

## The Primeval Forest

The rather aptly-named primeval forest lies adjacent to the walled garden, from where, many years ago, the original plant of *Dicksonia antarctica* self-spored to create a rainforest-like scene. This wonderful tree fern, a native of Australia and Tasmania, is commonly planted in the milder coastal gardens of Britain and Ireland, though it is in Ireland that it thrives best, particularly in south-west Kerry where they create an unparalleled exotic scene, looking every bit as happy as they would in north-west Tasmania. Old tree ferns, like those at Kells, are truly noble, with soaring thick, fat trunks carrying a parasol of fronds up to 4m (13 ft) long. Early summer is a magical time in Kerry gardens when dozens of crozier-like young fronds emerge in shuttlecock fashion from the apex of the stout trunks. Tree ferns are 'living fossils', the material that formed coal fields millions of years ago. The lifelike dinosaurs, recently carved by Pieter Koning from fallen trees at Kells, are highly appropriate in the circumstances. In Tasmania, where they are called 'man ferns', *Dicksonia antarctica* form gigantic specimens, growing beneath a canopy of blackwoods (*Acacia melanoxylon*) and the black sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*).

Several tree ferns from New Zealand have been recently planted in the primeval forest at Kells Bay beneath a canopy of oak, holly and Scot's pine - including the wheki-ponga, *Dicksonia fibrosa* and the rough tree fern or wheki, *Dicksonia squarrosa*. The former is rather tender and may succumb during hard winters such as those in 2010-'11, while the latter may be cut to ground level but re-sprout from underground rhizomes. Closely related and in the same family (Dicksoniaceae) is the South American *Lophosoria quadripinnata*, whose long elegant fronds are brilliantly silver on their undersides, in a similar fashion to the New Zealand silver tree fern, *Cyathea dealbata* (which also grows at Kells). *Lophosoria quadripinnata* is widely distributed in South America from Cuba to

Chile. I've seen it in its native Chile where it forms sheets of green and silver beneath the sub-Antarctic Forest canopy. The king fern, *Todea barbara*, is a native of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand's North Island. In its native habitat, it slowly forms a trunk up to 3 m (10 ft) tall and is extremely long lived. For example, at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin in Dublin, there is a venerable specimen no less than four centuries old. *Blechnum nudum*, the Australian fishbone fern, is another recent introduction. One of the most abundant of the Australian ferns, its common name stems from the resemblance of the fertile fronds to fish bones.

### **The Kells Bay Viewpoint**

As you wander on, stop for a moment to admire the sweeping views from the gardens across Dingle Bay with Mount Brandon in the distance. It's hard to miss the contrast between the lush cultivated garden with the Tasmanian *Acacia melanoxylon* in the foreground and the open exposed fields and lichen-encrusted stonewalls beyond. Sit on the bench for a moment and observe the surrounding vegetation. The loquat, *Eriobotrya japonica*, provides an exotic touch with its large bold leathery leaves. It rarely, if ever, sets fruits in Ireland and despite the specific epithet, it is not native to Japan, but is found truly wild in Central China.

Close-by, grows another fantastic foliage plant, *Drimys winteri* var. *chilensis*, a multi-stemmed evergreen tree that can grow to 15 m (49 ft) tall. Native to central Chile and commonly known as 'Winter's bark', it was Captain William Winter, who accompanied Sir Francis Drake to the Straits of Magellan in 1578, who first noticed that the bark (which contains high concentrations of vitamin C) acted as a powerful medicine against scurvy. It makes a beautiful sight in early summer when carrying broad umbels of ivory-white blossoms and the silvery undersides

to the leaves are spectacular when caught on the wind. Alas, it is a carrier of *Phytophthora kernoviae*, one of the most serious tree diseases to have reached our shores in recent years and, as a result, is being removed from large botanical collections.

The most striking plant visible from the viewpoint is the Chilean wine palm, *Jubea chilensis*. With its thick, fat trunk and head of feather-like fronds it has become an icon for Kells since its recent importation from Chile. It is apparently very hardy once established, a plant having grown out of doors at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though once abundant in north-central Chile, this species is now threatened, since entire trees are felled for palm wine, which is reduced to produce honey. It is becoming more widely planted in sheltered Irish gardens but is painfully slow growing.

The sheltered areas surrounding the view point harbour some interesting native Irish ferns like *Hymenophyllum tunbrigense*, a filmy fern, known in Irish as *dallán coille*. Needing extreme levels of high humidity, in Victorian times its cultivation was confined to bell jars. At Kells however, it forms cushion-like mounds over rocks and scales its way high into the surrounding oak trees.

Close-by are several plants of the cycad-like *Blechnum tabulare*, a striking fern that is indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. It occurs in the Cape, South Africa, including the famous Table Mountain from where its name originates – *tabulare* or table – the Table Mountain fern. A casual glance through this area of the garden at Kells leaves gardeners in colder climates in slight envy – tree ferns self-sporing in tens of thousands and behaving as though they were native to this favoured corner of Ireland.

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National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, Kilbride, Co Wicklow