

Postgraduate Experience Award 2017
University of Kent

TREE OGHAM PROJECT

PROJECT REPORT



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Introduction

The Ogham [Ohh-am] is an ancient bardic alphabet composed by 20 letters, each named after a tree. This alphabet, claimed to date back between 2200 BC and 200 AC, is found on hundreds of stone inscriptions in the British Isles, mostly Ireland and western Britain, but also in Europe's mainland and even on North America, long before Columbus. Its origins are uncertain, some argue it may have derived from the runic alphabet, the early Irish, Latin, Greek, that it has origins on the middle East or in West Africa; some argue it was used by Celtic cultures, the druids or early Christians in resistance to the authority of Rome. Still, the archaic name of each letter in the Ogham alphabet corresponds to a tree's species, as well as a sound, and is strongly attached to an archetypal meaning, symbolic and historical. The Ogham was not a fixed but rather a dynamic system, it was not used as a spoken language but rather as a symbolic script, each symbol corresponding to an array of interrelated meanings or concepts – general yet particular to the individual, amenable to be interpreted independently while also translatable to other languages. However, since the Roman alphabet established itself in Britain, the ogham's use became “restricted to the secret and magical realms, where it remains today” (Pennick, 1992).

As symbols, the Ogham letters represent key tree species in local ecosystems and traditional livelihoods, species that are native to the British and European landscapes and that may still be easily found in woodlands, hedgerows, house's gardens and along the river's margins. These trees were considered sacred by the Celts and their meanings are a powerful map of Celtic cosmology. Each tree embodies a cultural and ecological meaning indicative of their particular features: their characteristics in terms of wood, flowers or fruits, their annual cycles, their nutritional or medicinal value, their habitat and role in the ecosystem, as well as in sustaining people's livelihoods. As such, these trees were of major socio-economic importance, based on the variety of uses for their timber, bark, leaves or fruits; but also, due to their living characteristics, embodying a mnemonic that unveil their symbolic meaning. In such context, their sole presence were considered to be beneficial, a protection and a sign to the human dweller, who could obtain both knowledge and health in the encounter with such tree, by living in their company or, more, by intertwining their lives together.

The Ogham Trees

The first letter of the ogham is Beth, which corresponds to the Birch tree (*Betula pendula*). The Birch is a pioneer tree, the first to recolonise land after the end of the last Ice Age. Each year is the first also to put out leaves in Spring and marks the time for farmers to begin sowing; Luis is the rowan or mountain Ash (*Sorbus acuparia*). It was traditionally considered the 'tree of life' and a magical plant. Its Celtic tree month is from 21 January until 17 February, signalling the coming spring and the Imbolc festival; Fearn corresponds to the Alder tree (*Alnus glutinosa*). In British mythology, this is the sacred tree of the Celtic god-king Bran, the Blessed. It was traditionally used in Europe for building's construction in wetlands, while the smiths praised their charcoal for metal smelting. Alder rules the Celtic month from 18 March until 14 April; Saille is the Sally tree or white Willow (*Salix alba*); Nuin is the fifth letter and its tree is the grey and black Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), a tree said to link the three circles of existence, the past, present and future, and associated with healing and protection; Huath is the tree of love and sexuality, the Whitethorn or Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*); Duir is the common Oak (*Quercus robur*), throughout all Europe considered one of the most powerful trees, revered as to the major gods, such as Zeus; Tinne is associated with the Holly tree (*Ilex aquifolium*); Coli is the Hazel tree (*Corylus avellana*); Quert, the crab Apple tree (*Malus sylvestris*); Muin the grape Vine (*Vitis alba*)*; Gort the Ivy (*Hedera helix*)*; Ngetal is the Reed or Broom*; Straif is the Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*); Ruis is the Elder

