



LOUGHBRIKLAND
HISTORIC TRAIL

The Boundary Trail



Photographs courtesy of Andy Potts

The Old Ride

The wide, tree lined lane that forms the Boundary Trail is an old ‘ride’ – a path made specially for use by the owners of Loughbrickland House and their guests for riding and exercising horses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the owners planted trees in the fields around the main house to create parkland and at this time the ride was developed. Over the past 50 years or so, the ride fell into disuse and decline. In 2008, it was opened as a walk under a permissive path agreement between the owner, Dr Jean Whyte, and Banbridge District Council.

Johnston’s Fort marks the midway point of the Boundary Trail. This section of the trail, between the Coolnacran and Old Newry Roads, provides great views over this typical County Down rolling, drumlin countryside. To the south Coolnacran Fort is, on its hill, in a copse of trees, and Loughbrickland village is visible marked by 130 feet (39.62 m) high spire of Aghaderg Parish Church with a backdrop of the mountains of south Armagh and beyond.

Johnston’s Fort

Presumably, the fort got its name from a family who farmed this land in the past. Parish records of Aghaderg Parish Church record a headstone erected for a Paul Johnston who died in 1826. In 1800 a Henry Johnston of Loughbrickland wrote to his brother Moses Johnston in Pennsylvania, after the civil disturbances of 1798:

“My dear wife died in December 1795. Since that time there is nothing but disturbance, confusion and in many places rebellion. Thank God the troubles did not come just to our door but much too near...The dreadful consequence arising from so much disturbance was a great check to agriculture together with a very wet and cold spring in 1799, the summer was wet and unnatural and a very wet and scanty harvest. Provision of all sorts a monstrous price.”

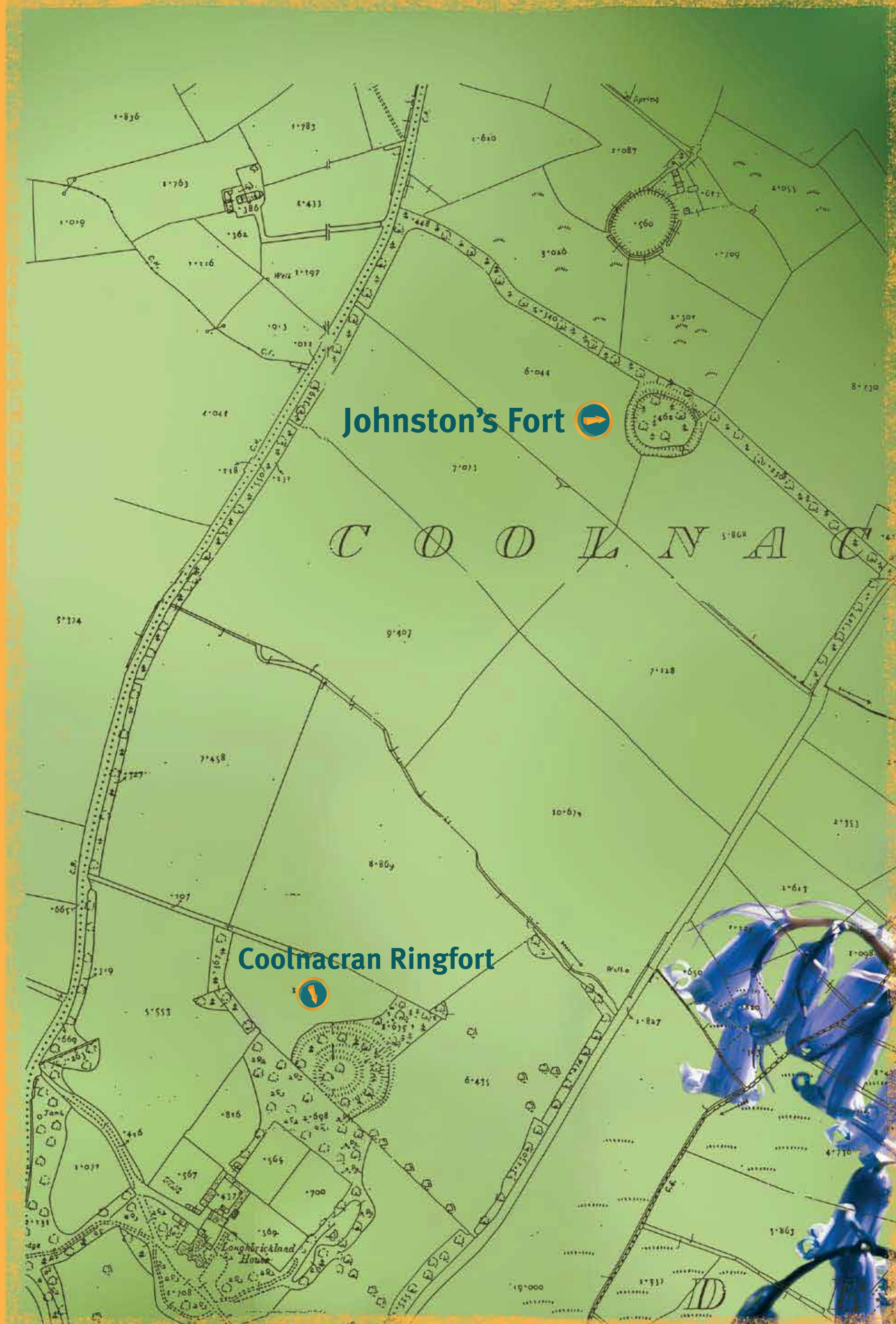
Early Enclosed Farmstead:

