano’s birthplace which lies across the river from Carrigacunna was birthplace of Burke’s mother. Burke was born in 1737. At 28, Burke was Private Secretary to Prime Minister Lord Rockingham – a critical period of the Penal Laws in Ireland. This name will not soon pass out of history – as Protestant champion of human rights for the Catholic and Dissenter populations of these islands. Rightly, Edmund rests before the High Altar of Westminster Cathedral, adjoining the former tomb of Thomas à Becket.

The walk commenced at Carrigacunna Gate Lodge (locally Killavullen lodge) at 2.30pm – the meeting point for visitors being Killavullen Bridge at 2pm. Kevin introduced the simple technique of dating the ages of our trees – a recently felled beech tree adjacent to the lodge was chosen for observation. The clean-cut beech, at 5 feet height revealed 187 rings. With measuring tape Kevin counted 382 centimeters circumference at shoulder height. The tree was planted between 1825 and 1835 because in a healthy, normally growing hardwood, one year’s growth is equivalent to 2 centimeters.

Avenues of beech became popular among the recently settled Cromwellian colony since the 1670's. In her *Bowen's Court*, Elizabeth Bowen describes the growing self-confidence of the colony, such that in early Victorian times, the forebears of the Anglo-Irish were planting up their demenses and opting for outspoken treed entrances.

*Dia Dhuit* acknowledges the owners Rosaleen and Rod Springett for their kind consent. Forty plus participants joined the walk – learning to identify the wild plants encountered along the avenue. Remnants of last spring's bluebells and wood anemone peeped from the earth banks that support the mature beeches. Late wood violets flowered on the day – despite the forecast, the afternoon was dry and bright. Woodruff, many fern species, woodrush, foxglove, both ground and creeping ivy and autumn toadstools occupied our attention. A squirrel's drey reminded the group of the presence of red squirrel that commute the riparian corridors below the avenue. A jay was discerned. Seamlessly the avenue projects one back to an earlier period – to at least a century earlier (1730). Giantess oak trees take up the baton of the linear (and yet meandering) beech avenue.

Veteran Oak of near 6 meter circumference with their wealth of epiphytic ivy, lichens, tree ferns and mosses, transport us from the cool battleship grey of introduced beech to aboriginal forest, under-canopied with holly, spindle, hazel; associated ground and field flora of ancient woodland, fine ash and fertile elm are noted.

Long decomposing stumps of oak host several species of saprophytic fungi (decomposer bracket fungi) – massive beefsteak fungi and honey fungus. We are reminded that life proceeds along the tightrope of growth and decay. Without our decomposers our pilgrim planet would suffocate in organic waste and turn our precious air to methane (CH<sub>4</sub>).

Kevin (former deputy principal of a large secondary school in North Cork) shared stories of his eye witness accounts of the impacts of nature on troubled folk – the rediscovery of the vital 'self' when introduced to the deeper scrutiny of the natural world.

Ted outlined the accelerating loss of contact with wilderness spaces since the Neolithic period of our first farmers. Agriculture relentlessly continues to annexe both riparian, coastal, upland and lowland habitat – driving plants and their dependent animals to their limits. To observe losses in our freshwater pearl mussel populations and consequently our wild salmon, in our hedgerow removal and fragmentation of corridors that provide for genetic dispersal and exchange across rural Ireland, our failure to secure mass ecological education as envisaged in 1993 at the UN Convention on Biodiversity visibly contribute to our declining psychic vitality and mental wellbeing.

The author thanks Killavullen Community for its provision freely to our group of an abundance of refreshments.

Ted Cook  
4 September 2014