



Hazel – Tree of Knowledge

*'Among the nuts
on the hazel tree
I sing to the Salmon
In the faerie pool.*

*What is the dream
The Salmon dreams,
In the pool of Connla
Under the hazels?*

Fiona Maclead- extract from the play The Immortal Hour.

The hazel is the tree of knowledge and stories abound with her parting with it through the running waters and the flesh of the salmon. In order to assimilate these key concepts, for I'm not sure they are to be understood in literal terms, we could do no less than explore the hidden themes starting with the hazelnuts themselves, then the water that they enter and finally the salmon that consumes them. The most famous story connected to hazel is of Finn mac Cumhaill (son of hazel) from the Fenian cycle who becomes enlightened merely from sucking the juice of the salmon of Fec which was caught in a pool surrounded by nine hazel trees, the nuts of which the salmon fed upon.

Fair wood that is hazel, everyone is eating of its nuts.

Fairest of tree,

Sweetest of woods, the nut.

Friend of cracking.

Book of Ballymote 1391

The Hazelnuts.

To crack open the hazelnuts is to become a poet, this is stated in the kennings of the Hazel tree above. To be a poet is to have the bright knowledge known as **Glefiosa** flowing through your veins and to have mastered the disciplines of **Dichetal do Chenaib** (psychometric foreknowledge) **Teinm Laida** (spontaneous incantation) and **Imbas forosonai** (the soul journey). The source of this knowledge is referred to as **Caill crinmon** in Cormac's Glossary and to have obtained it is the highest privilege in Celtic society. Fionn McCuail achieved just this on the banks of the river Boyne instructed by Finnegas 'White Wisdom' as a young man. This story demonstrates how the innocent youth can bypass the arduous hours of training when blessed by the magic of the Sidhe and the Goddess Boan.

The River

Wells, fountains, streams, rivers and lakes are often doorways into the realms of the Sidhe, the ancient race of magical folk who are close to the heartbeat of Nature. These wells are closely guarded and must be shown honour and respect. Often in Celtic stories maidens will appear from them offering fine hospitality.

Boan sought to test the power of the well and as a result lost her thigh, a hand and an eye, turning seaward she became the river, Mother of Oengus, son of the Dagdha and the source of poetic wisdom. The waters therefore are seen in the landscape as the feminine for they give life to the land and return all back to the source, the sea.

*The thistledown's flying, though the winds are all still,
On the green grass now lying, now mounting the hill,*

*The spring from the fountain now boils like a pot;
Through stones past the counting it bubbles red-hot.*

*The ground parched and cracked is like overbaked bread,
The greensward all wracked is, bents dried up and dead.
The fallow fields glitter like water indeed,
And gossamers twitter, flung from weed unto weed.*

*Hill-tops like hot iron glitter bright in the sun,
And the rivers we're eying burn to gold as they run;
Burning hot is the ground, liquid gold is the air;
Whoever looks round sees Eternity there.*

