Celtic Ogham Staves
The Celtic Ogham

The origins of the Celtic tree Ogham (pronounced OH-am) lie with the Celtic tribes who migrated to Britain from the continent around 700-500 BCE. Even though there is no evidence of any Ogham script found on the continent, there are 320 inscribed standing stones surviving in the British Isles today. Most of these are in Southern Ireland and Wales. The knowledge of the Ogham was passed down orally until it was recorded in some medieval manuscripts – the Book of Leinster in the 12th Century, the Book of Ballymote in 1391 (see picture below) and the Book of Lecan in 1416. These manuscripts mainly concern themselves with recording how the Ogham was used as an alphabet system.

The descriptions of each letter and its related tree are full of poetic and magical reference which holds many clues to their deeper meanings. There have been many suggestions as to what the Ogham was used for, the Book of Ballymote reveals how it was used as a secret sign language which used the shinbone as the central streamline and the fingers crossing it making the letters. The various descriptions of each of the letters later in this text cannot be claimed to be authentic to the Celtic Tribes, but they are relevant to today and to anyone interested in spiritual and personal development, healing and trees. The Ogham Staves can be used for divination, either for yourself or others, as a guide to working with the energies of trees and as a map to the deeper realms of the Celtic otherworld.

The Celtic Ogham alphabet is thought to be named after the Irish god Ogma. Ogham is also known as ogham craobh, beth luis fearn or beth luis nion. About 500 Ogham inscriptions have been found throughout Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England dating from between the 4th and 7th centuries AD. There are inscriptions in archaic forms of Gaelic and Pictish, which have not yet been deciphered. A handful of inscriptions featuring the Ogham script and the Latin alphabet have also been found.

Some examples of Ogham Inscriptions
While all surviving traces of Ogham are inscriptions on stone, it is believed to have been more commonly inscribed on sticks, stakes and trees. Inscriptions usually take the form of somebody’s name and the name of a place and were probably used to mark boundaries. The Ogham is most commonly associated with the Druids; they used the Ogham Alphabet for communication, sacred purposes and divination. Each consonant of the Alphabet represented a moon cycle; therefore, the Druid year was comprised of thirteen months. The extra day was a "non-calendar" day of ritual, used to "renew" the year.

**Features of the Ogham**

- It’s an alphabetic writing system
- Has 25 letters, although only 20 are used for Divination purposes.
- Usually written on Wood, stone and manuscripts
- The inscriptions around the edges of rocks runs from bottom to top and left to right. When written on manuscripts it runs from left to right and horizontally.
- Letters are linked together by a solid line.
- The names and sounds represented by some of the letters are still unknown.
- The Eite (feather) and Eite thuathail (reversed feather) symbols are used at the beginning and end of sentences respectively.

![A set of Ogham Staves](image)

The aspect of Ogham we are looking at is as a divination tool. Divination is the art of gaining information/knowledge from a physical object such as Oghams staves, Runes & Tarot cards to name but a few. Ogham staves are a popular method of divination among Pagans who follow a Celtic-focused path. Although there are no records of how staves might have been used in divination in ancient times, there are a number of ways that they can be interpreted. There are 20 original letters in the Ogham alphabet and five more that were added later on. Each corresponds to a letter or sound, as well as a [tree or wood](#). In addition, each of these symbols has come to be associated with various meanings and elements of the human experience.

Ogham Staves are easy to make and later in this text are instructions on how to make your own. No trees need suffer a loss if you’re prepared to look around for fallen branches, twigs etc. If you want to make your staves from certain types of wood and need to get them from trees or bushes, please remember to ask the plants permission first. Stand close to the tree with your hands resting gently on it, you can even give it a hug if you want, it’s a great experience and bonding with the tree may help it decide to allow you to use it’s wood. Remember to always be respectful and explain why you would like to use some of its wood for your staves. Be aware of the trees energies and if it would rather not give a part of itself to you, accept this decision gracefully and try again with another tree.
This is what the Ogham alphabet looks like:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ogham</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Beth / Birch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Birch is one of the first trees to grow on bare soil and thus it births the entire forest. Children's cradles were made of Birch. The tree bark is white, the inner bark provides a pain reliever and the leaves are used to treat arthritis. Criminals were at one time birched to drive out evil influences on them, to renew them for the New Year. Axe handles were also made from Birch. The Amanita Muscaria grows well under the Birch. Birch indicates new beginnings.

**Physical:** You must rid yourself of negativity, unhelpful influences and bad thoughts for a new, fresh start.

**Mental:** Concentrate on your desire, the image of the result wanted must be held firmly in mind.

**Spiritual:** For a new beginning focus on the white of the birch, it stands out clearly from distractions and obstructions.
Luis / Rowan

The Rowan tree is long known for aid and protection against enchantment. Sticks of the Rowan were used to carve Runes on. It was also used in the art of metal divining. Rowan spays and crosses were placed over cattle in pens and over homes for protection. Its lovely red berries feed the birds in winter. The berries have a tiny pentagram on them. The pentagram is the ancient symbol of protection. The Rowan tree indicates protection and control of the senses from enchantment and beguiling.

