

# **THE FOREST HERITAGE OF BIRSE PARISH**

## **A Report for Birse Community Trust**

by  
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### **PREFACE**

This report describes some of the main features of the forest heritage of Birse parish on Deeside. The parish covers over 125 sq.kms (50 sq.mls.) and forms part of the eastern edge of the Grampian Highlands.

The report has two main aims:-

- (a) to illustrate the distinctive and rich character of the parish's forest heritage: &
- (b) to help raise awareness of this heritage both locally and more widely.

The report was commissioned by Birse Community Trust (BCT), a local charity that exists to promote the common good of the inhabitants of Birse parish and deliver wider public benefits.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Setting the Scene

The nature of what is meant by 'forest heritage' and the richness of Birse's forest heritage are most readily demonstrated by the combination in the parish of three nationally important features:-

- The native pinewood that still survives in the Forest of Birse Commonty and Glen Ferrick, which is the most easterly and one of the largest remnants of Caledonian Pinewood in Scotland;
- The three nineteenth century water powered wood-working mills that continue to operate within the pinewood area and which have no surviving equivalents elsewhere in the UK;
- The ancient rights over the pinewood in the Forest of Birse Commonty that are used to harvest trees from the pinewood to supply the mills and which are an unique set of rights in Scots Law

The survival of the pinewood, the mills and the ancient rights and their continuing integrated operation, is an impressive aspect of Birse parish's forest heritage and one which is given added interest by the fact that it is the local community through Birse Community Trust which holds the ancient rights, manages the pinewood and operates the mills.

It is only relatively recently, however, that this combination of the pinewood, mills and ancient rights has started to be recognised as an important component of Scotland's heritage. Ten years ago, for example:-

- The native pinewood had not been recognised as one of Scotland's surviving remnants of genuinely native Caledonian Pinewood and was unmanaged;
- Two of the water mills had been largely abandoned, one of them in a major state of disrepair, and the third mill was under threat of closure;
- Few people had any knowledge about ancient rights over the Forest of Birse and most of these individuals considered that the rights had ceased to exist long ago.

Against that background, there has been a remarkable transformation in a relatively short period in the status of the rights, the condition of the mills, the management of the pinewood and the recognition of their importance as part of Scotland's forest heritage.

The purpose of this report is to build on that transformation and set the pinewood, mills and rights in a wider context by identifying other interesting features of Birse parish's forest heritage. Some of these are of national importance in their own right and many have links with other aspects of the parish's forest heritage, so adding further to the significance of the whole.

Birse parish's forest heritage is not just about the Native Caledonian Pinewood, Ancient Commonty Rights and Historic Wood Mills, but also about record-breaking trees, medieval sheilings and many other features described in the following pages.

## 1.2 Structure of the Report

The report has two main sections describing aspects of Birse's forest heritage and then a final section drawing together conclusions about the parish's forest heritage as a whole. That heritage can be considered to have two main types of components:

- *physical aspects*, including trees and woodlands, related artifacts and landscape evidence;
- *cultural aspects*, including knowledge of the area's woodlands and their history, traditions and similar information;

The first main section deals with woodland history, which in the area covered by Birse parish can be divided into three main periods:-

- *Pre-History* – c.9,000 years from the colonisation of the area by trees c.10,000 years ago following the end of the last Ice Age, to the beginning of historic records about Birse c.1,000 years ago.
- *Medieval Period* – c.600 years from 1000 years ago (11<sup>th</sup> century) to the end of the 1600s (17<sup>th</sup> century) and the complete deforestation of the Forest of Birse.
- *Modern Era* – c.300 years from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the local pattern of estate forestry to the present time.

The second main section covers a range of other aspects including the parish's surviving native woodlands, notable trees and woods and the extent and nature of local involvement with the parish's woodlands and their management.

The aim in these two main sections is not to try and write the woodland history of the parish or provide comprehensive lists of the other features. The aim has been more limited - to identify those elements in each case that make a distinctive contribution to the overall forest heritage of the parish. In the instances where fuller information is available about particular elements which have been identified, then that further information is referenced in the text.

The scope of what might be considered to contribute to the forest heritage of a parish such as Birse, is very wide ranging. It is therefore necessary to recognise the exploratory nature of this report. The topic has not been tackled here before and, despite the increasingly widespread use of the term "forest heritage", no templates appear to exist from elsewhere to define the topic or categorise what might be considered to be encompassed within it.

It is hoped that the report will stimulate interest in the topic locally and lead to extra information and features being identified, as there are a number of people in the parish who have a particular knowledge of the area's woodlands and their history and management. For BCT, the report is a start on a topic which is of particular interest in Birse and for which the parish is also of particular note for people elsewhere with an interest in the topic. The report is not an attempt to produce a definitive statement, but to contribute to the conservation and continued development of the parish's forest heritage.

The final section considers on the basis of the information presented in the two main sections, the key features that characterise the forest heritage of Birse parish and the importance of these features both locally and more widely.

## 2. WOODLAND HISTORY

### 2.1 Pre-History (10,000 – 1,000 years ago)

#### 2.1.1 Surviving Evidence

Little is known directly about the pre-historic forest that existed for c.9,000 years in the area of Birse parish. However, two forms of local evidence exist:-

- (a) The *physical remains* of the forest that still survive in peat deposits in the parish. These include the pre-historic tree stumps and roots that can be seen in the eroding peat hags at the head of the Burn of Corn in the Forest of Birse (OS ref. 496508). There are also likely to be the other such pre-historic remains in local peat mosses ranging from whole trees, such as the large pine and oak which were dug up from time to time during peat cutting in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Callander 2000, p.95 et seq.), down to the surviving microscopic pollen.
- (b) The other surviving remnants of the prehistoric forest are the *semi-natural trees and woodlands* that still grow in the parish now. These are the genuinely native trees that have continued to survive by natural regeneration from generation to generation from the trees that colonised the area naturally in the post-glacial period. Birse parish is relatively rich in genuinely native trees and woodlands (section 3.1) and thus the genetic descendants of the trees in the pre-historic forest.

The surviving semi-natural trees and woodlands might be considered to give some broad indications of the nature of the pre-historic forest, for example: from the pinewood in the Forest of Birse with its component of oak at the Finlets, to the mixed broadleaved woodland beside the River Dee at Quithel Wood. There are also the apparently relic distributions of some species such as aspen and hazel.

However, an invaluable key to understanding the evolution and development of the pre-historic forest is the pollen record laid down in the parish's peat deposits.

#### 2.1.2 The Pollen Record

Descriptions of the potential development and evolution of the prehistoric forest in Birse, dominated by pine and birch on the higher ground and oak woodland lower down, have been written by Callander (2000, p.95 et seq.) and Carter (2000).

These descriptions are based on the conclusions that can reasonably be drawn for Birse from the results of pollen cores taken from Loch Braeroddach ten kilometres to the north west, near Dinnet, and related evidence from elsewhere.

No pollen cores have been taken in Birse itself to investigate the composition and extent of the forest at different times during that 9,000 period and this is something that BCT has tried to pursue.

