

25. Murroe Woodland Walk - Report by Michael Quirke



Woodland Walk

This small area of mixed conifer and broadleaf woodland is located in the village of Murroe near the entrance to Glenstal Abbey (see map). It is well worth a visit when visiting the Clare Glens that lie only 4km to the north. Walking distance 0.5 km, time 30 min. Terrain easy. O.S.MAP 65: Start grid ref R730559
A wood can have a number of functions - to produce timber, to shelter wildlife, to provide a place of tranquillity for human recreation. This small wood fulfils all of those functions but it is very remarkable for the large variety of trees, and the reason for this lies in the history of this part of the country.

The name Murroe comes from the Irish 'Magh Rua', meaning the Red Plain. The red soil is due to the underlying rock- Old Red Sandstone, of which the Slieve Felim hills (and most of the mountains of southern Ireland) were formed. This produces an acidic soil that is suited for the development of oak woodland. Thus in prehistoric times this part of the country had extensive woodland, with its accompanying plants and wild animals. We are lucky to have here some remnants and fragments of an oak woodland.

The wall that separates the wood from the village street is part of the boundary of an ancient deer park for Red and Fallow Deer that was licensed by King Charles II in 1683 to a George Evans, whose descendant became Lord Carbery. He built a hunting lodge in the area, so this must mean that these hills retained wild woodland, suitable for game. Throughout the 18th century the Carberys leased their house and lands (their main residence in Ireland was in west Cork), and after the death of the 4th Lord Carbery, Sir Matthew Barrington, a wealthy lawyer, bought the estate and moved here from Limerick City. He began the construction of Glenstal Castle in the 1830s. To create a suitable demesne around his impressive castle, he undertook a tree-planting programme, including conifers from Europe and America. Some of these trees, similar to the ones growing around the castle, are still growing here, now quite tall and spectacular.

Today the wood lies inside the grounds of Glenstal Abbey. Since the departure of the Barringtons in the 1920s the woodland has been managed as a commercial operation, and every few years part of it is felled to produce timber. A few years ago the monks agreed with Murroe Community Council to make it freely available as an amenity for locals and visitors. At that time the path was laid out as a walk around the wood and various trees were planted to add further variety to what was already here.

Start at Point 10

Before entering the wood take a look at the wall on the street. Notice the Ivy-leaved Toadflax with its pretty long-stalked flowers, and three ferns, Rustyback, Maidenhair Spleenwort and Wall Rue, growing on the mortar between the sandstone.

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Inside the gate there is a seat and two notice boards. The first shows some of the birds in the area. These include Robin, Wren, Treecreeper, Chaffinch, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, Blue Tit, Jay and Long-eared Owl. The second board shows some of the trees that include Lodgepole Pine, Scots Pine, Douglas Fir, Ash, Beech and Oak. The board shows just six trees but there are more than twenty-five species in the wood, so this gives you a chance to play at tree identification (with a little help at identifying the conifers) as you stroll along the path. Before you leave for the walk, look around. There is a line of Beech, Ash and Oak to the left of the bird board, a pair of Limes near the road and beside the gate there is a Western Hemlock (needles of unequal length and with a drooping leader) with a Yew (dark green pointed needles) on the right of the gate.

Among the flowers on the woodland floor at this point notice the Hogweed, Herb Robert, Cow Parsley, Bluebell, Wood Sorrel, Lesser Celandine, Golden-saxifrage, Cuckoo-pint and Foxglove. On either side of the path to the right there is a pair of Scots Pine (needles in pairs) and as you go along the path you will pass Douglas Fir (smooth bark and stems), with tall Sitka Spruce (rough stems and hard spiky needles) visible on the left. There are lots of young Oaks on either side, along with Sycamore, Elder, Silver Birch and Holly. The path leads to the corner of the wood, where there are some old and battered European Larches (deciduous needles in tufts). Examine some of the cones, with straight edges, and compare them later with the cones of the Japanese Larch, which have the cone scales curved. There are also some fine old Scots Pines that date from the Barrington planting.

The path turns to follow alongside the stream. Here there are more Western Hemlocks and a Hawthorn. There is also a good view of the old Oaks with their mighty spreading branches, some of which are covered with Polypody Fern. The line of trees beside the stream contains some old Silver Fir (needles of different length and with a slight notch and large cones - look for their scales with a curved pointed bract on the ground). On the left there are Norway Spruce (rough stems and softer green needles). Along the ground there is Honeysuckle and Woodrush. Look out also for some young Mountain Ash and a Laburnum among the Holly and Western Hemlocks.



Speckled Wood (Ian Rippey)

The path now comes to the next corner, again with some European Larch and Scots Pines from the 19th century. Around here you will find Rhododendron, Eucalyptus and an Alder. There are also canes of an American Raspberry (*Rubus spectabilis*), with purple flowers in May, along with Bluebells and Lesser Celandine. The path to the right joins the avenue to Glenstal Abbey. Continuing back to where you began the path passes a seat, a good place to sit and listen to the birds - Robin, Chaffinch, Song Thrush, Blackbird are common, and sometimes the Jay can be heard. Sometimes too you may notice the cones of the Scots Pines that have been nibbled by Red Squirrels. Around here there are young Horse Chestnuts and further along the path passes a number of quite tall Japanese Larch on the right and Douglas Fir on the left. There is a bright rich carpet of Wood Sorrel in spring under the Firs. Look out too for the Hornbeams and for an American Oak, with some enormous leaves, before you arrive back at your starting point.