John Claire

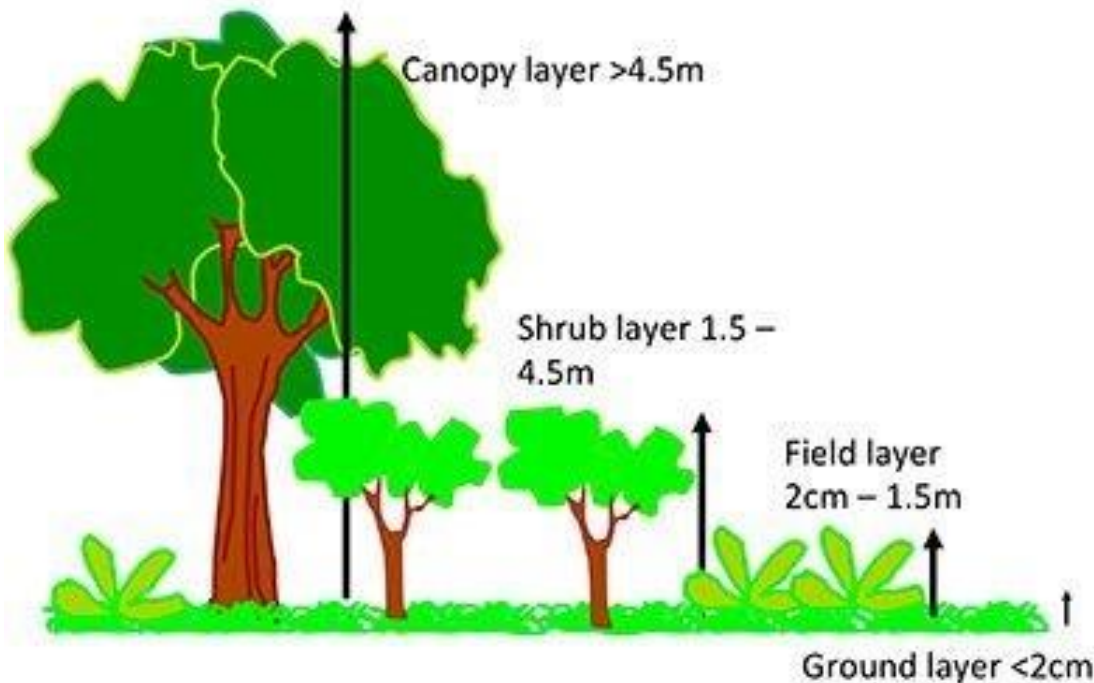
The Oldest of Animals

The poet or bard in Celtic times was the remembrancer and therefore in Celtic lore we need them as witnesses going back to the very first inhabitants of the land. In Ireland the first Bard was known as Fionntan MacBochna who arrived with Cessair, the granddaughter of Noah from the Old Testament. Fionntan lived for five and a half thousand years and took the form of a salmon, eagle and stag witnessing the stories of all the ages. The next race to arrive on the shores of Ireland where the Partholon who also had a sole survivor known as Tuan MacCairill who took the form of a stag, wild boar, bird and salmon. Tuan in a very similar fashion to Taliesin, the famous Welsh Bard was eaten by a human to become a person yet again. This cycle of lives from one form into another is called a 'Tuirgen' and connects us to the concept of memory through the oldest animals. The lineage of animals from mammal to bird and finally to fish fits in with the scientific evolution model of tracing the history of creation back to the sea. Therefore, it is the salmon which comes out of the sea flowing up the river Boyne from the primal place of birth, the sea from which we are all descended from.

Woodland Structure

In the oak tree section, we explored the deep dark depths and the importance of dead wood and invertebrates then we went on to explore in the holly section how the wild wood looked originally and the animals that once roamed there. As we enter the hazel wood we shall explore the importance of light and structure in a woodland habitat.

Structure of a Woodland.



Flowering plants of the woods.

Most woodland flowers need light to flower and therefore reproduce and thrive. Generally flowering plants of woodlands fall into three categories listed below.

1/ **Shade evaders**- The species most associated with woodlands flowering in the spring before the leaves come out. This means they evade the shade cast upon the woodland floor later in the year when the leaves fill in the gaps. Species include Bluebells, primroses, ramsons, wood anemone and lesser celandine. Although these plants have learnt to evade the shade cast by the tree leaves, a densely packed woodland would still not support them. Species within this group will vary as ramsons will tolerate more shade than the bluebell for instance.

2/ **Shade avoiders** -by far the largest group of species are the shade avoiders which include species such as yellow pimpernell, geums, foxgloves, sparges, bugle, self-heal, archangel and St John's wort as well as many species of rushes. These species wait for a gap in the canopy caused by a fallen tree. They are also the plants which grow on the edges of the woods or along the track or pathways. They are the first species to erupt when an area has been cleared of trees by felling or coppicing. Their seeds can lay dormant for many years waiting for the right

conditions to germinate. The wood spurge seeds can lay dormant and still be viable after 150 years. As with the shade evaders their ability to cope with shade will be variable and the wood spurge grows in shadier parts of the wood than say foxglove.