In 2000, the researcher who carried out the work on pollen cores from Loch Braeroddach in the 1970s for his doctorate thesis, Kevin Edwards, returned to Aberdeen University as a professor. BCT made contact with him and he visited Birse to investigate the potential for taking some pollen cores in the parish. While Powlair Moss in Finzean was seen as one potentially site with suitable peat deposits, it proved difficult to find one or two others to give a fuller basis for interpreting the local evidence. Thus, to date, no cores have been taken.

### 2.1.3 Human Settlement

While trees colonised the area covered by Birse parish c.10,000 years ago, it appears that the maximum extent of woodlands in the area was around c.7,000 – 8,000 years ago. That was the optimum climatic period for tree growth in Scotland and it is likely that the whole area of Birse was covered by forest then, as even the highest local hills were below the natural tree line at that time.

However, archaeological evidence from Birse and the surrounding area also shows that by that time, the forest was already being affected by human use. By 8000 years ago, the area was frequented by groups of nomadic, mesolithic hunter gatherers (Callander, 2000, p.82 et seq.). The first evidence of permanent settlement then comes from c.6,000 years ago, when the area was settled by neolithic farmers.

The amount of archaeological evidence in Birse is greater in turn for each subsequent period (ie. Bronze Age from c.4,000 years ago, Iron Age from c.2,500 years ago) and these remains reflect that each of the three main straths in Birse must have already been well settled before the end of the pre-historic period c.1,000 years ago.

That settlement pattern was concentrated in the same main areas of settlement in the parish today. The distribution of the surviving iron age hut circles and field systems, together with those known to have previously been destroyed by agricultural improvements, is largely correlated with the locations of the seventeen townships listed in the parish in 1170. Those townships can in turn be traced to the present day (Callander, 2000, p.155 et seq).

It is not possible to estimate the extent of the pre-historic forest which still survived 1000 years ago, particularly without any local pollen core analysis. However, the circumstantial evidence from the beginning of the medieval period suggests that the forest must still have been fairly extensive, covering much of the parish to the south and west of the current B976 public road across the parish.

## **2.2 Medieval Period (c.1000 – 1700 AD)**

### 2.2.1 The Place's Name

The first record of Birse as the name of this area comes from the very beginning of the medieval period (when it was recorded as 'Brass') and the name itself forms part of the parish's forest heritage.. This is because the derivation of Birse has long been taken to be from 'preas', which is the Gaelic for 'a wood or thicket'. This appears to imply that the area's name derived from it having a wooded character.

The date at which Birse acquired its name is not known. However, if it does derive from Gaelic, then it potentially comes from towards the end of the first millennium when Gaelic spread to this area. This in turn suggests a significant extent of woodlands still at the end of the pre-historic period.

The name might, however, predate Gaelic and be of pictish origin. In that context, it is interesting to note the entries for 'Birse' in the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, the Scottish National Dictionary and other Scots language dictionaries (copies of the relevant pages are in the BCT Archive). In these, 'birse' is mainly used for bristles, including the hairs on the back of the neck of a person or animal. This can be taken as a similar derivation with its implication again of a thicket.

### 2.2.2 Royal Hunting Forest

Birse emerges early in Scotland's historical records because of its use by Kings of Scotland for hunting. The first reference to this comes from the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently in 1170, Birse was one of the first Royal Hunting Forests to be conveyed to the Church, when it was granted to the Bishops of Aberdeen.

The designation of Birse as a medieval Royal Forest does not say anything directly about trees, as the word 'forest' was used to signify a hunting reserve. However, as hunting was forest based at that time, it does imply indirectly that the parish still had a relatively substantial wooded area.

This view is supported by the Bishops of Aberdeen having a hunting seat there and further substantiated by later evidence from throughout most of medieval period, for example, the record that the pinewood in Birse in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was equal to that in Glen Tanar and the representation of 'The Birs' on the earliest map (Blaeu's Atlas from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century), as the first major area of woodland that still survived at that time west of Aberdeen.

### 2.2.3 The Medieval Forest

The Bishops of Aberdeen owned the whole of Birse parish for c.400 years from the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century to the Reformation in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. For most of that period, the Forest of Birse covered a much larger proportion of the parish than now. It did not just cover the upper catchment of the Feugh, but also Glen Aven and Glencat. In the Feugh valley, it also stretched down to between Craig of Woodend and The Slough, as well as apparently covering the hills tops round to Corsedardar.

The records that exist for the Forest of Birse during the Bishop's ownership of the parish (Callander, 2000, p.88 et seq.), make it one of Scotland's better known 'medieval forests' (ie. a regulated forest in a similar fashion to the Royal Hunting Forests). This is one of the aspects of the parish's forest heritage that is of much wider significance. This status is also of particular interest because most of Scotland's other medieval forests were in more lowland areas and did not, for example, involve native pinewoods.

More information about the medieval Forest of Birse may also yet emerge, for example, from the surviving records of the Bishops of Aberdeen (eg. charter room at St Machar's Cathedral). It is also possible that items made with wood from the medieval forest may still exist (eg. treen ware on p.151 in Callander 2000).

The recent establishment of the Elphinstone Institute at Aberdeen University (named after Bishop Elphinstone who founded the University and was one of the Bishops responsible for Birse) and on-going work by the University and Aberdeen City Council to restore aspects of the medieval townscape in Old Aberdeen (the period when the Bishops were using wood and other goods from Birse), both offer potential links for BCT in developing the profile of the parish's medieval forest.

#### 2.2.4 *The Pattern of Sheilings*

A key feature of the medieval period, is the history of sheilings in the Forest of Birse. The Bishop's records list 17 sheilings in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, one for each of the townships in Birse. These sheilings, which may have been in use for hundreds of years before then, continued to be used throughout the medieval period into the early eighteenth century.

The same townships (& new townships that derived from them over the centuries) returned each year to their same traditional sheiling sites. It also appears that the township from what are now known as Finzean, Ballogie and Birse, had their sheilings on the parts of the Forest with which those three estates / communities have continued to be associated right to the present day (south, north and west sides of the Forest respectively).

Most of the medieval sheiling sites still survive, with the main exceptions being those replaced by later settlement and cultivation on Balloch and Auchabrack (Carter, 2000). Some of the surviving sites involve a dozen or so buildings and other structures (eg. folds or enclosures) for different purposes. The surviving sites also show that the main sheiling accommodation was typically a 'traditional house sized' wooden building, constructed on low stone platform walls.

This use of timber buildings reflected the continued availability of wood in the Forest during the sheiling era. A Bishop's rent roll from 1511 also shows that the in-kind rent paid by many of the tenants to the Bishops included loads of firewood, sacks of nuts and in some cases, wooden plates and bowls.

Thus, for over 500 years and possibly much longer, the inhabitants of Birse were spending around five months of the year in wooden summer 'farmhouses' in the woodlands along the Feugh and moving their stock up and down through the woodlands to the open moorland hill tops.

