

EXPLORING THE HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF YOUR TREESCAPE

Mourne Park case study

Authors: Annie Tindley, Claire Hickman & Andrew Phemister



Exploring the History and Heritage of your Treescape - Mourne Park Case Study

It is all very well working through the theory of historical research and its benefits, but here we wanted to present a short case study of one site in Northern Ireland, to demonstrate the value of understanding the history and cultures of a place.

The site is called Mourne Park, near Kilkeel in County Down Northern Ireland and it is owned and cared for by the Woodland Trust Northern Ireland.

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/mourne-park/>

It was a relatively new acquisition by the Woodland Trust (purchased in 2021) after being in private family hands for over four hundred years. As such, it had a rich archive, as well as an active and engaged body of volunteers and local history and culture experts in the area, which the Woodland Trust wanted to engage as much as possible.

This case study will demonstrate how historical research supported the Woodland Trust's objectives of:

- Building and engaging with their volunteer body on the new site
- Engaging the local communities of Kilkeel and the Mournes on the site
- Raising the public profile of the site
- Understanding the history of the site in order to inform planning for its future, including questions of path design, interpretation planning, and planting/land management schemes.

Getting Started

Our first step was to start investigating what kinds of historical records were available to tell us more about the site. Our first port of call was the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, which is the main archive for all of Northern Ireland. It held the records of the Kilmorey family and Mourne Park estate, which took us back to the seventeenth

century, and including lots of historical maps – including some with trees, even specific kinds of trees, marked on them, as well as lots of other documentary materials covering three centuries. These included letters, photographs, albums, diaries and financial accounts. As we might expect, the further back in time we went, the sparser the material became, but there were some very rich collections for the twentieth century.

From these historical collections we were able to build a timeline for the history of the site, including its ownership, and management as a landscape – for agriculture, as well as for forestry and pleasure. We were also able to understand how different communities had used the site over an extended period of time – from the owners to the local people.

The new owners, the Woodland Trust, were interested in understanding how the site had been used in the past so that could be factored into their restoration of it, and public access today and in the future. For example, from the historical research we provided the Woodland Trust with a map marked up with all the historical trails and paths across the site, and they based their modern path plans on this.

So, the historical research had a practical impact on modern management, but it was also instrumental in engaging local communities and Trust volunteers with the site, which after all was new to them. This kind of engagement can happen on many levels – large and small – and this case study demonstrates a few examples. However, each community is different and there are many objectives



you may have to balance in your approach. These are just some illustrative examples of the kind of activities that might be beneficial or interesting.

Archive detectives: in the archive for Mourne Park, we came across an envelope of photographs from the early twentieth century of the park, from lots of different viewpoints. They were wonderfully detailed and evocative and highly engaging. We distributed scans of the originals to the volunteer group at Mourne Park and asked if they could identify the spots from which they were taken. They were able to identify an amazingly high number, and it gave us new insight into the development of the landscape, as well as granular detail around individual trees.

Heritage and community events & activities: in order to showcase more widely the historical information, we had uncovered and also to

capture people's own memories and responses to that and the site generally, we co-designed and ran a 'Heritage Day' at Mourne Park. We designed this along collaborative principles, being very clear on the objectives of each of the participants, so that everyone was able to achieve something positive and useful. In our case, this meant the Woodland Trust team, as well as their volunteer bodies and local community groups.



We wanted the event to be as interactive as possible, so designed a 'history trail' around the site, with stopping off points including interpretive panels on key themes (e.g. the river, the scout camp, etc.) as well as a central marquee where we displayed photographs, maps and images from the historical material for visitors to enjoy.

Creative arts practice was also central to the design: visitors could take part in basket weaving, traditional children's games, and storytelling.

Building the future archive of your woodland: this was all part of the start of building an archive for the future for Mourne Park – after all, the transfer of the site from the same family that had established the estate and owned it since the seventeenth century, to the Woodland Trust, was in itself a historic act and we were keen to capture as many perspectives on that as possible, for future historians and land owners and managers.

So, as well as engaging communities with the history of the site on the Heritage Day, we took the opportunity to build our understanding of how people had been part of and understood Mourne Park over time. We designed blank postcards that people could jot down their memories for us. We also had roving mikes, enabling us to record people's memories and stories about Mourne Park.

Hopefully, this case study has shown the wide range of possibilities that History and Heritage can offer your own woodland site. It can be a highly engaging way to bring together local communities of place or interest, and also to help understand the ecological and environmental histories and decision-making which has shaped it into what it is today.