3/ **Shade resisters**- There are a few plants which tolerate shade fairly well such as dog's mercury, herb paris, enchanter's nightshade, dewberry and wood woundwort. However, the true resisters are a specialist group of plants which tap into the mycorrhizal fungi within the trees root system. They include bird's nest orchid, toothwort, early purple orchid, fly helleborine, ghost orchid and Yellow bird's nest orchid.

Ancient woodland indicators.

Plants which are associated with ancient woodlands are called ancient woodland indicators. Some of these plants only grow in woods over 350 years old such as wild daffodil, columbine and oxslip as well as trees such as the small leaved lime and midland hawthorn.

However, some ancient woodland indicators may appear in newer woods and when doing a flora survey, its often about how many indicators are present rather than just discovering one or two isolated species. It is also worth noting plants such as spindle only occur naturally in a hedgerow over 100 years old and pasque flowers only grow in a meadow that is over 100 years old.

Indicators will also vary from region to region or vary according to the soil. For instance, dog's mercury is an indicator in non-lime soil areas and bluebell is only an indicator in the North, the wood sorrel in the East Midlands and East Anglia.

Woodland knowledge is often about local knowledge rather than generic facts. Every woodland has its own history and specialist flora. Native trees and plants originally tend to grow in very specific geographical areas, in fact the location seems to play more of a key role than the soil type. Although we can see this with especially rare or endemic species this was once true of our common species as the five main provinces illustrate in the section on Natural regeneration.

This is still relevant today as we locate the only true native Beech in the South East of England and the only true native pines in Scotland. Specific whitebeams only grow on the Isle of Arran and the true service tree on cliffs of south Wales. Planting trees and importing species has confused the natural selection of plants and could be detrimental to our ecology as a whole. This can also be true of the flowering plants though sometimes the reason a species is only in a certain area is due to it being destroyed in other areas.

Examples of Ancient woodland indicator species:

Blue gromwell (Mendips ash woods), Cornish moneywort, lady orchids (Kent), wood calamint (Isle of Wight), caper spurge (Bedford purlieus), downy woundwort (Oxfordshire), blue sow thistle (Scotland), Irish spurge(West Country), green hounds tongue, sword-leaved helleborine, ghost orchid, wood sedge, crested cow wheat, spiked rampion, bluebell (not in the south), herb

paris, barren strawberry, primrose, figwort, wood vetch, cow wheat, bird's nest orchid, early purple orchid, wood anemone, columbine, nettle leaved bellflower, lily of the valley, small teasel, yellow archangel, wood horsetail, sweet woodruff, yellow pimpernel.

Shrub layer.

For the biodiversity of the woodland site a vibrant shrub layer is essential as detailed in the survey below our native shrubs create nectar for invertebrates, nesting for birds and fruit for many mammals and birds. The biodiversity of the wood are determined by conditions which allow a developed shrub and field layer which is only possible through the thinning and coppicing of established woods.

Native shrub list (sourced via the Tree council compiled by Jon Stokes and John White)

- 1/ Elder- *Sambucus nigra*.
- 2/ Spindle - *Euonymus europaeus*
- 3/ Wayfaring tree - *Viburnum lantana*
- 4/ Blackthorn - *Prunus spinosa*
- 5/ Dogwood- *Cornus Sanguinea*
- 6/ Guelder rose - *Viburnum opulus*
- 7/ Purging buckthorn - *Rhamnus cathartica*
- 8/ Alder buckthorn – *Frangula alnus*
- 9/ Sea buckthorn - *Hippophae rhamnoides*
- 10/ Dwarf birch – *Betula nana* (speciality of the highlands).

Canopy Layer.

