

The Historic Trail – Whyte Estate

Boundary and Woodland Trails (2.5 mile)

The Historic Trail in the Whyte Estate follows tree lined trails through the woods and open countryside. It offers the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and peace of this natural environment and to discover the traces of the previous occupants of the estate from the time over 1000 years ago when the impressive Coolnacran Ringfort and the smaller Johnston's Fort were in use – to World War II (1939 – 45) when troops were stationed in the estate. The trail can be extended by including the Boundary Trail or you can simply walk the circular Woodland Trail (both trails cover ground that can be muddy, uneven and rough in places. There are steps along both trails).

Enter through the gates of the estate and take the trail to the right, just beyond the building [A] erected by the owner Dr. Jean Whyte in 2008 to replace a derelict gate lodge. The trail wends its way through a line of beech trees bordering the Old Newry Road. Sections of old concrete paths are visible along this section of trail – reminders of the estate's role as a military camp during World War II.

Loughbrickland Wood surrounds the house and parkland of Loughbrickland House. It is a small, broadleaf, woodland of beech, sycamore and ash with a few veteran oak - mixed with an shrub layer including holly, wych elm (wild elm), and elder, with areas of bramble and ferns on dry banks. The white, umbrella heads of cow parsley festoon parts of the trail in spring and early summer. Undisturbed parts of the wood make a perfect habitat for badgers and foxes.

Areas of the wood are dominated by the unwelcome invasive, exotic cherry laurel with its dark green glossy leaves. It crowds out native trees and shrubs and inhibits the natural regeneration of the wood. With old trees, thicket, dappled shade and an ample supply of fallen timber the wood provides an attractive and rich habitat for wildlife. The western section of the wood is an established winter roost for the rooks and jackdaws with a rookery of between 250 and 285 active nests every year for the last 20 years.

Beech cast a deep shade and most of the woodland flowers here are adapted to flower before the leaves appear on the trees. In spring the trail looks at its best when the wonderfully scented bluebells are in flower and the beech leaves are just beginning to unfurl. Bluebell or wild hyacinth is a plant of woods and shady places. Its flower buds are at first upright but as they open, the bell-shaped heads begin to droop. (Please try to avoid walking on the bluebells as this damages the plant). Wood anemone with its white (often tinged with purple) cup shaped flowers creeps across the woodland floor and flowers from March to May.

At the junction of the path – ignore the entrance to the Boundary Trail for now and follow the Woodland Trail up the hill, through the ash plantation, and climb two sets of steps, passing a group of common lime trees, to Coolnacran Fort. [B] Just beyond the steps you will be passing the original entrance to the fort on the eastern downhill side of a drumlin - typical of this rolling county Down countryside. The word 'drumlin' is said to originate from the Irish 'droimín' meaning 'little hill'. The current entrance to the fort is further along, near the interpretative board. Coolnacran Fort, (Cluain Chrannacháin – 'meadow of the wooded place') with its peaceful location surrounded by trees has an almost mystical feel. Colloquially known to as 'forts' archaeologists refer to these ancient earthworks as 'ringforts'.

Ringforts were constructed and lived in between the 7th and 12th centuries AD – around 1000 years ago. They are early enclosed farmsteads. Coolnacran Fort has two concentric banks and ditches indicating that the occupants were wealthy and might have been kings, or the noble relatives of kings. It is even possible, given the nearness of Lough Brickland with its crannog, that Coolnacran, was the fort of the tribal king.

Loughbrickland and District Community Association, as part of the first phase of the Historic Trail project in 2000/01, helped to cut away years of laurel growth to reveal the banks and ditches of the fort. **Follow the path around**

the perimeter of the rath to the interpretative board with its artistic impression of how the fort would have looked shortly after its construction and take a moment to explore the ringfort. Nearby is a habitat pile created as part of the clearance of the fort and now providing a cosy place for hedgehogs to hibernate during the winter.

Follow the waymarkers out of the wood to an avenue and turn left and walk towards a set of gates. To the right is an old crab apple tree. **[C]** Crab apples, tiny, bitter apples, are at their best in September or October. They are too bitter to eat but can be cooked to make crab apple jelly. Nearby is a patch of white and red campion - a plant commonly found in woods, hedges and shady places. It flowers from May to November.

To the left the small, red brick building dates from World War II and may have been used as a store for fuses for the artillery. The green building beside it is a club facility for Ballyvally Archers, who use the wood as an outdoor range – hence the large, black archery targets visible along the woodland trail.

Go through the gate, closing it behind you and turn right into the back avenue, away from the house (which is strictly private).

You may see grey squirrels scampering up trees here. Greys, like cherry laurel, are unwelcome invaders in the wood. Native to North America they were introduced to Ireland in 1911. They have pushed out our native red squirrel from broadleaved woodland to conifer plantations as they are bigger, less fussy eaters and carry a virus fatal to reds. To the left of the avenue is part of the rookery.