**Physical:** You will keep your senses about you to distinguish good from bad, and harm from help.

**Mental:** You will not be swayed, tricked or beguiled. Keep your wits about you.

**Spiritual:** Your strength will turn away anything that threatens your purpose and your serenity. Be not afraid.

Fearn / Alder

This tree is a water lover. The oily water resistant wood has been used extensively for underwater foundations and pilings in Venice and elsewhere. It is used in dairy vessels and the branches in making whistles. It is associated with Bran, as He used His body as a bridge to span dangerous waters. It is used in the construction of bridges. Bran's Head was oracular. Alder indicates protection and oracular powers.

**Physical:** Be aware of uniqueness in self and others. Keep your eyes open to see the unusual and acknowledge what is seen in another if at all possible.

**Mental:** You will utilize something you previously overlooked. Oracular skills are not easy to acknowledge. The mind is unwilling at times to deal with the intuitive part.

**Spiritual:** You offer spiritual aid and protection in a dispute. Let your intuition guide you.

Saille / Willow

The willow is another water loving tree. Willow bark contains Salicin which is used in the treatment of rheumatic fever and various damp diseases. Her catkins, which appear in early spring before her leaves, attract bees to start the cycle of pollination. She indicates cycles, rhythms and the ebb and flux.

**Physical:** A comfortable relationship to the material world is full of lessons and cycles of changing values. Change is necessary for growth, and values are no exception to the rule.

**Mental:** To gain understanding of a particular concept, a steady accumulation of facts is the foundation that brings understanding. All cannot be learned in one lesson. Repetition is the key.

**Spiritual:** This is a period of taking it easy rather than full speed ahead. Learn to play with the cyclical nature of things.
Nuin / Ash

The Ash tree has the toughest, most elastic wood. It is used in weaver's beams. Women would weave cloth and intermingling threads together in a tight pattern as the microcosm and the macrocosm are united. The Ash tree indicates the linking of the inner and outer worlds.

Physical: Your actions echo in the cosmos as a stone thrown in a pond casts ripples. Know you and the world are interconnected. Be aware of the effect of your actions.

Mental: Your problems or questions are not yours alone; others have the same ponderings. Look at the question in the wider context and ask opinions.

Spiritual: Endeavour to become aware that all things are connected. Balance your need with the Earth’s.

Huatha / Hawthorn

The wood from the Hawthorn provides the hottest fire known. Its leaves and blossoms are used to create a tea to aid with anxiety, appetite loss and poor circulation. This small tree can create dense thickets and have thorns that are an excellent defence. The Hawthorn signifies cleansing, protection and chastity.

Physical: You need to work upon the physical condition of yourself. To better yourself you need to alter diet, smoking or eating properly. Healthy body can be attained by diet and exercise. A healthy body means a healthy mind.

Mental: You must open your mind to the self-imposed thickets of ignorance and false facts. Free your thoughts and cleanse your mind.

Spiritual: However hot the problem, the forge heat of overcoming it, in your spirit creates new and unexpected strengths.

Duir / Oak

The grand Oak, King of the Forest, grows slowly. Its dome shape and clean, straight trunk make it known on the horizon. Its wood is hard and tough and it burns slowly. Acorns when processed feed humans. Druids taught lessons under the Oak. Duir means doorway. This tree indicates protection - a doorway to mysteries and strengths.

Physical: A hands-on approach will nurture the skills you wish to have. Step through the door, one learns by doing.

Mental: You have accumulated acorns of wisdom, the time for dropping and sharing your wisdom is here.

Spiritual: You as a teacher or student must be tough and resilient despite life's unpredictability as an Oak is to the bolt of lightning. Strong and wise.
Tinne / Holly

The Holly is an evergreen bush with bright red berries. It is one of the three timbers used in the construction of chariot wheel shafts. It was used in spear shafts also. The qualities of a spear shaft are balance and directness, as the spear must be hefted to be thrown the holly indicates directed balance and vigour to fight if the cause is just.

**Physical:** Challenges will be overcome with unity and concerted effort. Ensure the cause is just.

**Mental:** As warriors train and retrain until what they do with spears is instinctive, so you too must train and learn daily.

**Spiritual:** Cultivate dynamic and instinctive intuition to respond to fast moving situations and accept the reality of here and now. Ensure the ability of slipping in and out of a great variety of behaviour styles, to be able to respond to the environment at hand.