A mixed deciduous wood with a defined a ground, field, shrub and canopy layer as already discussed is paramount for a good Biodiversity action plan and a healthy woodland ecology. A dense canopy will support less species and needs to be thinned. The canopy itself provides the cover for many mammals and birds to shelter and nest as discussed below. The need for native trees is to create the correct conditions is essential as explored below.

Hazel Fact File

Corylus avellana (Latin) Coll (Ogham)

Hazel like the oak has been well-used; it has played a huge part in the history of Woodsmanship in Britain. Hazel spread effectively throughout Britain after the last ice age and probably helped form a staple food for early humankind.

As we explored at the beginning of this section hazel is known as the Celtic Tree of Knowledge. It is not hard to see why the nuts (representing illumination) were so revered in a time when much of our native foods must have been bland in comparison. Hazel's connection to the life of the salmon which also represents illumination also would have followed through on a practical level as it must have also been a staple food fit for the gods!

As we trace the source of many traditions, we find they are connected to all aspects of life and it is only in more modern cultures we distinguish between the physical/practical and the philosophical/ spiritual aspects. This caused a lot of confusion to early Anthropologists as they termed indigenous people as schizophrenic as they seemed to not distinguish between one reality and another. The same could be said in rural areas where ancient beliefs still persist.

For instance, the poet and mystic William Butler Yeats in his encounters described a woodsman in Ireland thus:

‘I am not certain he distinguishes between the natural and supernatural very clearly’

Anthropologists have since revived this notion of schizophrenia, realising that although the people they studied were talking about flying and sharpening an axe in the same sentence, they were also perfectly aware that they fly in dreams and visions and sharpen an axe when fully awake in a physical reality. This probably is so obvious to them it was not worth commenting on. I feel that it is more the urbanised person who struggles with the concept of different states of reality. What is important to note is the trance/dream like state to indigenous tribes and many of our rural people not that long ago is as real as the physical state. It is only when we start to feel we can fly or disappear down holes in a physical reality we begin to open ourselves up to mental illness. Tribal and rural people who fully believed in spiritual states of being were fully aware of the difference between mental delusions and the achievements of a mystic. We shall explore this further in the folklore of the apple tree.

Spiritual work can only be effective if it is grounded in all realities physical, mental and spiritual and it often is more modern religions that separate these realities for instance by focusing on the heavenly realms rather than connecting to the deep ecology of this earth.

Bearing this in mind lets us look at the physical qualities and uses of the hazel which permeate through all the three levels of existence spoken of above.

Uses of Hazel

Hazelnuts are rich in mineral salts and can be ground to a powder to make flour. The hazelnut can also be used to soothe sore throats and relieve symptoms of a head cold.

Not only did hazel provide a rich source of food, its wood is ideal for many crafts due to it being strong, flexible and easy to split and coppice. The wood can be used to make hurdles for fencing, walls for housing, springels to hold thatch in place, stakes and supports to grow plants, fishing rods, baskets, coracles etc...

No wonder the hazel became so venerated and the traditional stories started to explore a deep spiritual aspect to its multi-faceted usage.

Unfortunately, commercial forestry does not employ hazel so extensively as it would have at one time. This is due to the shift from woodsmanship to forestry. The English forestry tradition started at the beginning of the seventeenth century fuelled by Arthur Standish who wrote pamphlets on the subject at this time. Later the works of John Evelyn heavily influenced the creation of plantations through his book *Sylva* written in 1664 with a focus on planting for timber rather than wood. Timber is any wood over 2ft in girth and therefore involves the clear felling of large trees which are then sawn to size, the main product of modern forestry. Wood is less than 2ft in girth, not processed, just cut to the right size direct from the tree. Wood production is far less labour intensive and the product of traditional woodsmanship. These terms are still employed today when describing products such as wood fires or timber buildings.

This shift is a huge loss to the welfare of our land for managed coppice wood is much more biodiverse than a forestry plantation. Bradfield woods is one of the finest examples of a working coppice in Britain today. The site has not changed for over 700 years and never been planted creating a perfect mecca for wildlife. Well-documented since 1252 it was originally owned by the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds who managed it exactly as it is still being managed today.

