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I think the wood in question is officially called Llanblethian Down, but is known universally by local people as Mount Ida. The designation "Down", in this part of Wales, seems to have been given to land on which common rights existed. As in many other places, it was probably more extensive, but the more valuable parts will have fallen victim to the depredations of Enclosure. I have been told that the owners of certain adjoining properties have, in theory, the right to graze livestock here. It appears that the freehold of the land is held by the Vale of Glamorgan Council, and the footpaths, one along the bottom, one along the top, and two roughly diagonal, are cut back occasionally.

The wood occupies the eastern slope of a hill to the south-west of the town of Cowbridge. This hill rises to a height of 100m above sea level, and is called Llanblethian Hill on some maps. It slopes down on this eastern side nearly to the floor of the valley of the River Thaw, which is not much above sea level. (We are here only about three miles from the Tidal Limit as the Raven flies, and I mention the Raven because he nests in a Scots Pine at the top of this wood, and also because he flies far straighter than the crow).

The gentle southern side is occupied by fields and that part of the village of Llanblethian, which includes the church. The northern side is also fields except for a rather exposed strip along the ridge, too steep for cultivation, and so covered with trees.

The entire eastern side is also too steep for cultivation, which probably explains why it escaped enclosure. It was used, possibly for centuries, as rough grazing, and even sixty years ago was open land with very few trees. When grazing stopped the first change was the increased cover by bracken and gorse. This had previously been controlled by animals and by burning in the Spring, and the tradition of burning was continued, largely by mischievous children. This is still a danger, as anyone who plants trees knows.

The next stage was scrub. Hawthorn, Blackthorn, Elder and bramble, from seed brought in by birds, managed to get a hold, suppressing the bracken and therefore the danger of fire. This prepared the ground for the trees whose seeds are spread by the wind --- Field Maple, Elm and, above all, Ash.

I have detailed this history because the interesting thing is that these stages can clearly be seen in different parts of this wood to-day, so let us look at what we have here.

This wood is not large. It covers not much more than 6 or 7 hectares, but its physical conditions are enough to excite any lover of trees. The slope is generally too steep for the plough, but, in most places, not too difficult to walk up. It faces a little south of east with good shelter for sites suitable for planting. The rock is limestone with a generous covering of medium to light loam. The most developed parts are high Ash forest with areas of Blue-bell and Dog's Mercury. The chief fern, where it is too shady for bracken, is the Hart's-tongue with the Male Fern and the Common Polypody also present, the latter often on the lower branches of large trees. I'm sure a fern expert could find many more. The fact that the wood is not ancient is shown by the amount of Hawthorn still present in the undergrowth and by the youth of the Yew trees. *Clematis vitalba*, called Old Man's Beard or Traveller's Joy in English, festoons some of the trees. Holly and Hazel are well represented, especially in the lower areas. Suppressed Field Maple seedlings are seen among the big trees as part of the undergrowth, but larger specimens, capable of forming seed, occur among the thorn bushes of the transitional areas. Wych Elm is still seen, and since the Elm Disease does not always kill the root, there is a periodic regeneration. One or two specimens have managed to survive to a fair size, but I watch them with apprehension and not much hope.

The aspect of this most developed part is impressive. Tall, graceful Ash trees, the oldest ones truly massive, make a picture of established woodland that seems to be at the climax of development. But is it? There are three species many tree lovers will be wondering why I have not mentioned. Oak, Beech and Sycamore. Of the last named, many of you will agree with me, the less said the better. It is present, but not everywhere. My objection to it is not just that it is not native --- there are two Horse Chestnut seedlings in this wood that I am quite glad to see --- but that it competes too successfully with the lovelier natives. It is the grey squirrel of the tree world. (You thought the grey squirrel was the grey squirrel of the tree world? Well, yes, but you know what I mean.)

Beech has been accused, not very convincingly in my view, of not being native to Wales. That is as maybe, but I defy anyone, who knows and loves trees, to look at the site we are talking about

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without thinking immediately of Beech. The rock, the soil, the slope and drainage are all ideal. It is amazing to me that I have not found a single Beech in this wood, except for those I have planted myself, and these show their agreement with me by growing with great vigour. Approach from the direction of Llanblethian churchyard, where, incidentally you can see three magnificent specimens in their prime, and you will pass a Beech, just the other side of a wall, which is on the Woodland Trust's list of Ancient Trees, although I doubt that it is much more than 150 years. Beeches, much younger, are also to be found where the adjoining woodland, belonging to the Penllyn estate, runs westwards along the northern escarpment of the hill.

And it is exposed right at the top of this escarpment that we find one of the nearest Oaks of some age. Down in the valley bottom, also outside the wood in question, there are others, but within the wood itself I have only found three Oaks that are big enough to bear acorns. One is near the top of the diagonal path that was carved out of the hillside in the days when the inhabitants of the area around the church expected to walk into Cowbridge. A fine, vigorous tree, it stands next to a big old hollow Ash, the length of whose branches show that it began life in the open, with very little competition from other trees.

Despite the paucity of Oaks, vectors of acorns, probably jays and magpies, and, I reluctantly admit, squirrels, have been busy and one can find naturally seeded saplings in many places. It may take a long time for some of the Ashes to decline and fall to give the Oaks and Beeches their opportunity, perhaps centuries, --- always providing we have not destroyed our environment by then. In the meantime I have been planting in one of the open spaces, trying to ensure a good supply of seed for the future. If you want an example of how good this ground is: an Oak in its third growing season after planting out from a pot grew 1.30m in one year. Yes, I mean a real British, lowland Oak, *Qercus robur*, grown from an acorn from my own garden. That would be good going even for a Poplar. The only flies in the ointment are rabbits when the trees are very small, squirrels when they get bigger, and pyromaniac children while dead bracken lies around in the Spring.

I have not seen the most recent maps of the area, but those I have seen do not even name it as a wood, and only colour the northern strip green. However, anyone who wants to find it only has to go to Cowbridge, stand anywhere with a good view to the south-west, and the shoulder of the wooded hill will dominate the skyline. Approach from Geraints Way and you come into the most mature part of the wood, from Piccadilly, Llanblethian, the most open. Tree lovers might come in from Llanblethian church, around whose churchyard they will find fine specimens of Beech, Ash, Lime, Scots Pine and Yew, as well as exotics such as Monterey Cypress, Morinda Spruce, Bay-tree and *Malus hupehensis* (come in mid-May to see the last-named in magnificent bloom).

As for the wildlife, Mammals are represented, to my certain knowledge, by Rabbit, Fox, Grey Squirrel, Yellow-necked Mouse and several Bats whose species I am not expert enough to list. I feel sure that the Bank Vole and the smaller Mustelids are also here, but I have yet to find any sure sign of Badgers. I have seen Mink on the river. Of the birds seen here, Raven, Crow, Wood Pigeon, Magpie, Jay, Greater Spotted Woodpecker, Tree Creeper and the occasional Pheasant, along with the common garden birds, and the usual Warblers, all certainly nest, and I would be surprised if the Nuthatch were absent. Sparrow-hawks are here, but I have seen no evidence of breeding sites. Buzzard and Tawny Owl are often seen and heard. In Winter, Woodcock are regular visitors, and flocks of Jackdaws occasionally roost here overnight.

This account was written before the news reached us of the danger of Ash Dieback. It appears that the next stage in the cycle of this woodland, that of Oak and Beech, may well nearer than we thought.