Coll / Hazel

The Sacred Salmon is associated with the Hazel tree in legend. The Salmon swimming under the overhanging Hazel trees ate the 9 nuts of poetic wisdom. The number of spot on the Salmon's side denoted the number of nuts eaten. The Hazel tree provided shade, protection and baskets. Hazel twigs were used for divining because of their pliancy and affinity with water. Hazel indicates intuition to lead to the source, poetry, divination and meditation.

**Physical:** Your skill in poetry, divination and meditation allows you to inspire others to increase their capacity in these arts. Example is the best teacher.

**Mental:** Allow the promptings of your intuition to bring ideas to the surface. Become a catalyst with those ideas.

**Spiritual:** Follow your intuition to the source, you will be rewarded with wisdom and your soul will ring with poetry.

Quert / Apple

The Apple is the earliest cultivated tree. It is associated with choice. At Somerset, an auction was held for single acre plots on two pieces of common land. Plots were marked and matching marks made on the fruit. The apples were then placed in a bag and commoners were allocated land by the distribution of the fruit. All the acres of land were similar, as many times today choices must be made between similar and equally attractive things. Regardless, the choice must be made. Apple indicates choice.

**Physical:** Choice, while not easy, is necessary. Stop procrastinating; you will end up with nothing or an unsatisfying taste from each choice.

**Mental:** Many paths of learning are open to you - choose one! Better master of one than expert of none.

**Spiritual:** In your journey choose one of the Eight Paths to complete the others will follow.
Muin / Vine

The Vine has been known and grown in the British Isles for a long time. Its distinctive fruit and foliage appear on Bronze Age artifacts. The grapes of the Vine are the supply of wine. The effects of wine are well known. Wine loosens inhibitions and allows one to speak more truthfully than normal. The Vine indicates the release of prophetic powers.

Physical: Unwind, if you then sense at a deep level that you must act in a certain way at this moment in order to deal with an issue; let intuition be your guide and do it.

Mental: Allow your senses to open to speed inner development as you learn to place trust in them when they are acting strongly. Instead of using reason constantly.

Spiritual: Open your inner self so it may harvest and gather all signs and omens that it is capable of understanding. Allow yourself this boon.

Gort / Ivy

Ivy is capable of growing and spreading in any land climate conditions. It is strong and difficult to destroy. Growing in a helix pattern it represents the spiral of the self and the search for the self. Ivy symbolizes the soul's wandering inward and outward seeking nourishment and experience from both the inside and out to achieve enlightenment. Ivy indicates the search for the self.

Physical: Link with others turn out this is not the time to be alone.

Mental: Recognize group unconscious has an influence on you, absorb, go inward to learn more about the self.

Spiritual: Enter group mind with joy, assist others in their spiritual journey as they assist in yours. We all are intertwined as the Ivy, their success is yours and vice versa.

Ngetal / Reed

Reed grows in clumps at the river's edge. Reed resembles an arrow by its thinness. It was at one time used to make arrows. It is symbolic of music, bagpipes and flutes. In the winter the villagers rethatched their roofs with reed for security in the cold ahead. Weavers used reed to separate threads and to beat the fibres before spinning. Reed indicates direct action, and finding direction and meanings to the purpose of your journey.

Physical: You are able to find order where others find and create only chaos. Put this valuable skill to work. Take charge.

Mental: Your results are as sure as the intentions with which you began. Keep your target in sight. Do not be distracted.

Spiritual: Your journey has begun; surprise encounters and upsets are only to be expected. The skills you overcome these troubles with are as valuable as the trip itself.
**Blackthorn**

Blackthorn is a winter tree. The sloe, its fruits ripen and sweeten only after the nip of the frost. White flowers are seen even before the leaves in the spring. It is black barked with vicious thorns and grows in dense thickets. The wood is used in the cudgel shillelagh and Blasting Stick. Its thorns are used to pierce waxen images. Blackthorn indicates strong action of fate or outside influences that must be obeyed.

**Physical:** Unexpected change, plans altered or ruined. No choice however unpleasant. Events take over forcing you down the unavoidable path. Take courage, issues must be faced, decisions are unavoidable.

**Mental:** Your negative view, clinging to old ways and facing challenges with anger and stubbornness will only make it worse and hurt you more. Accept the changes and move on.

**Spiritual:** Realize you and your life have changed radically, enter reborn.

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**Elder**

Elder regrows damaged branches with ease and can root rapidly from any part. A tea for purifying the blood can be made from the flowers and wine from the fruit. Sticks of Elder were used as magical horses by Witches. Elder indicates the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end. Life in Death and Death in Life.

**Physical:** Though one aspect of your life is over, another begins anew.

**Mental:** Changes from the old will bring creativity, to usher in new ideas and thoughts.

**Spiritual:** Links are continually formed as new phases of life and experience repeat in different forms that lead to renewal.