At the back entrance there is a choice of routes with the turn to the left completing the Woodland Trail and leading back to the front gates of Loughbrickland House. The path to the right leads onto the Boundary Trail and follows an old 'ride' that runs around the perimeter of the estate.

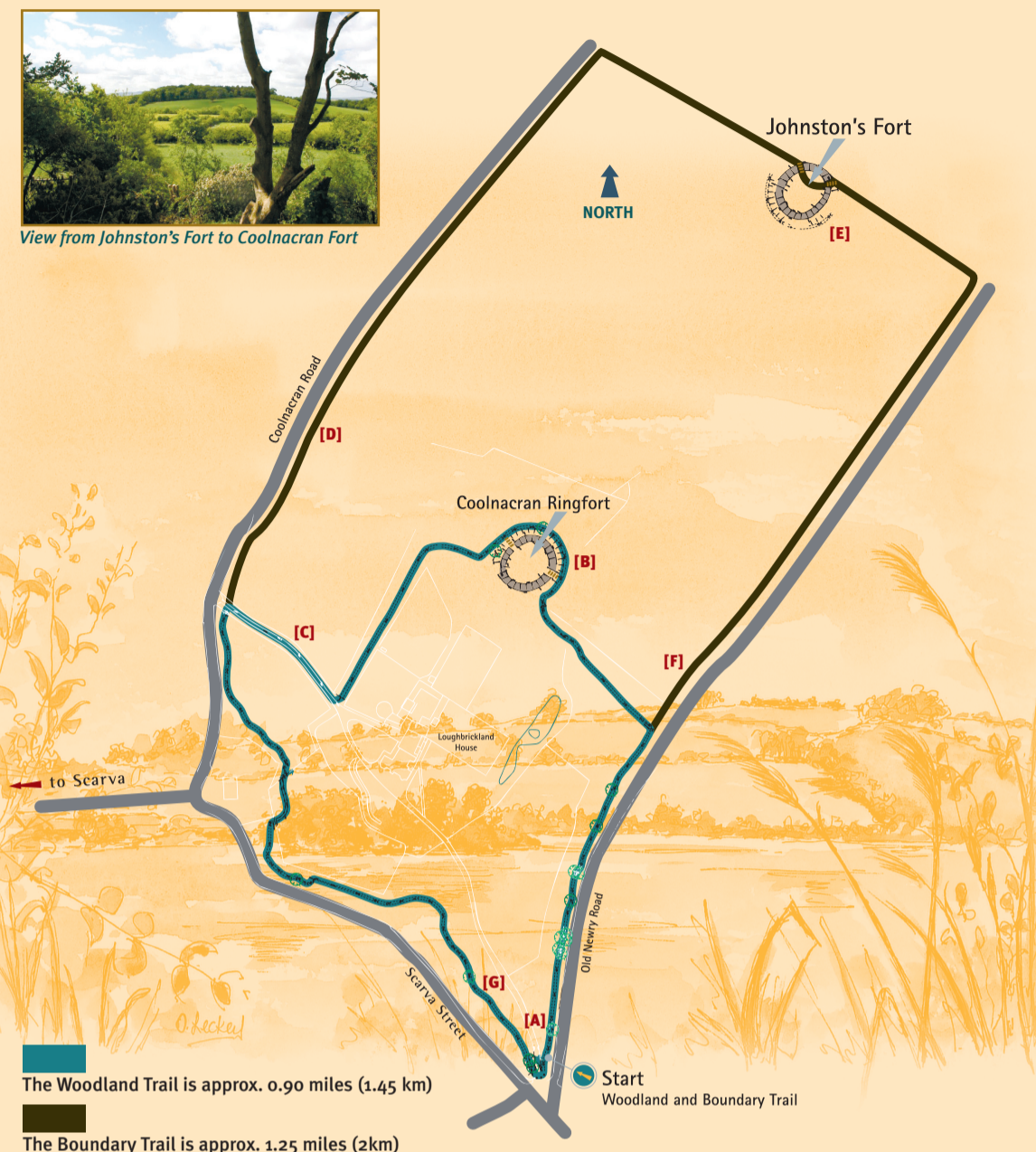
[D] The wide, tree lined lane that forms the Boundary Trail is an old 'ride' – a path made specially for use by the owners of Loughbrickland House and their guests for riding and exercising horses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Whyte family planted trees in the fields around the main house to create parkland and constructed the ride around the estate. During the last fifty years the 'ride' has been treated as an extra to a number of fields let each year on a conacre basis. In 2008, following an agreement between the owner Dr. Jean Whyte and Banbridge District Council and with the assistance of Probation Service and funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the ride was reopened as a pleasant country walk.

