

## Trees in our heritage

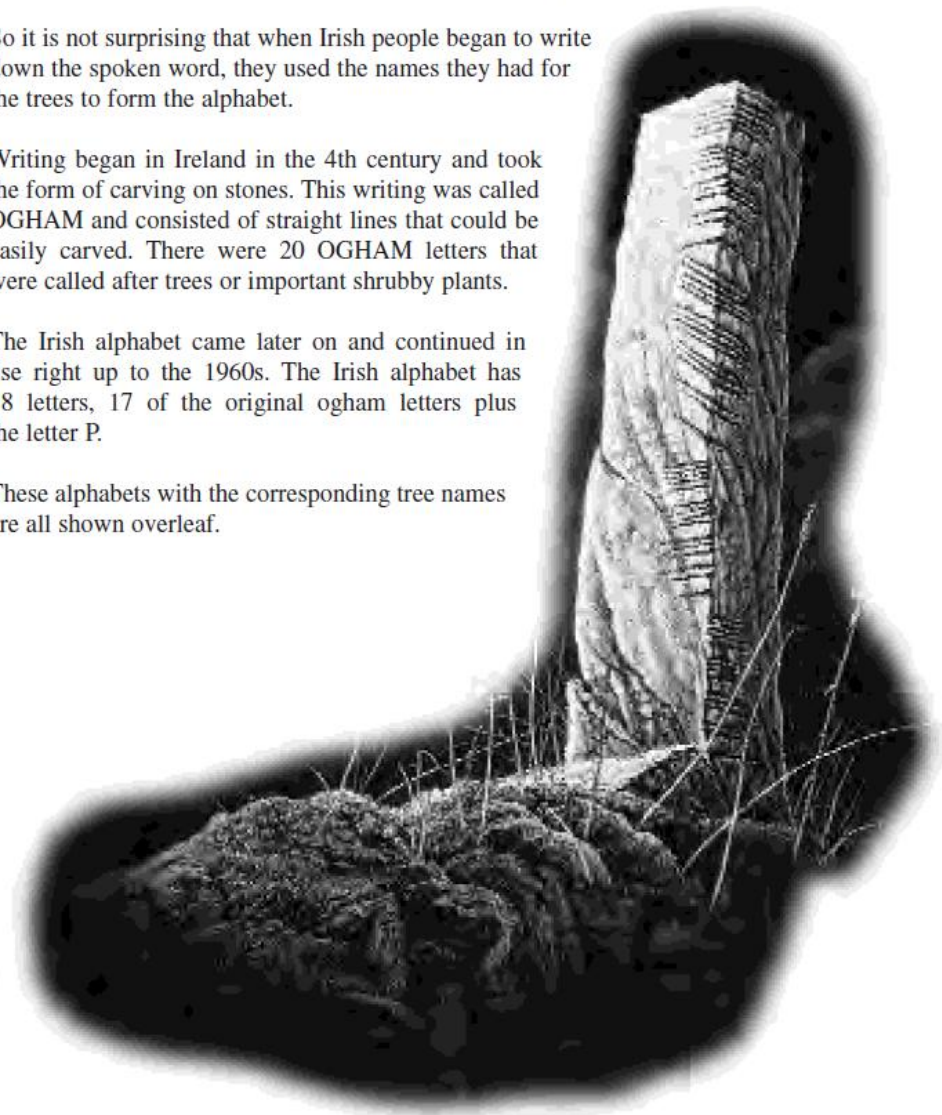
When the first people came to Ireland after the Ice Age – some 9000 years ago, they came to a country that was completely covered in woods. There were woodlands of ash and elm on the good soil, woodlands of oak and holly on the acid soil and forests of Scots pine up on the mountains. They lived, hunted and slept in these woods so of course they were very familiar with all the trees. They knew which ones were good for burning as they cooked over timber fires. They had to know which had edible fruit and nuts. They needed to know which were strong enough to make shields and wheels for chariots. They quickly found out which ones were pliable and bendy enough to make house frames, baskets and bows. And of course they knew which were magic and kept away evil.

So it is not surprising that when Irish people began to write down the spoken word, they used the names they had for the trees to form the alphabet.

Writing began in Ireland in the 4th century and took the form of carving on stones. This writing was called OGHAM and consisted of straight lines that could be easily carved. There were 20 OGHAM letters that were called after trees or important shrubby plants.

The Irish alphabet came later on and continued in use right up to the 1960s. The Irish alphabet has 18 letters, 17 of the original ogham letters plus the letter P.

These alphabets with the corresponding tree names are all shown overleaf.



# The Irish Tree Alphabet

|  |    |    |            |               |
|--|----|----|------------|---------------|
|  | I  | Í  | Yew        | <i>Iodha</i>  |
|  | E  | É  | Aspen      | <i>Eadhá</i>  |
|  | U  | Ú  | Heather    | <i>Ura</i>    |
|  | O  | Ó  | Gorse      | <i>Onn</i>    |
|  | A  | Á  | Scots Pine | <i>Aítm</i>   |
|  | R  | R  | Elder      | <i>Ruis</i>   |
|  | Z  | Z  | Blackthorn | <i>Scrúif</i> |
|  | Ng | Ng | Reed       | <i>Ngéal</i>  |
|  | G  | G  | Ivy        | <i>Gort</i>   |
|  | M  | M  | Bramble    | <i>CDuin</i>  |
|  | Q  | Q  | Apple      | <i>Quert</i>  |
|  | C  | C  | Hazel      | <i>Coll</i>   |
|  | T  | T  | Holly      | <i>Tinne</i>  |
|  | D  | D  | Oak        | <i>Dáir</i>   |
|  | H  | H  | Hawthorn   | <i>Duach</i>  |
|  | N  | N  | Ash        | <i>Nin</i>    |
|  | S  | S  | Willow     | <i>Saille</i> |
|  | F  | F  | Alder      | <i>Fearn</i>  |
|  | L  | L  | Rowan      | <i>Lus</i>    |
|  | B  | B  | Birch      | <i>Berch</i>  |



**Oak**  
represents the letter **D**



**Ash**  
represents the letter **N**