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**Silver Fir**

Fir is a very tall slender tree that grows in mountainous regions on the upper slopes. Fir cones respond to rain by closing and the sun by opening. Fir can see over great distance to the far horizon beyond and below. Fir indicates high views and long sights with clear vision of what is beyond and yet to come.

**Physical:** In this issue you can see what is beyond and what is coming. You have the perception to see and to understand from the point where you stand. Take long view point and foresee the future.

**Mental:** Receive from the past and present strength and healing from which to draw insight and knowledge for your future.

**Spiritual:** Be aware of your progress on your spiritual voyage.
Furze is a yellow flowering shrub that grows on the moorland and common land. It blooms throughout the year. The flowers are plentiful in pollen and nectar and give off a strong sweet aroma of honey. The flowers are frequented by the first bees of the year. The bruised shoots provide food for the horses. In the spring Furze is set on fire to burn away the old growth to make room for the new. Furze indicates a gathering together, a skill at collecting elements needed for a goal.

**Physical:** Your search is over. What you seek shall be found. Continue on towards your goal.

**Mental:** Share the knowledge you have gathered, as the bee shares pollen and nectar gathered from the Furze.

**Spiritual:** There is an abundance of blessings in your spiritual voyage, do not stockpile and hoard. Share with others, you will be rewarded.

Heather grows on top of peat moss, which provides fuel after it is cut and dried. Heather blossoms are used in the brewing of tea. The blossoms also attract bees and are valuable as a source of honey unsurpassed in flavour and delicacy. The bee travels from the heather back to the hive in relation to the position and angle of the sun. It is regarded as a messenger from and to the Spirit world by the Celts. Heather indicates closer contact with the Spirit world and healing.

**Physical:** Listen to your body's message. The time for healing is now.

**Mental:** Do not permit yourself further stress. Go inward for healing and respite. This issue can wait.

**Spiritual:** Integrate inner with self to heal and be whole, to build the foundation for what will follow.

The Aspen / White Poplar flourishes beside rivers, in marshes and in other watery areas. The pith is star shaped. The upper leaves are green, the underside is silver. The wood was used in the making of shields. Leaves move with every puff of wind. It is commonly referred to as the talking, whispering and quivering tree. The Poplar's ability to resist and to shield, its association with speech, language and the Winds indicates an ability to endure and conquer.

**Physical:** Whatever challenge you now face, you will endure and conquer with determination. You can bend and not break.

**Mental:** Shield your thoughts from the fears and doubts about the odds you must overcome. A positive attitude will prevail.

**Spiritual:** Do not give in to worldly pressures, great assistance is yours on your journey to rebirth.
Ioho / Yew

The Yew is an evergreen tree with the leaves attached spirally to the twigs. As the outer tree decays a new tree grows within. The branches grow down to form new stems. Yew timber is dark and very strong. Yew berries were used to poison weapons. Wine barrels were constructed of Yew to symbolize the death of the Vine. Yew was also used in the manufacture of bows. Yew indicates rebirth.

**Physical:** Something held for many years must be passed on, let go. It serves you no longer.

**Mental:** The knowledge that nothing lasts forever will bring ease at this time.

**Spiritual:** Changes are coming to you, you have a tendency to try and hang on, let go and experience the change as an ally not an enemy.

## How to Make Your Own Ogham Staves

### What You Need:

- 25 or 26 sticks of equal length
- Images from the Ogham Symbol Gallery
- Paint, a knife, or wood burning pen (*& varnish to cover the symbols if you paint them on*)
- A pouch to keep your staves in, I recommend waiting until you've made your staves to get or make a pouch, this is to make sure it's the right size to hold them.

To make your own set of Ogham staves, start with sticks or twigs in even lengths. You'll need 25 of them, or 26 if you want to include a "blank" Ogham. If you have trouble finding sticks that are the right size, you can use dowel rods cut to short lengths. About 4 - 6” is a good size for Ogham staves.

Inscribe each of the sticks with one of the Ogham symbols. You can do this either by carving them into the woods, painting them on, or using a wood burning tool. If you paint the symbols on, remember to use a non water based paint or it will wear off, or, you could put a thin coat of clear varnish over the painted symbol.

Consecrate your staves by visualising them swathed in white light and affirm that you are cleansing the staves of all previous energies. Once this is done, keep the white light on them and ask a Divine blessing on them and affirm that they will only be used for positive purposes.

There are a number of methods to reading the staves for divination, and you can figure out what works best for you. Many people like to simply keep their staves in a pouch, and when a question comes up that needs to be answered, they place their hand in the bag and pull out a designated number of staves. Three is a good number to use, but you can pick as many or as few as you like.

I hope you enjoy making your own Ogham Staves and have some interesting experiences using them.