This history of wooden sheiling buildings within woodlands is very different from the normal records of Scottish sheilings (typically fairly rough stone structures on open moorland) and is a particularly distinctive and feature of Birse's forest heritage.

The survival of such a complete set of the sheilings, linked to other historic features in the Forest, have led to the area being identified as a historic landscape of national significance (Carter, 2000).

#### 2.2.5 *The Tragedy of the Commons*

During the 400 years when the Bishops of Aberdeen owned Birse parish, the inhabitants of the parish used the Forest of Birse in common as tenants and sub-tenants of the Bishops. However, with the break-up of the Bishop's ownership in the second half of the sixteenth century, the lands in the parish



became owned by over half a dozen land owners. By the mid seventeenth century, there were over twenty owners.

While one of these twenty owners claimed ownership of the whole Forest, the others also claimed through their title deeds the right to their traditional uses of the Forest. The disputes that followed are detailed elsewhere, together with the associated destruction of the forest in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century (eg. Callander, 2000, p.88 et seq., p.95 et seq.).

This destruction of the forest in the Forest of Birse is an important part of the forest heritage of the parish and of wider significance because:

- there is interesting documentation of the woodlands being destroyed;
- the episode is a classic instance of what has become known as “the tragedy of the commons”, where the breakdown of a traditional system of regulation leads to the over-exploitation of a shared resource.
- the rights involved are the ancient shared rights over the Forest of Birse Commonty now held by BCT.

## **2.3 The Eighteenth & Nineteenth Centuries**

### *2.3.1 Extent of Woodlands*

There was virtually no woodland left in the Forest of Birse by the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While some timber was extracted by the heritors in 1706 to provide cabers for the re-roofing Birse School (Callander, 2000, p.151), the only trees on the Commonty throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century were scattered remnants.

However, significant amounts of woodland still existed in other parts of the parish. Indeed, from the point of view of forest heritage, Birse is of note for the extent of its woodlands during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Birse was, as in earlier centuries, the first relatively well wooded area west of Aberdeen and formed the eastern edge of the forests of mid and upper Deeside. At that time, the forests of Deeside and Strathspey stand out as the most important surviving forest area in Scotland and were of great note in Britain as a whole. One continuing reflection of this today is that, while these two Cairngorms straths cover c.5% of Scotland's land area, they still have 25% of Scotland's native woodlands (see section 3.1.5).

One indicator of this position in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is that the cairngorms were more or less the only area in Scotland where red and roe deer survived at that time and it was reported that both species were “abundant” in Birse during that century.

It was also recorded local in the 1790s that, while the Forest of Birse was largely treeless, a “great part of the parish was, and still is covered with natural wood, such as fir, birch, ash, alder, mountain ash, gean or black cherry, holly, hazel, aspen, and some oaks, &c.” (Anon, 2000).

By that time, and largely based on the surviving local pinewoods outwith the Forest of Birse, the parish also had 2,000 acres of forestry plantations – 10% of the land are outwith the Forest and equal to the extent of cultivated farmland in the parish.

### 2.3.2 Plantation Forestry

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Birse, the first plantations were formed simply by enclosing and protecting areas of naturally regenerating Scots pine. This development, while part of the “Era of Improvement” which started at the time, was just an extension of the longstanding history of local woodland management.

The evidence of woodland management practices in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century comes mainly from adjoining Glen Tanar and other prominent forests on Deeside and in Strathspey (eg. Ross, 1991). However, all the indications are that such practices also occurred in Birse. Over and above the extent of its woodlands, the majority of the parish became owned at this time by members of the two main land owning families in the rest of mid and upper Deeside (Gordons and Farquharsons), being the families involved with these management practices in their woodlands elsewhere on Deeside.

The development of plantation forestry in the Cairngorms during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its evolution during the 19<sup>th</sup> century into a pattern of clearfell and replanting, is of wider interest as giving rise modern British forestry practice. It is a significant aspect of Birse’s forest heritage to have been part of that wider development.

Another aspect of Birse’s forest heritage from this period, is the case study of the development of commercial forestry on the main estate in the parish during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Callander, 2000, p.133 et seq.). Few such detailed studies exist for other places. The Finzean study could also be developed into a wider local study from the estate records that also survive for the other local estates (Balfour, Ballogie and Birse (as part of Aboyne Estate)).

### 2.3.3 Wood Working Mills

The origins of an upper and lower sawmills in Finzean in the early nineteenth century to meet the needs of starting to exploit the local woods for external markets, together with the development of these mills into the current Finzean Sawmill (1820s), Turning Mill (1830s) and Bucket Mill (1850s), are described in Callander 2000 (p.151 et seq.). Additional information is also in briefing notes recorded by BCT for the use with guided visits to the mills.

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were also three other water-powered sawmills operating in the parish (Callander, op.cit.). There were also other wood turning mills around (eg. the bobbin mills at Cambus o’May on Deeside and in King Street, Aberdeen). However, it is the survival and continued operation of the Finzean Mills today in good condition that makes them such an outstanding component of Birse’s forest heritage.

While the Turning Mill and Bucket Mill can appear nowadays simply as fascinating examples of pre-Victorian / early Victorian ‘factories’, they are more importantly a continuation of the wood turning

tradition in Birse dating from the medieval period (see section 2.2.4) and part of an ancient strand of local woodland culture.

The work of BCT is continuing to restore the condition and integrity of the mills with recent projects including, for example, the purchase of the last piece of the traditional sawmill site not already in BCT's ownership (the land and building across the road from the mill) and the return to the Bucket Mill of all the tools and equipment that had been held in store in Edinburgh since the 1970s by the National Museums of Scotland.

There is also some scope for further documentary research in local estate papers and elsewhere, to contribute more information about the operation of the mills during their long history.

## **2.4 The Twentieth Century**

### **2.4.1 *Opening Decades***

The expansion of plantation forestry that had been occurring in Birse parish and more generally in Scotland during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, ended around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was due to a decline in the economics of forestry and estate management generally. This position continued throughout the depression of the 1920s and 1930s until the second world war. As a result, some felled areas, including first world war fellings (eg all the mature timber on Balfour Estate), were not re-planted and few new areas were planted during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Callander, 2000, p.138). Within Birse parish, the pattern was different on each of the four estates with forestry continuing most fully on Ballogie. The Nicol lairds of Ballogie have taken a particular personal interest in forestry throughout their ownership of the estate from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

### **2.4.2 *Two Major Events***

Two major events in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century had a profound influence on Scottish forestry – the large scale felling of timber during World War 2 by Canadian lumberjacks and the devastating impact of the 1953 Gale.

In both of these, Birse parish was particularly prominent and especially Ballogie Estate (see below). Put in crude terms, the surviving mature timber in the parish which had not been felled by the Canadians between 1941-43, was blown down in the 1953 Gale.

The Canadian fellings and 1953 Gale are thus, a major part of the parish's forestry heritage both locally and nationally because of the central position of the parish in these important events in the history of Scottish forestry.

### **2.4.3 *Canadian Forestry Corps (CFC)***

In World War Two, due to the impact in the UK of the U-boat blockade and labour shortages, twenty companies of the Canadian Forestry Corps (CFC) were recruited in 1940 and another ten in 1941/42.

