

CULTIVATION **FORESTRY**

Before the arrival of humans, most of Scotland – apart from the higher hill-tops – had been covered in forest. In the north and north-west this was mostly coniferous Scots pine, in the south and east mixed deciduous trees, dominated by oak. By medieval times, substantial inroads had been made into the forest, without replanting. The term *forest* appears in several places, such as Ettrick Forest, Selkirkshire or the Forest of Atholl, Perthshire, but in this context the term refers not to woodland but to hunting reserves.

Visitors to Scotland in the 17th and early 18th centuries were struck by the apparently treeless landscape, though their impressions referred only to the more accessible parts of the country, where cultivation and grazing had all but eradicated woodlands. There were, however, still substantial native Scots pine woods in the Highlands, beyond the reach of most visitors and protected from exploitation by their remoteness.

Others *were* aware of their potential. From the 16th century onwards, there are scattered references to sawmills, principally around the Great Glen and the catchments of the River Dee, Aberdeenshire, the River Tay, Perthshire and the River Spey, Moray/Inverness-shire, from which timber could be exported by floating.

In time, even these remote woods came under pressure. One facet of agricultural *Improvement*, during the 18th and early 19th centuries, was re-forestation. The 6th Earl of Haddington was a prolific planter of trees on his Tynninghame, East Lothian estate. He also wrote *A Treatise on the Manner of Raising Forest Trees*, published in 1761. Besides their value as timber, trees were also planted by Improvers to form shelter belts (to reduce exposure on cultivated ground) and as 'amenity' planting, to beautify the surroundings of their country houses.

However, it was not until the aftermath of World War I (1914-18), that the re-forestation of Scotland really got underway. During the War, the shortage of timber from British sources became all too apparent. In response, a state-run body, the Forestry Commission, was established in 1919 to buy up land and plant it with trees, mainly fast-growing coniferous softwoods.



Extensive areas, mostly on poorer ground, were ploughed and planted with conifers – as seen in this picture at **Mossilee Farm, nr Galashiels**.

Considerations of beauty and amenity were not at the forefront, resulting in densely planted blocks which little could penetrate and little else could flourish in.

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When war broke out again, in 1939, few of the plantations were ready to exploit.



Forestry planting, nr Auchindrain, Argyll © West of Scotland Archaeology Service via SCRAN



Scottish forest, felled to meet wartime timber requirements © Hulton Getty via SCRAN

Since the end of World War II, in 1945, attitudes have softened and the role of the state forests has diversified. Consideration is now given to the appearance of the planted woods and attempts have been made to promote their potential through the designation of forest parks – as in the Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Stirlingshire/Perthshire and the Argyll Forest Park. On the minus side, favourable tax regimes have encouraged private forestry, not always with the same sensitivity to the ecological damage caused. The controversy over the attempted afforestation of the Flow Country, in Caithness, was a case in point.

Beyond the forests themselves, afforestation, both public and private, has left other legacies in the landscape. As the estate plantings of the 18th and 19th centuries came to maturity, sawmills, mostly powered by water, were built in hundreds of localities. This picture (on the next page) shows sawmill workers at the **Garroch estate, Dalry, Kirkcudbrightshire**.

Many such sawmills survive. The needs of the labour force in the Commission's forests led to the building of houses and, in a few cases,



villages – as in Ae Village, Dumfries-shire. With earlier-20th century plantations coming to maturity, facilities were set up to process them.



A pulp and paper mill was built at Corpach, near Fort William, Inverness-shire to exploit this new resource.

Finally, in recent decades, there have been moves to preserve the last fragments of Caledonian pine forest and native oak-wood.

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To find out more:

Anderson, M.L. *A History of Scottish Forestry*. 2 volumes, London, 1967

Smout, T.C. *Nature Contested* Edinburgh, 2000

Looking at Woods and Forests

Woods and forests, and indeed most trees in Scotland, are where they are because someone decided to put them there. Very few woods date back to before people arrived.

Trees were not just planted at random. As you pass through the countryside, you can ask why each plantation has been put where it is.

Large woods are planted for timber, usually on land which has little agricultural value. In the past, this meant moors and hills. In the 1990s, when the prices of farm produce fell, some farmers started to have trees planted on grazing land.

Look at:

- **The quality of the soil**
- **The species of tree which has been planted**
- **The age of the trees**

Usually, you can ignore questions of transport. Timber only has to be moved once, after it has been felled, and it can be shifted by road or rail. In the past, it was floated down rivers such as the Spey and the Aberdeenshire Dee. But transport does not affect where the trees were planted.

It is also worth thinking about settlements that are found near forests. A few were built deliberately to accommodate forest workers.

Smaller blocks of trees will be used for timber when they mature, but they have other purposes. A narrow band of trees along the side of a field is probably a shelter belt, intended to give protection against the wind. Sometimes trees are laid out in avenues purely because they are attractive, or they may be planted around big country houses to improve the scenery. Occasionally wealthy people have collected unusual trees from other countries because they are interesting in themselves, forming an arboretum.

If you look at a large-scale map you can find some interesting names. For example, 'Fox Covert' indicates a small plantation which was intended to encourage foxes in the days when they were hunted. Shelter belts can be easily found on a map.