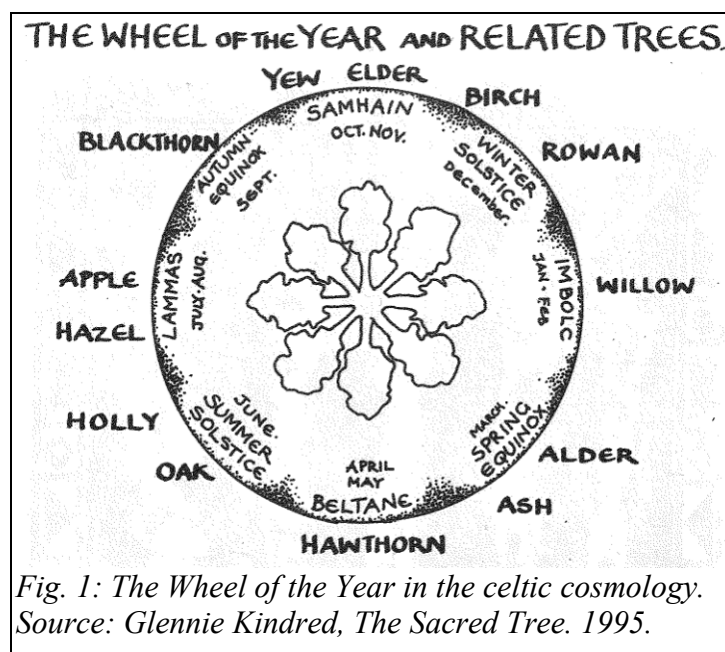
* Botanically, not classified as tree.

tree (*Sambucus nigra*); Ailm is the Fir tree (*Ulmus minor*); Ohn is the Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*)*, a plant which can be found in flower throughout almost all year, thus symbolising continuous fertility; Ur is the Heather (*Erica sp.*)*; Eadha is the Aspen (*Populus tremula*); And the 20th ogham, Idho is the Yew tree (*Taxus baccata*), in Europe the longest-lived tree and green throughout all year. It is the tree of eternal life, sacred to various divinities and symbol of death and regeneration.

Aims

This project aimed at the creation of a trail across the University of Kent, in Canterbury, which reveals the presence of the Ogham Trees on campus as a set of places to potentiate a relaxing, pleasant and meaningful experience through the interaction with the landscape and, in particular, the trees who compose it. Moreover, the project aimed to unveil the cultural heritage, history and meaning that comprise the British-European landscapes through facilitating both the embodied experience of such interaction and the disclosure of the associated folklore and cosmology, embedded in the co-creation of such places. As such, the project was set to portray and discuss the cultural values and identity attached to the Ogham Tree's species and the domesticated socio-ecological landscape that together these help to shape, focusing on the role of these species on:

- The conservation of British natural habitats and landscape, their importance in ecological woodland succession and ecosystems restoration;
- The traditional livelihoods, their cultural and economic importance through their uses as food, crafts materials and medicinal properties;
- The ancient British and European folklore and mythology, as well as its expression in their symbolic and archetypical meanings.



The Project

To respond to the above aims, we brought together an interdisciplinary team from the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, as SAC and SECL, including people from environmental sciences, ethnobotany, anthropology and literature; as well as participants from different backgrounds and interests, local organisations (such as the Abbots Mill Project) and community members linked to the arts, music, poetry and folklore. The development of the project involved:

- The identification and selection of tree species on campus, narrowed to the 13 Ogham tree species that are associated to the celebration of specific annual events, represented on the Celtic Wheel of the Year and related festivities (Fig. 1).
- The layout of the Ogham Tree Trail through the selection of a specimen for each of these tree species, based on location, history and establishing a connection to related community projects at the university, as the Oasis Garden, the Nature Trail and Billhook Nook (Fig. 2).
- Signs with the name of the tree and letter symbol were crafted in oak plaques and hanged with rope on the trees (Fig. 3).
- A Call for Submissions was launched asking for proposals on poetry, music, art instalations and performances related to these 13 tree species.