These companies were shipped to Scotland and stationed in camps north of the Highland line. By the time they left in 1943, they had felled around 230,000 acres of timber.

Birse parish was heavily involved. Ballogie was one of the few locations in the Highlands to have two camps, reflecting the large volume of mature timber there. These companies also felled in Finzean and Glen Dye, and together these locations made a disproportionately large contribution compared to other areas to the overall volume of timber felled by the CFC in Scotland (Wonders, 1995). There were four other camps on Deeside.

The companies in Ballogie were Company 2, which was recruited in Westmount, Quebec, and Company 3, which was recruited in Quebec City. This company had 20% French speakers, half of them not fluent in English. Both companies were recruited in July 1940 and arrived in Scotland in March and April 1941. Camps had been constructed in advance for them.

Company 2 had its camp on Murley, north of the farm buildings (OS ref. 569942), while Company 3's camp was on Midstrath, south of the farm buildings (OS ref.586948). The companies had 200 men each who were housed in wooden huts holding 14 men each. In addition to over a dozen huts and a recreational hall, there were other buildings, the sawmills and timber yards. There were also new roads into many woods, with one to the north west of Bogiesheil Lodge still known as the Canadian Road and recorded as such on the Ordinance Survey.

1947 aerial photographs held by Ballogie Estate, show the extensive scale of the (then former) camps and associated tracks. The Estate also has detailed records of the areas affected by the felling.

The impact of the CFC was not just on the woodlands. There was also a social impact. Four hundred men was a large addition to the parish and stories are still recalled by older residents.

A striking social statistic is that 38 'local' marriages took place or an estimated 25% of all the single men in the two companies – Company 2 had 16 marriages and Company 3 had 22.

No research has been undertaken to try and ascertain how many of the marriages were to "daughters of Birse", rather than those from elsewhere locally who might, for example, have been met at the dances in Aboyne.

There were, of course, also relationships that resulted in a child but not marriage – as testified in a letter from Canada to the Deeside Piper earlier this year (21.1.04) entitled "Looking for long lost sister", in which the story is told of a Deeside girl having a daughter by the author's father when the father was serving with the CFC at Blackhall Camp, near Banchory.

#### 2.4.4 The 1953 Gale

The Great Gale of 1953 hit the north-east around 5.30 am on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> January and blew for 18 hours until late that night. The gusts reached over 120 miles an hour. There was a huge impact on forestry.

Deeside was particularly badly affected and within Deeside, Ballogie Estate was one of the worst affected estates. Over 400 acres were blown down on the Estate. The main picture on the front of the P & J on the Monday was an aerial view of the Carlogie Woods on Ballogie, where an area of around half a mile by three quarters of a mile had been flattened (original copy of page in BCT's Archive).

Birsemore Hill on Birse Estate was another badly affected area, while on Balfour Estate around half the remaining mature timber following the first world war fellings, was blown down. The Finzean Woods were also badly damaged. The wind started in the north-west and went round to the north-east, so that woods on southern slopes fared best.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gale occurred during the research for this report and BCT initiated a full page feature in the Deeside Piper on the local impact of the Gale (Piper, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2003). The feature illustrates not just the huge affect of the Gale on the woodlands, but also all the 'human stories' from the memorable day.

Other such memories still survive locally (eg. Alex Coutts' father from the Ballogie Shop leading Nurse Steele back to Finzean, with all the local roads blocked; or Hugh Cochran of Balfour's father watching powerless from his drawing room window as the trees on the Black Hill went down).

To help with the tidy up operation, mobile sawmills were brought in from the Borders and this led to the permanent establishment of James Jones & Sons as sawmillers in the area. They are still on Deeside today with their multi-million pound sawmill at Burnroot west of Aboyne. The presence of that mill and the Finzean water powered mills within a few miles of each other, is an interesting juxtapositioning of forest industry history.

The tidy up in Birse included four of the mobile mills working along the Carlogie road and the first ever use of powersaws in the parish.

The 1953 Gale caused massive disruption to transport and five people died in the North east as a direct result of it. However, the same storm continued southwards and caused notorious flooding in East Anglia in which 300 people died. There were also apparently hundreds of deaths when it hit Holland.

#### 2.4.5 Post War Estate Forestry

During the 1950s, the Estates, reflecting in part the strong tradition of forestry locally, carried out extensive re-stocking of their depleted woods (eg. Callander, 2000, p.138/9). This included, within the spirit of the national effort to repair the damage, selling two areas to the Forestry Commission (Balfour & Easter Clune Woods).

The general lack of old plantations in the parish combined with the large scale of the post war plantings, created a visual impression during the second half of the century that there had been a significant expansion in the amount of land locally under plantations. However, in fact, the area of planted woods in the parish by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had only fairly recently reached the level which there had been at the beginning of the century.

An important aspect of the post war re-planting was that it was done very largely using Scots pine, the traditional local timber tree, and much of the stock used came from the native pinewood in Glen Tanar. This has meant that, when national forestry policy moved away from its focus during the 1970s and 1980s on Sitka spruce and other non-native conifers towards greater emphasis on native species, a high percentage of the plantations in Birse were already native woodlands (see 3.1 below).

### 3. WOODLAND FEATURES

#### 3.1 Native Woodlands

##### 3.1.1 Native Pinewoods

After the Second War, there was increasing interest in Scotland in conserving the last genuinely native remnants of Caledonian Pinewood. In the late 1950s, areas that might count as genuinely native remnants were investigated by Steven and Carlisle from Aberdeen University and their results published as “The Native Pinewoods of Scotland” (1959).

Steven and Carlisle did not include the Forest of Birse pinewood of Glen Ferrick and the Finlets in their list of surviving genuinely native sites. The unpublished records of their work also show that they did not visit the site or consider it as one to investigate. On Deeside, they just dealt with the well recognised remnants of Glen Tanar, Ballochbuie and the Mar pinewoods. Subsequent research in the 1990s has shown that Glen Ferrick and the Finlets was not the only remnant missed out on Deeside.

Local interest in Finzean established in the 1980s that Glen Ferrick and the Finlets was a genuinely native pinewood. This was based on research using a combination of estate records and field work. This conclusion was subsequently endorsed by the Forestry Commission and the pinewood included on their Inventory of Caledonian Pinewoods in 1993. In the Inventory, it is the most easterly and eleventh largest remnant in Scotland.

A crucial part of the field work was the identification of the drawtracks down the Glen Ferrick slopes which were used when the woodland was heavily felled in the 1840s. The pine that naturally regenerated then in the disturbed ground down the sides of the tracks are still growing there now. Features such as this and the link between the exploitation of the wood then and the establishment of the Finzean Mills, all add to the interest of the site.

There are also more modern aspects of interest, including:-

- the central role of Glen Ferrick in Dr. Alan Knox’s research in the 1980s which first established that there is a separate species of Scottish Crossbill.
- the role of the Glen Ferrick and Finlets pinewood at the present time as one of the most important sites in Scotland for capercaillie.