The coppice is cut in the winter months to allow a profusion of flowers to come to fruition in the spring. The coppice is cut in rotation on a seven-year cycle supporting a healthy invertebrate population which in turn supports birds such as the nightingale. The site supports 350 flowering plants and 42 native trees and shrubs, a perfect mecca for wildlife

Hazel today is still in demand on a smaller scale for wattle hurdles which are used for motorway fencing and in gardens. When you think it once provided building materials from houses to fences, coracles and stakes this change is drastic indeed.

The counties of Hampshire and Sussex are strongholds for hazel but on a national scale hazel is declining and is threatened due to its lack of regeneration. Neglected coppice means the tree will not flower and therefore will not fruit. When hazel does fruit the wood pigeons and squirrels will devour the nuts, often when they are still unripe meaning dropped seed will not grow.

The hazel tree as with so many of our trees needs our attention and protection as its habitat becomes neglected, this is a perfect example of how keeping our traditional crafts alive and using rather than neglecting the tree will help preserve it for future generations.

Hazel catkins mark the time of Imbolc or Oimelc (which means butter bag) as they resemble lamb's tails and this season is traditionally the time when lambs are born and sheep begin to lactate. It is also the festival of Brighid who amongst other things is the muse of poets through the hazel tree.

The hazel is connected to the elements and has lightness about it. However there is also the story of the dripping hazel tree poisoned by the head of the giant Balor (leader of the Fomhoire). This may well be a threshold tree acting as a guardian to the Other-worlds. To confront this tree is to experience your darker nature.

Hazel generally prefers a more acid soil and supports a rich flora; it will co-exist happily with honey fungus provided there is not too much shade and trees aren't planted!

Summaries for Hazel

*I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;*

*And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:*

*It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.*

*Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.*

The Song of Wandering Aengus by William Butler Yeats

Hazel is the tree of knowledge intimately known by the poet of the Celtic twilight inviting us to be open to other states of being and sharing the earth with all of creation. Hazel forms a beautiful wood supporting much wildlife if allowed to form a partnership with humankind in traditional woodland management. Studying hazel therefore is being open to the traditions of the land through the physical, mental and spiritual states of being. Being aware that these three states run through all we do in life and need not to be separated. This does not mean we sharpen our axe with prayer or enter deep states of deep meditation to coppice or use thought to build a house, it means we apply the most effective state for the task ahead knowing all is connected. In the next study of the apple we will look more into the importance of being grounded when in prayer and thought as well as in physical tasks.

Hazel invites us to enter the knowledge of the green wood and all its inhabitants!

The themes to explore with hazel therefore are:

How can I apply all three states of being to my daily life?

How can I recover lost tradition and knowledge?

What poems and stories can I share to maintain tradition or help others to connect with nature?

Deepening your connection to Hazel

If you are able to find a hazel tree and sit under its boughs or if it is small by its trunk tune into its presence has discussed before. After a little time you may wish to contemplate the loss of tradition whether it be the practical skills, the poems and stories or the prayers and rituals. Meditate with the hazel to see how you can recover this knowledge or what you personally have a spiritual affinity with and wish to bring into the world. Hazel encourages us to connect and bring our thoughts and visions into the world to create a deeper understanding. Can you share your knowledge with others that you know in a form that they understand? Is there a way you can pass something special and valuable on to the next generation to continue tradition?

Practical tasks

The ideal practical task for connecting with hazel would be to work with green wood (fresh wood that still hold moisture) to make a wand, spatula or spoon. If you are able you could learn to make a stool or chair or even a shelter. You may wish to collect or even buy some hazelnuts to have a nurturing snack and as you eat them connect with the qualities of our precious hazel tree.

If you do not have access to the tree, enjoy meditating on its form within you and enjoy the poems and stories of this companionable tree.