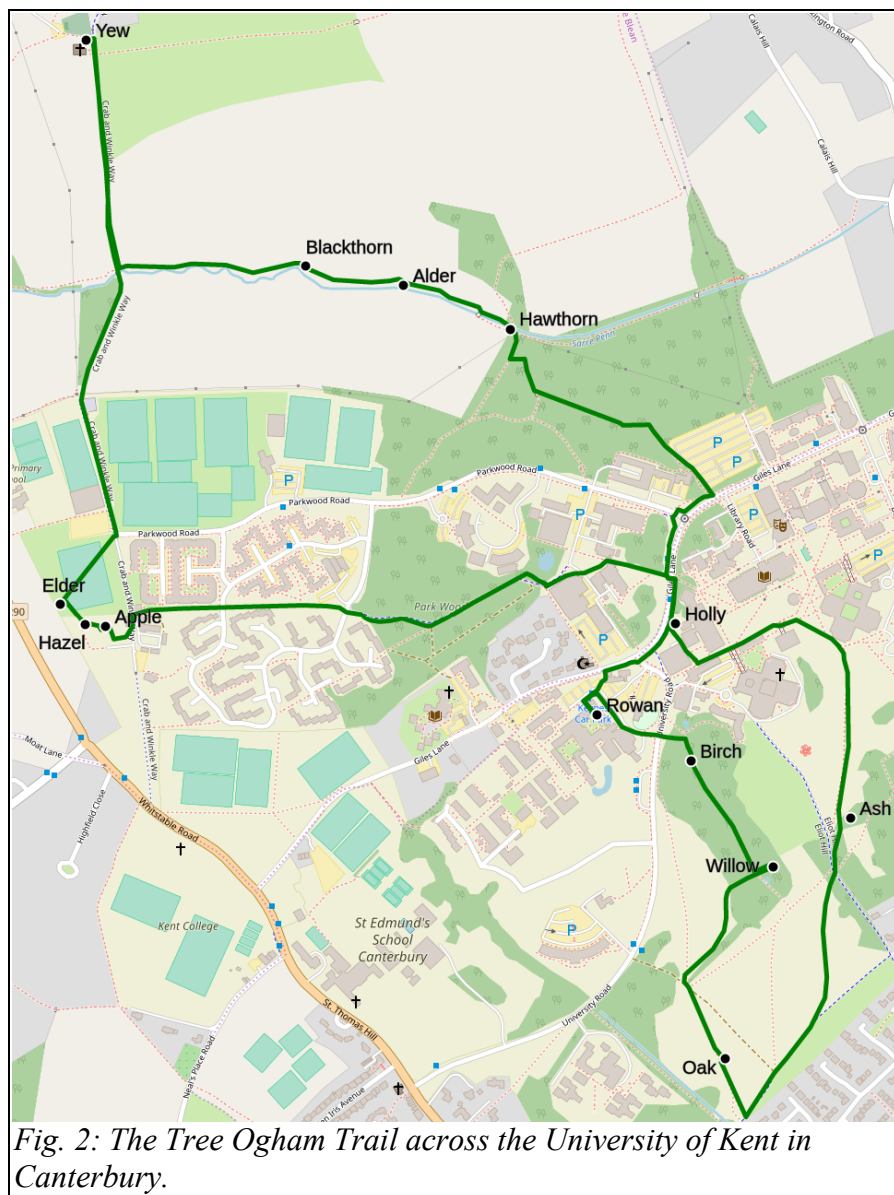




Fig. 3: Wood sign for Alder tree showing the Ogham letter symbol.

- The devise of an event, held on the 7th and 8th of October at the University, bringing together all the above participants and invited speakers (Fig. 3).
- The design of a website for the Tree Ogham Trail, <https://www.kenttreeogham.co.uk/>, presenting a manifestation of the compiled knowledge for each tree, including ecological characteristics, myths and stories, gastronomical and medicinal uses, as well as literary, historical and folklore aspects*; to be used as an informative support for the wondering wayfarers.
- The event was advertised through university mailing lists, events list and on facebook, www.facebook.com/events/1215278555243125/



Fig. 4: The poster for the Tree Ogham Trail event, held on the 7th and 8th of October 2017.

* Note: The text for a few trees and the legend on the map are still to be completed on the website.

The Event

The event started, on the 7th October, with Prof. Roy Ellen presenting the “Concept of Tree across Cultures”, followed by Dr. William Rowlandson on “What is the Tree Ogham”, at the labyrinth next to Elliot footpath. Then we started the trail, walking to the Keynes College, where Dr. Rajindra Puri introduce us to the ethnobotany of the Rowan tree, as a tree of protection. Emilia presented the Birch tree, as a tree of new beginnings, inviting participants to write on pieces of its bark in a ritualised practice. Stella Onions, MSc in ethnobotany, introduced us to the many uses, crafts and stories around the Willow tree, followed by a triptic poem by Alexander Laurence on the Willow imagery. We walked to the Oak tree, where Dr. Ian Bride presented its symbolism and key socio-ecological importance due to the multiple uses of its wood, timber and acorns. Then at the Ash tree, Ashley Mills discussed the several meanings of this tree, said to be a tree of life and death - the axis-mundis, and some of the divinatory practices associated with it through ritualising a gathering and tied together of its branches. Ashley played a music dedicated to the Ash on a fiddle, while David Luke followed with a bardic poem on the Ash magical existence, the elf king of the forest. Before the sunset, we paid the last visit of the day to the Holly tree, where Dr. Ian Bride explained its ecology as evergreen, with the resulting properties of its wood, as well as its male symbolism associated with the summer solstice, and the practices of intertwine it with Ivy in winter solstice. Along all the trail, during this day, we tasted a sour Rowan berry jam, a comforting birch leaves tea, a bitter willow leaves tea, a wholesome acorn coffee and a revitalising ash leaves tea. We ended the day with a meal around the fire in Billhook Nook educational project, where the evening welcome us with a circle of stories.