##### 3.1.2 Wider Pinewood Area

The native pinewood of Glen Ferrick and the Finlets is continuous with other self-sown native pinewoods to the west and north west. These other pinewoods are not ‘genuinely’ native in that they have not, or are thought to have not, a continuous history of naturally regeneration.

This is illustrated by the West Bogturk pinewood. It’s trees derive from the small wood planted at the Forest of Birse Kirk in c.1800 by the first school master there (Callander, 2000, p.98). Those trees naturally regenerated north across the road and then the natural regenerated trees have in turn naturally regeneration. There have been at least three such waves of natural regeneration and the

West Bogturk pinewood is now continuous with and indistinguishable in all other respects from the pine on the Finlets.

In addition to West Bogturk, the main areas of self sown pinewoods are in Glencat and above Newmill. There is now an extensive sweep of native pinewood across the parish from the Garrol Burn in Finzean to the boundary with Glen Tanar, where it connects with the famous native pinewood there.

This large-scale area of native pinewood has the potential to develop into one of Scotland's core pinewood habitats, given appropriate management. There have been some setbacks, however, such as the burning and felling of pine regeneration and established trees on Carnferg in the 1980s and 1990s to maintain grouse moor there and the accidental fire on West Bogturk in 2003.

This band of self-sown pinewood across the parish is more or less continuous along its north edge with pine plantations so that the overall pinewood habitat is even more extensive. Pine makes up over 80% of all the conifer woodland in Birse parish, with half the area of pine planted and the other self sown (MacKenzie and Callander 1991). Much of the planted pine is also of local genetic origin.

### 3.1.3 Local Birchwoods

Birse parish is also relatively rich in birchwoods. These are of value for their natural heritage interest and as a source of timber. Nowadays that timber is mainly used for firewood, but some is also used to supply the Finzean Turning Mill).

One reason the birchwoods are of particular interest from the point of view of the parish's forest heritage, is the understanding that exists of how the pattern of birch woods in the parish has changed over the last 250 years or so. This results from a detailed study of the birchwoods in Finzean (MacKenzie 1985) which revealed a dynamic relationship between the extent and distribution of the birchwoods and local plantation forestry. This dynamic has been shown to exist more widely not just in Birse, but Highland Deeside as a whole (Brown & Wightman 1988).

The study showed that the pattern of birchwood survival has followed the pattern of troughs and peaks in the extent and maturity of Finzean Estate's plantation resource. This had troughs in the mid eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries and peaks at the end of each of these centuries. However, the troughs and peaks in the extent of local birch have been offset from those for plantations, because of the nature of the relationship between the two resources.

There has been a cyclical relationship that has several components. Firstly, following each plantation trough, the setting up of enclosures to protect new or re-stocked plantations has also encouraged birch regeneration and survival. However, each time the plantation resource has expanded towards a peak, the extent of birchwood has fallen because the expansions have been concentrated disproportionately on existing birchwood sites. Then, as the plantations mature, the birch which had regenerated with the protection to establish the plantation, tended to be either shaded out or felled out. It is only as the canopy opens up again as the plantation reaches maturity (c.100-120 years for pine) and lets in more light, that the birch starts to regenerate again. Then, with the final felling the cycle starts again.

Thus, in Finzean in 1947 and 1985, the acreages of birchwood were very similar at c.150 ha. However, 50 % of the birch wood present in 1947 had disappeared due to plantation expansion and was only compensated for by new areas of birch regenerating within some plantations and other ground. A particular factor that contributed to this other birch regeneration, was myxomatosis in the 1950s. It was a 'historic episode' which reduced browsing pressure sufficiently to allow several un-enclosed areas of birch to get away.

#### 3.1.4 Other Native Woodlands

Pinewoods and birchwoods account for the overwhelming majority of the native woodlands in Birse. However, there are also some relatively unusual other woodland components (eg. the Finlets oaks, the Midstrath whitebeam, and the extent of aspen within the mid and lower Cattie catchment). There are also interesting riparian woodlands.

Quithel Wood beside the Dee is an SSSI as a mixed broadleaved woodland of regional importance, while the continuous and diverse woodland fringe along the Feugh for all but its highest reaches, has been described as amongst the best riparian woodlands in the North East. The Cattie is also relatively well wooded.

The oak woodland on the Aven at the Cat's Heugh is as significant as the Finlets oak if less well known, while there are also important relic trees and woodlands higher up the Aven and on the burns in the Forest of Birse.

The diversity of surviving tree species and associated vegetation on some of the burns in the Forest of Birse (eg. hazels, aspens, honeysuckle) reflect how relatively recently (in historic terms) the area was deforested. The Burn of Corn has particularly rich riparian woodlands still.

The detailed knowledge of the trees and woodlands along the Feugh, Aven and burns in the Forest of Birse all comes from surveys commissioned by BCT.

#### 3.1.5 Deeside Forest

There were several detailed studies of the woodlands of Birse parish and the three other parishes which, with Birse, make up Highland Deeside (Aboyne & Glen Tanar; Glenmuick, Glen Gairn & Tullich; Crathie & Braemar).

Highland Deeside has extensive woodlands (c.24K ha. or nearly 30% of the land area below the tree line) and the woodlands are very largely native birch and pinewoods (84% of total woodland area). The balance of woodland types is also remarkably evenly spread across the parishes (ie. in terms of the percentage in each parish of native pinewoods, birchwoods, other native woodlands and non-native woodlands).

The continuous nature and consistent character of the native woodlands throughout the area shown by these studies (eg. Callander & MacKenzie 1991), led to the area being designated as the Deeside Forest. In 2000, a large number of different individuals and organisations (land owners, public



agencies, NGOs...and including BCT) signed the Deeside Forest Accord as a commitment to promoting the conservation and development of the Deeside Forest as a major native forest.

The only equivalent area in Scotland, is Strathspey on the other side of the Cairngorms. The extent and nature of the woodlands there is very similar to Highland Deeside and the Forest of Strathspey was also officially recognised at the same time as the Deeside Forest.

These two areas between them cover 5% of Scotland's land area and yet have 25% of all Scotland's native woodlands. The status of Birse parish as part of the Deeside Forest is a reflection of the importance of its native woodland resource as part of Scotland's forest heritage.

### 3.1.6 *Millennium Forest for Scotland*

The recognition of the Deeside and Strathspey Forests in the early 1990s is one indicator of a major change taking place in national forestry policy at that time. Another indication of the nature of the change is that, at the end of the 1980s, over 95% of all new planting in Scotland was of the North American conifer sitka spruce, but by the end of 1990s, over 60% of the new planting had changed to using native tree species.

There were many policy initiatives associated with that change during the 1990s and it is part of Birse parish's forest heritage that it featured in some of those. For example:

- a booklet published by the Scottish Office on "Forests and People in Rural Scotland" (1996) incorporates a sketch map and text based on Birse to illustrate local involvements with forestry.
- a Forestry Commission publication reviewing "The Native Woodland Resource in Scotland" (1999) has photographs from Birse parish illustrating its front and back covers.

