SITE SYNOPSIS

SITE NAME: CLOPOOK WOOD

SITE CODE: 000860

In south County Laois, 6km south of Stradbally and 10km west of Athy, a small Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*) woodland occurs on the steep, rocky slopes of a prominent limestone hill. This area, known as the Doon of Clopook, is of considerable ecological, geological and archaeological significance.

The canopy of this dry woodland is dominated by Ash and Hazel but also contains frequent Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and Spindle (*Eunonymus europaeus*). Introduced species such as Sycamore (*Acer psuedoplatanus*) are common on the west side, but on the east side the woodland has a more natural assemblage of species.

The ground flora contains a good diversity of calcicole species and features Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*), Pignut (*Conopodium majus*), Ground-ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*), Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) and Early-purple Orchid (*Orchis mascula*). The summit of the 'Doon' is comprised of herb-rich dry grassland. Blackthorn and Hawthorn form a dense thicket on its margins.

Very rich lichen and bryophyte communities have been recorded at Clopook. Several species such as *Marchesinia mackaii* and *Cololejeunea rosettiana* do not occur elsewhere in the county. The absence of grazing animals in this wood has favoured their establishment in comparison with other woodlands in the region which have been overgrazed.

This site is also a good example of the Tertiary karst landscape of south Laois where weathering over a long period has resulted in a series of isolated limestone hills. This weathering process has created numerous solution cavities, fissures and caves in the limestone. Clopook is reported to contain many long, narrow passages but at present many of the openings have been blocked off or are overgrown. There is one broad open cave entrance at the base of the hill which has been colonised by Badgers, an internationally protected species.

Cloopok Wood is one of the only remaining intact Ash and Hazel woodlands on limestone in County Laois. It supports a rich flora and fauna including several species of regional and international importance.

In addition to its botanical and ecological significance, the summit of the hill contains a Bronze Age hillfort which features prominently in the history of the area.

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