

# Coillte officials guarantee no Dartrey oak cutting without agreement

WHEN contacted by the *Northern Standard* this week on the Dartrey oak trees issue, Coillte officials George Byrne (Forestry Manager) and PJ Fitzpatrick (District Manager) were both adamant that no trees would be felled prior to agreement being reached after further meetings with local people are arranged.

A Save the Oaks campaign has been set up by people in the area who want to see the last remaining 13-acre grouping of oaks in the Dartrey Estate kept intact as a 200-year-old heritage woodland amenity. Coillte say some of the trees need to be cut to allow new ones to be planted, but the objectors argue that there is plenty room for planting oaks in other parts of the estate (see separate article).

By MICHAEL McDONNELL

Coillte have acquired a licence to fell 15 oaks this year, and 70 over a period of five years. Any felling to be carried out this year would have to be completed before the end of February because of wildlife regulations.

But Mr Byrne gave assurances that no trees would be felled until further meetings were held. He pointed out that it was Coillte who called the initial meeting in November to bring the plans to the attention of the public, and argued that the organisation had been "open and honest throughout".

Mr Fitzpatrick confirmed that the 15 oaks licensed for felling this year were included in the 13-acre patch which the campaigners want to see preserved as a single woodland. But he stated that the 70 oaks for which a felling licence had been granted over the next five years were not all included in that particular section. When we asked how many of the 70 were in 13-acre woodland he would not give a specific figure. He would prefer to have the matter agreed at local meetings before it was announced in the press.

"We have to work out the numbers to guarantee that some of that stand will still be there in another 200 years," Mr Fitzpatrick said.

When we put it to him that not cutting the trees would be the best

way to guarantee this, he disagreed, and said it was not true that all oaks could last 900 years. The crowns of some trees in the Dartrey patch were already showing "wear and tear", he claimed. He could see the point being made by people who wanted the stand preserved, even at the loss of their commercial value, but he felt they not be preserved forever without some new growth being introduced.

He refuted the idea that Coillte's primary interest was in the commercial value of the oaks. But any improvements in Dartrey would have to be "self-financing".

The Save the Oaks campaigners argue that the trees in the section are in prime condition and would last for hundreds of years. They say it should be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations as the only native woodland in the area.

Significantly, Mr Fitzpatrick accepted that none of the oaks would be cut this year if agreement could not be reached before the end of February.

"There will be no cutting until agreement is reached. I am totally committed to that," he assured us.

Both officials accepted that Coillte had a poor record in planting new oaks since their organisation (then the Forestry Service) took over Dartrey in 1949. They had planted some in recent years, but these had been eaten by deer. That was why they needed to raise money for fencing around new oaks. Mr Fitzpatrick accepted that Coillte had concentrated on foreign evergreen trees in the past. But in recent years they had recognised the need to replant more native broadleaf trees such as oak.

In relation to allegations made by the Save the Oaks Committee that Coillte had breached heritage regulations by causing damage to a ring fort on the top of Dartrey's "Black Island" when fir trees were planted seven years ago, Mr Byrne said he had no knowledge of that. Coillte's policy in the past five years was not to plant within 15 metres of such sites. He accepted that "mistakes" might have been made in the past, but Coillte, like everyone else, was now becoming more mindful of archaeological areas.