Another major initiative at the time which now forms part of Birse parish's forest heritage, was the Millennium Forest for Scotland. This was a national lottery funded initiative to celebrate the new millennium by encouraging the restoration and regeneration of Scotland's native woodlands.

BCT's Millennium Forest Project was one of nearly 80 projects supported across Scotland by that prominent initiative. BCT's project was also the only Millennium Forest project in North East Scotland that involved actual native woodland management (there was one other project in the region, but it only involved policy development).

BCT's Millennium Forest Project, which ran between 1999-2001, was very important to the establishment and future development of BCT itself. The Millennium Forest funding contributed to the historic settlement over the Forest of Birse Community and also enabled BCT to become involved in a range of other woodland related projects – Finzean Sawmill, Finzean Community Woods & School Wood and Corsedardar.

### 3.1.7 *BCT's Community Woodlands*

BCT has been in existence for 5 years now and, whether or not it survives for many years to come, it has become a significant and lasting part of the forest heritage of Birse parish.

BCT's has developed a series of nationally significant community woodland initiatives – bringing the Commonly pinewoods into management, its restoration and operation of the Finzean Wood Mills, its award winning Finzean Community Woods and School Wood, and its model local partnership with the Forestry Commission over Balfour Wood and Slewdrum Forest. BCT's newsletters illustrate some of the quotes from Government Ministers and other prominent commentators on these various projects.

While each of these projects is of significance in its own right, taken together they have made BCT one of the most prominent community woodland initiatives in Scotland at a time when that sector has been growing rapidly as an increasingly important part of public policy.

While BCT has made a major contribution to the conservation and development of Birse's forest heritage, BCT should also be recognised as a reflection of the parish's forest heritage. It is no coincidence that BCT, while a general common good community business, was founded on a community woodland initiative and has developed such a strong portfolio of woodland related projects. This is a reflection of the strength of the parish's forest heritage independent of BCT.

## **3.2 Notable Trees**

### **3.2.1 Named Trees**

Named trees are an interesting part of the forest heritage of Birse.

An example from the past was “*the Maiden of Midstrath*”, an uncommonly large ash trees on Midstrath which blew down in 1843. When Dinnie (1865) describes the tree, he also noted the quality of ash timber that was obtained off Midstrath, which is a lime rich area.

Semi-natural ash trees are still common on Midstrath today. For many years, self sown ash have been growing out of the walls of the large Midstrath limekiln and causing damage to this historic listed building. They were felled in 2003. There is also a notable group of whitebeam growing on the rockfaces of the nearby limestone quarry. They are the only group of this species in the parish and are very uncommon in the wider area of Mid Deeside.

Prominent named trees in the parish at present are:

- “*The Queen of the Firs*”, which is on the north drive towards Ballogie House (OS ref. 572962). It was planted in 1792 and is the tallest recorded Scots pine in Scotland (& thus, the tallest native conifer in the UK).
- “*The Twin Trees of Finzean*”, which grow on the south side of the B976 at Whitestones (OS ref. 636936). They are two Scots pine, both over a hundred years old and which have become joined by a thick limb that seems to have grafted natural from one tree into the other.

### **3.2.2 Heritage Trees**

In 2002, the Forestry Commission and the British Tree Council canvassed widely to locate the hundred most important heritage trees in Scotland. Over 800 entries were then judged by an expert panel in October 2002, who selected the one hundred trees or groups of trees. The Forestry

Commission has since published an illustrated book describing each of these “Heritage Trees of Scotland” (FC, 2003).

BCT nominated the Queen of Firs and Twin Trees of Finzean as important heritage trees. They were both selected amongst the hundred most important and are described in the FC’s book. The owners of these trees (Ballogie & Finzean Estates respectively) each received a commemorative plaque.

### 3.2.3 Champion Trees

The Queen of the Firs was already well known locally as a notable tree in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It had been brought to wider attention by 1913 when it was measured by Ewles and Henry. It was measured by Alan Mitchell in 1982 along with some other un-commonly large non-native conifers on Ballogie Estate (Scottish Forestry 37.4, 1983). The Queen of Firs was then included in Mitchell et alia’s “Champion Trees in the British Isles” (FC Field Book 10, 1985) as the tallest Scots pine in Britain.

The third edition of Champion Trees (1990), also included a silver birch (*Betula pendula*) on Ballogie Estate as the tallest recorded specimen of that species in Britain. If that had been the case, it would have been impressive that Ballogie Estate and Birse parish had the tallest examples of the two main natural trees species in the Highlands - pine and birch, just as the Finzean Mills include one specialising in pine (Bucket Mill ) and one on birch (Turning Mill).

The record breaking birch has, however, proved to be a ‘phantom tree’! Research for this project established that the Nicols of Ballogie were unaware of the tree, that it has never been recorded in the FC Tree Register started by Alan Mitchell, that it is not mentioned in his records of his visits to Ballogie and that it was not in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Champion Trees in 1994. It appears, therefore, to have been an erroneous entry in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

### 3.2.4 The Finlets Oaks

The population of c.200 genuinely native oak growing at the bottom of the Finlets are considered of significant ecological value as a natural component of the surrounding pinewood. One of these oaks is also potentially the oldest tree in the parish. It has been estimated to be at least three hundred years old by various experts who have visited it (eg. George Peterken, Oliver Rackham). This dates the tree back to before the historic settlement over the Forest of Birse Commonty in 1755.

The key importance of that settlement to BCT securing the ancient rights which it now holds over the Commonty, together with the prominence of the oaks and age of that oldest tree, have resulted in oak seedlings grown from Finlets acorns being used by BCT in an ‘emblematic’ way.

Finlets oaks have been planted by BCT as commemorative trees at many of its project sites in addition to the Commonty itself. These other sites have included Corsedardar, Finzean Community Woods, Finzean School Wood, Finzean Village Hall, Birse Community Hall, Balfour Wood, Finzean Church and Finzean Old School.

### 3.2.5 Old Truffie's Trees

On land just to the south of the weir for Finzean Sawmill, a group of non-native conifers towers above the surrounding native woodlands. Their location in the middle of the glen between the Craig of Woodend and Slough, means that they are prominent landscape trees from both higher up and lower down the Feugh valley. These very large trees, all growing tightly together in a former cottage garden, were planted in the 1840s by Andrew Coutts when he lived there (known as 'Old Truffie' from the time he lived at the Turfgate) and when such species were first being planted by Finzean Estate (Callander, 2000, p.165).

In recent years, one or two of these trees have blown down. However, it appears that they will be succeeded in time in their landscape prominence by another nearby group of non-native conifers with their own distinctive story. Two hundred metres to the east at 'Westers Gate', is a 25 year old group of non-native conifers on the former site of an old caravan that used to be owned by the Duncans (Sawmill). The trees were planted by Jesse Boyce, an American from Colorado, when he stayed in the caravan for a couple of years in the late 1970s when doing a Phd on rabbits. Like Old Truffie, Jesse is still remembered locally for what were regarded as his 'eccentric' characteristics – including catching rabbits and letting them go(!) and having what locally is a woman's name (spelt Jessie).