The fort is a type of earthwork, a ringfort, which archaeologists have described as a ‘Counterscarp Raised Rath’. Just as the greater number of rings a ringfort had indicated greater social status so too did raising the interior of the rath. In the middle of the fort were the dwelling house and out buildings – no visible trace of which remains. The fort was in use at sometime between the 5th and 12th centuries AD and was the enclosed farmstead of a relatively wealthy or powerful family. Although, Johnston’s Fort faces the larger Coolnacran Fort, and is so near a third fort, we can only speculate as to the relationship or interaction of the occupants of these settlements, or as to whether they were in use at the same time.

Ringforts are the most commonly found field monument in Ireland. Colloquially known as ‘forts’, ‘raths’ and ‘lios’ they were often regarded as magical places, the home of the ‘little people’. There are 3049 recorded raths in Northern Ireland with 762 of this number in County Down. This superstitious belief undoubtedly contributed to the preservation of so many raths though many were lost through post World War II agricultural ‘improvements’ and development. Now, many are legally protected.

A 1966 survey of archaeological sites in Northern Ireland described Johnston’s Fort as part of a pair of raths - ‘Two raths 300ft apart, one just above the 400ft O.D. contour, the other just below, on a S-facing slope at the S. end of a ridge.’ The fort to the north has been lost in modern times.

Johnston’s Fort was described in the survey as follows: ‘...120 ft across the interior, which slopes down to an entrance to the S. On the N.W. the inner bank rises 4ft above the interior, and the ditch is now 12ft below its crest. The outer bank on this side is as much as 4ft above the surrounding land, which slopes gently to the S.’



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Farming

The first farmers came to Ireland during the Neolithic Period some 6000 years ago. Over the centuries a pattern of traditional mixed farming developed including rotations of crops such as oats, barley, wheat, and potatoes, the raising of livestock and the cutting of hay for feed. This supported a wide diversity of wildlife, particularly birdlife. This way of farming continued until World War II (1939-45).

During and after the war, and over the past 60 years, greater intensification and mechanisation of farming occurred together with the widespread use of inorganic fertilisers, a change from spring to autumn sowing of arable crops, and from haymaking to silage production. Spring tillage was important for feeding and nesting by several bird species such as the lapwing and skylark. Winter stubble was a food source for birds such as finches, buntings and partridges. The loss of winter stubble and hedges has contributed to the decline in numbers of the yellow hammer, a bunting, by 65% since 1991. The yellowhammer is now found only in isolated pockets of County Down.

These changes have led to a dramatic reduction and loss of once common farmland birds just as the lapwing, skylark, corncrake and corn bunting and of traditional flower meadows. The distinctive ‘crek’ call of the corncrake during early summer nights was a familiar sound in our countryside less than a generation ago but now it is regarded as extinct for breeding purposes here. The corncrake was a summer visitor breeding and raising young before spending the winter in Africa. It was heavily dependent on managed hay meadows for a nesting habitat.

The Native Hedgerow – A Diverse Habitat

With the development of large estates from the 17th century onwards land was enclosed with banks and hedges or stone walls – particularly between 1700 and 1850.

An old hedgerow marks the boundary of the ride between the road and adjoining fields. Not only is this an attractive feature providing shelter for stock, it is also home to a wide range of living things and acts as a wildlife corridor linking the wood to the countryside. Spring is heralded in the hedgerow by the delicate flower of the blackthorn, and later by the lacy, creamy flowers of the hawthorn so indicative of spring in the Irish countryside. In spring, dog violets and primrose are found along the hedge bank. In autumn, the red berries of the hawthorn, and blackberries, rosehips, elderberries and sloes provide food for birds such as the yellowhammer, bullfinch, and chaffinch. The wet ditch running alongside the hedge provides a habitat for damselflies and dragonflies: hibernating frogs travel in spring via ditches and damp hedgerows in search of breeding pools and mates.

Hedgerows, such as this, planted with native trees and shrubs such as oak, willow, ash, elder, hawthorn, blackthorn and whin (gorse) support up to 14 species of mammal such as the wood mouse, badger, rabbit, stoat and hedgehog. Dying and decaying wood in the hedgerow provides a habitat for insects and nesting and roosting places for birds and bats. Northern Ireland is one of the least wooded countries in Europe with a broad-leaved tree cover of just 3.8% - 65% of the trees which make up this figure are found in our hedgerows. Up to 36 of our bird species rely on hedgerows for breeding, shelter and feeding purposes including threatened species such as the yellowhammer, linnet, and barn owl.

If you encounter any problems with the trail please contact the Countryside Officer on 028 4066 0605

Under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995 it is an offence to search for archaeological objects without a licence.

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