The second day, on the 8th October, we started at the Hawthorn with Ashley Mills music and a magic poem by Alison Bloomfield on three trees. We tasted just-made hawthorn bread and tea. Joana Canelas introduced the Alder tree along with celtic mythology associated with the tree, and a poem said to be a charm, from the XIII century by the bard Taliesin, “The Battle of the Trees”. The Blackthorn was revered with a “Witches Ballad”. And we followed with William Rowlandson leading the way to a pilgrimage to the two twin Yew trees, at the top of the hill, on the ground of the twin saints St. Cosmus and St. Damian church. Then we walked down the hill to meet Stella Onions, at the Elder tree, where she introduced us to the tree etnobotany while we tasted elder berry jam and elder flower cordial. Jo Barker presented the young Hazel trees that she planted on the Oasis garden. And we ended the day with a harvest ritual associated with the Apple tree, entering a circle and the magical realm with the tree – ‘me, you, apple tree’, where a storytelling with Gabrielle Fenton made us travel back on time while tasting more than 20 different local varieties of apple. The evening waited for us with a feast around the fire in the Oasis garden, where sharing stories and knowledge about these and other trees continued through the night.

The Feedback and Conclusions – a Way Forward

The event was very well received, with about 30 participants each day. Many people couldn't do it on both days, so the group was different from one day to the other, welcoming new people on the second day. The feedback was very positive and we received several requests to repeat the event next year, from both people who attended both days and people who could only attend one day. We hope that through dwelling on our ancestral relation with trees, and the knowledge they host for us, a gathering around this thematic will continue and become itself a seasonal celebration of our entwined lives. This is a creative journey's process to reveal and co-create new places with ecological, symbolical and historical meaning throughout the University's campus. A process which does not end with the end of this event nor this project, but that rather reveals and celebrates what is already there, wishing to create its own momentum unfolding the co-creation of places in which the wayfarer may experience and interact with the tree's presence, enjoy their company and learn from their history, their specific ecological, cultural and socio-economic roles on shaping our landscapes.

Places where one may find themselves playing with the natural elements of the landscape while gathering with friends or diving into a meditation which connects our existence to that of plants, through the ancestral wisdom rooted in actual living landscapes.

To potentiate such spaces and places of beyond-human interactions, re-evaluating our multispecies cultural heritage, through deepening the experience of walking in the woods, is aligned with ground-breaking areas of research in ethnobotany and multispecies ethnography, while simultaneously raises awareness on the importance of simultaneous conservation of European natural habitats, traditional landscapes and cultural heritage through a both historical and symbolical perspective. We believe this project will keep fostering interest and improve well-being in students and staff at the University of Kent as well as among the larger community of Canterbury, by providing a set of places for enjoyment and reflection on our role as human beings who ‘become with’ the non-human living landscape.



Fig. 5: Gathering around the Willow tree with Stella Onions.



Fig. 6: Discovering the Oak tree with Ian Bride.



Fig. 7: Journey through the trail and along the river to meet the Alder tree and Blackthorn.



Fig. 8: William Rowlandson, leading our pilgrimage to the Yew tree, show us the alignment of paths and trees that lead to St. Cosmus and St. Damian church.



Fig. 9: Gathering under the Yew tree, and getting to know its mythology.



Fig. 10: In a circle with the Apple tree, a story about kings, princesses and trees, while eating and then seedling an apple.



Fig. 11: Offerings to an Apple tree - being thankful for the abundance of its fruits, when the day is at dusk and we are filled with joy.