### 3.2.6 Joseph Farquharson's Trees

Joseph Farquharson was born in 1846, succeeded his elder brother as laird of Finzean in 1918 and died in 1935. He exhibited as a painter from his teenage years and his works continue to become more widely recognised and highly regarded. Many of his paintings are set in Finzean and the Forest of Birse, especially around Woodend.

Most of his local paintings include some trees or woodland. They are, in many cases, accurate representations and now, many years later, are interesting 'woodland history records'. His painting 'The Sun peeps o'er yon Southern Hills' from c.1908, for example, shows the state of the natural regeneration up the Laird's Burn at that time in sufficient detail for its location to be re-visited now. Similarly, for example, his painting "Evening Glow" (c.1910) shows the old alder tree that can still be seen at the south end of the Sawmill weir (which lost a major limb in January 2004).

As part of the events to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Joseph Farquharson's death, Angus Farquharson identified the sites of c.20 Joseph Farquharson paintings around Woodend. This, with his status as a nationally important painter and the commemorative well to him on Woodend, linked to the nationally important native woodlands within and around Woodend (part of the registered Caledonian Pinewood) and the nationally important Finzean Sawmill and Bucket Mill at either end of Woodend, might reasonably be considered to make the landscape of Woodend, well defined by the surrounding hills, an important "cultural landscape".

### 3.2.7 Other Named Trees & Woods

Other named trees that have existed in the parish include "the Laird's Walking Sticks" that used to grow beside the south drive to Finzean House ('History of Finzean' SWRI, reprinted 2003). There are also other trees in the parish that might be considered named now, like the Corsedardar Pine – the

distinctive tree growing prominently beside the War Memorial on Corsedardar and potentially an outlying survivor of the Old Wood of Corsedardar.

The long history of woodlands, plantations, and forestry mean that there are many named woodlands in the parish. These might be identified systematically when BCT's current cataloguing of the place names in the parish is complete. That project will also enable the range of other place names in the parish that have tree or woodland associations in their derivation, to be identified.

### 3.2.8 The Parliament Oak

In 2000, BCT paid for two oak trees to be felled in the Den Wood running south from Finzean House drive and then processed the timber at Finzean Sawmill to fulfill a contract for BCT to supply timber to be used in the construction of the new Scottish Parliament building.

The historic character of Finzean sawmill in comparison to the other mills supplying Scottish timber for the Parliament, has given BCT's contribution particular prominence. At this stage, the exact location of the timber in the building is still not known, but it has been suggested that it will be used in the main entrance foyer.

A piece of the Parliament Oak was used by David Duncan to make a gavel and block for use at BCT AGMs and other meetings to commemorate the project.

### 3.2.9 Scotland's Finest Woodland

Finzean Community Woods was the overall winner of the Small Woods Award (woodlands less than 150 ha) in the competition in 2002 to find Scotland's Finest Woodlands. The other two categories in the competition were Large Woodlands (over 150 ha) and Farm Woodlands.

BCT's management of the Community Woods won the Award against entries from private estates, the Forestry Commission and forestry management companies. BCT received the Award at a Ministerial presentation at the Royal Highland Show in June 2002.

The Award has added to the parish's forest heritage by the prominence its has given to the Community Woods.

## **3.3 Local Involvement**

### 3.3.1 Continuity of Pattern

The Finzean Mills symbolise the continuity of local involvement with woodlands and timber in Birse parish. The Mills reach back through three generations of Browns and four generations of Duncans to their origins in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Beyond that, they are also a link back to the tenants in medieval Birse 500 and more years earlier paying part of their rents in loads of fire wood, sacks of hazel nuts and sets of wood-turned bowls and plates.

David Duncan at the Sawmill & Turning Mill, with his knowledge of local timbers and the growth of the trees in the woods, illustrates the kinds of information and experience traditionally passed from generation to generation. Another example or late survival of this, was Dugald Brand. He was a working forester who moved in late old age from Braehead in Finzean to Banchory in the 1980s.

In the Medieval period, timber and other woodland products from the self-sown Forest of Birse were an important part of the parish's economy. While that resource was destroyed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, employment grew during the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the expanding area of local plantations. Forestry employment has continued to be important locally, albeit in peaks and troughs and at an increasingly reduced level due to mechanisation.

Other types of local residents in the parish have also had on-going involvements with trees and timbers, from the landowners and their managers, to those who worked in the mills (c.12 in Bucket Mill, 6 Turning Mill) and agricultural tenants. A particular example of this latter group were the tenants on Balloch and Auchabrack in the Forest of Birse, who took tree about from the woods on the Commonty near the Forest of Birse Kirk until after World War Two.

More generally, the overall social continuity in Birse is a reflection of links with earlier involvements with local woodlands. This continuity is reflected in the parish having both relatively high number of families which have been resident for many generations and a high level of kinship ties between the households in the parish (for example, nearly one third of the 260 households have an immediately family relation such as a father or son, living in at least one other household in the parish).

They are also more widely dispersed connections, for example, with the Melven family. They moved to Finzean from the Ballater area in the 1930s, following the availability of forest harvesting work. They then moved to Durris, where they have been ever since. Their family group remains one of the main traditional wood contracting families in Deeside and are involved in harvesting, timber sales including a firewood business, timber haulage, powersaw sales and so on. The point here being that there are close kinship ties between some families in Birse and the Melvens.

The estates in the parish also represent a particular type of continuity, where forestry has gone up and down, with one generation investing, another benefiting from that investment. The estates' woodlands have acted as a bank. In some cases in the past, the natural woodlands help fund the transition to the modern estate economy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particular estate woodlands have been felled to fund specific projects or retained as a 'pension fund'. The predominance of pine has been good for this type of 'bank' approach, with its relatively slow rotation providing flexibility when harvests are taken.

### 3.3.2 *Current Level*

There is no simple answer to how many of the people living in Birse at present are involved with forestry and timber. While only a few local people are involved full time, a relatively high number are involved professionally with forestry and timber to some extent.

It can be noted on the basis of local knowlegde and a quick glance down the Electoral Registers for the parish that, amongst local residents in the c.260 households, there appear to be for example:-

- two full timber professional foresters resident in the parish. They work for private forestry companies with offices outwith the parish (Aboyne & Tarland) and only part of their work is on woodlands in Birse parish.
- two individuals involved full time in timber harvesting, one for the Forestry Commission and one on their own account with their own harvester.
- three individuals who spend or have spent a significant amount of their time as forest managers, with their work very largely within the parish.
- four people who are or have been involved in woodland management as ecologists, two to a significant extent and another two to much less extent.
- three individuals involved as resident owners of estates with major forestry resources.
- three other resident owners with commercial scale woodlands.
- an increasing number of residents (c.3) with 1-10 ha of woodland to manage.
- three tenant farmers with one or more woodlands they have planted with their landlord's agreement (which agreements became developed into a Model Agreement which was promoted by the National Farmers Union for Scotland and Scottish Landowners Federation in the 1990s)
- at least two retired forest workers;
- at least three estate workers whose time is spent mainly on forestry work;
- two part time millers at the Bucket Mill and Sawmill/Turning Mill.