The species-rich hedgerow of the Boundary Trail contains a variety of trees and shrubs including, hawthorn, ash, elder, horse chestnut, beech, oak, holly and elder and dog rose. It is, in effect, a linear woodland extending the woodland habitat into the surrounding countryside and acting as a wildlife corridor. Hedgerows, like woodland, are one of our most important habitats. A wide range of plants, animals and invertebrates make use of the hedge, the dry bank and the sheugh or wet ditch at the foot of the hedge. Mammals such as the Irish hare, woodmouse, badger, hedgehog and stoat make use of the hedge and birds and bats use the hedgerow to nest, roost and feed.

From March to May the shining golden stars of lesser celandine appear along the damper sections of the trail next the Coolnacran Road and in drier areas primroses appear along the hedgerow bank. The name primrose comes from 'prima rosa' – first rose. The flower rises from a flat cluster of low-growing, crinkled leaves and it has pale yellow flowers with a deeper yellow centre.

As the Boundary Trail turns from the Coolnacran Road towards Johnston's Fort **[E]** it passes through a line of beech and oak. The beech have not thrived on the heavy, clay soil and if you look closely some are peppered with buckshot.

The 'ride' was a useful and very visible way for the



owners of the estate to demarcate the boundary to those on the outside while also allowing the owner to display his estate to its best advantage to visitors. It is probably no accident that the ride leads to a ringfort known locally as Johnston's Fort which affords beautiful views down to Loughbrickland village and across to the much larger Coolnacran Rath to the south west.

Johnston's Fort marks the half-way point of the Boundary Trail. It is located on a south facing slope on the southern end of a ridge just above the 400 O.D. contour. It was once part of a pair of raths just 300ft apart but the northern rath has been lost in modern times. Described as a 'counterscarp raised rath' its mounded interior is surrounded by a substantial ditch, and it is believed that the interior of the rath may have been raised as successive generations cleared away old structures and built over them, gradually raising its level, which, it is thought, had the added bonus of displaying an increase in the occupants' status. In country lore, forts were regarded as magical places - the home of the fairies or little people which could not be disturbed. This belief helped preserve the sites. In keeping with the tradition, the area around Johnston's Fort is said to be haunted.

On leaving Johnston's Fort the trail drops down to run parallel with the Old Newry Road or 'Old Bann Road' as it is known locally. As part of the historic trail project in 2008 a native hedgerow was planted to reinstate the field side boundary of the trail which had been removed generations previously. The second field along this section is large and flat and is known as the 'Football Field' as it was used for football matches by the soldiers camped in the estate during WWII. As you walk along this section of the trail towards the wood you will see Coolnacran Fort surrounded by trees on the hill.

As the trail enters the woodland stay on the upper path and look out for the veteran oak **[F]** on the left, estimated from its girth (16.24 feet/4.95 m) to be some 350 years old - this is probably the oldest tree on the estate. Big, old trees such as this, with their holes and crevices, provide sites for roosting bats and hole nesting birds such as blue tits, kestrels and mistle thrushes. An old oak can host up to 250 species of insects.

During World War II the quiet of the estate was disturbed when the Armed Forces requisitioned some of the house and all of the parkland and stationed some 2000 troops here. Troop accommodation in the form of Nissen huts (tunnel-shaped huts of corrugated iron) were dotted throughout the estate hidden from air attack by the dense canopy of the trees. A few vestiges of the camp remain in the form of remnants of concrete pathways and foundations, a set of concrete steps that connected them and a vehicle inspection pit.

The last troops stationed in the estate were the 4th Infantry Brigade "Steenstraete" (4th Belgium Brigade) between April and October 1945. Following the liberation of Belgium in September 1944 some 25,000 Belgian troops were sent to Northern Ireland to train for battle and were stationed at bases in Antrim, Armagh, Lisburn, Larne, Lurgan and in and around Banbridge.

A contingent was based in the camp at the Whyte estate. Many of the soldiers were former members of the Belgian resistance and arrived with nothing more than the clothes on their back. One veteran Belgian soldier recalled arriving in Loughbrickland in darkness, undergoing exhausting, intensive physical training during his stay and perpetually wet weather. However, he said that the generosity of local people and the warmth of the welcome made up for the spartan conditions they endured in the camps. Lasting friendships were made and links maintained up to the present day. In recognition of the warmth of their reception in Northern Ireland the Brigade incorporated a shamrock into its brigade badge.

On rejoining the Woodland Trail retrace your steps to Coolnacran Fort and follow the way markers to the back gates of the Estate. Take the Woodland Trail to the left and follow the way marked path back to the front entrance.

Look out along this section for the rookery, bluebells in season and towards the end of the trail the old, concrete vehicle inspection pit on the right and just beyond this - on the left - a line of Monterey cypresses - a favourite nesting place for the rooks. **[G]**