The individuals identified above represent just over 10% of the parish's households. There are also others with connections to woodland management and timber. For example:

- Two individuals directly involved in helping manage Finzean Community Woods and School Wood for BCT;
- The local individuals working with three local furniture businesses (Birse Furniture, Tom Ironside's workshop at Boghead and the Mother Hubbard's workshop at Coulnacraig).
- The half dozen or more residents who work as joiners, very largely in the local area.

The list could go on, for example, from proficient local amateur wood turners (at least two) to the numbers of local residents who turn out to fight any forest fire (including a local builder's squad).

It is also the case that outside forestry contractors that come into work in the parish have strong local connections. The Melvens have already been mentioned. Other examples might include: Charlie Esson from Ballater whose father, brother and nephew live or lived in Finzean; Bob Watt from Glen Dye with all his work and other involvements (eg. Church) in Finzean over a long period; the driver of a FC harvester that works within the parish from time to time, who is the son of a former tenant farmer; Irvine Ross from Dinnet, whose local involvements include managing Balfour Estate's woodlands and being a forestry agent for BCT, while he is also the Head Forester of neighbouring Glen Tanar Estate.

At one level, of course, all residents of Birse parish now have a wide ranging involvement with local woodlands and forestry as members of BCT with its portfolio of woodland related community projects.

## 4. FOREST HERITAGE

### 4.1 Definition

The previous sections of this Report have described what might be considered most of the main features of Birse parish's forest heritage. The report has not, however, tried to define in any detail what is meant by 'forest heritage'.

Both 'forest' and 'heritage' can be defined in fairly simple terms, for example, "a large area covered with trees" and "something which is inherited" respectively. However, when they are combined as 'forest heritage', they represent a wider concept that is not so readily defined.

Forest heritage is a part of both the 'natural heritage' (eg. trees and woodlands) and 'cultural heritage' (e.g. historical information). Both these other types of heritage have reasonably well established definitions (eg. recent Land Reform and National Parks legislation):-

- Natural Heritage = "the flora and fauna, the geological and physiographic features and the natural beauty and amenity";
- Cultural Heritage = "structures and other remains resulting from human activity of all periods, languages, traditions, ways of life and historic, artistic and literary associations of people, places and landscapes"

The nature of these definitions indicates the wide potential scope of what might be considered to count as 'forest heritage'. While a similar style of definition could be drawn up for forest heritage, it has been taken more simply in this Report as encompassing anything to do with the area's trees and woodlands. This includes the two main aspects identified in the Report's Introduction:-

- *physical aspects*, including trees and woodlands, related artifacts and landscape evidence;
- *cultural aspects*, including knowledge of the area's woodlands and their history, traditions and similar information;

### 4.2 Interest

An interest in the forest heritage of Birse parish is inherent in both BCT's charitable objectives and its overall mission "to promote the common good of the inhabitants of Birse parish and deliver wider public benefits".

The role of this Report has been to illustrate the distinctive and rich character of Birse parish's forest heritage and so help raise awareness of this heritage both locally and more widely.

For BCT, this aim has the potential to bring two main benefits. Firstly, greater awareness will contribute to the conservation of the main features of the parish's forest heritage. Local awareness is vital to this, but wider recognition of distinctive and unusual features can help secure outside funds and other support for local work on the area's forest heritage. That work might involve a wide range of activities including, for example, physical management, documentary research or community involvement.



Secondly, greater local awareness and external recognition of the rich and distinctive nature of the parish's forest heritage can contribute to the community's sense of identity and through that, help support community development more generally. The increased awareness supports a sense of involvement and responsibility amongst residents with the place and for their community.

Thus, for BCT, promoting the parish's forest heritage is part of its commitment to the well-being of the local community which makes up BCT's membership.

This report has been written for a fairly specialist readership and assumes a certain familiarity with a number of topics. However, it is clear from producing the report that the forest heritage of Birse is a subject which has considerable potential for a well illustrated local publication for a wider audience.

### 4.3 Character

On the basis of the information in the main sections of this Report and in the interest of drawing some preliminary conclusions, an initial attempt has been made below to identify ten points which might be considered to characterise the forest heritage of Birse parish:-

(i) Native Woodland

Birse's forest heritage is a native woodland heritage, with only a very limited extent of non-species even in recent times. Key features include that the area has always been relatively well wooded and particularly rich in native woodlands.

(ii) Highland Character

Birse's forest heritage is of a predominantly Highland character, with Scots pine and birch as the natural tree cover over the majority of the parish. Key features include the important native pine and birch woods that still exist in the parish and the role of these species in the history of the area's woodlands.

(iii) Cairngorms Area

Birse parish's forest heritage is part of the forest history of the Cairngorms Area and its importance for native woodlands. Key features include Birse as part of the Deeside Forest and the continuous area of birch and pine woodland that stretches from Finzean in the east to Mar Lodge in the west.

(iv) Edge Position

Birse parish's forest heritage reflects that the area has long been the eastern edge of the forests to the west. Key features include historic descriptions of Birse as the first major woodlands east of Aberdeen, Scotland's most easterly surviving native pinewood and the over-shadowing of Birse's significance on occasions because of the more famous forests west of it.

(v) Richness of Features

Birse parish's forest heritage is particularly rich in features which are of wider significance. Key features include many of the relatively large number and wide range of topics described in the main sections of this report, both the physical features, from special trees to unique wood mills, and cultural features, such as the extent of information known about many of the main topics.

(vi) Representative Features

Birse parish's forest heritage, while having many distinctive aspects, also has features that are representative of the likely woodland history and forest heritage of many other areas in and around the eastern and central Highlands of Scotland. Key features include the parish's Highland/Lowland fringe location, the survival of features in Birse that have been lost in many other areas and the level of knowledge in Birse about some topics, such as the development and evolution of estate forestry.

(vii) Core Features

Birse parish's forest heritage is of special importance compared to any other location because of the combination of the continued operation of the three 19<sup>th</sup> century Finzean wood working water mills, the native Caledonian pinewood that still survives in the Forest of Birse Commonty and the harvesting of timber from the pinewood for the mills using ancient shared forestry rights over the Commonty.

(viii) Medieval Background

Birse parish's forest heritage is exceptional in the extent to which the core features of ancient rights, wood mills and native pinewood can be traced back into the medieval era 500-1,000 years ago. Key features include the Forest of Birse as a Royal Hunting Forest, the history of its regulation by the Bishops of Aberdeen and the origin of the ancient rights over the Commonty; the pattern of medieval woodland sheilings and the Finzean Mills as a continuation of a wood turning tradition from that time; the story of the destruction of the woods in the Forest of Birse during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its continuity with the woodlands there now.

(ix) Complementary Aspects

Birse parish's forest heritage has added significance because of the extent to which many of the features complement other features and enhance the importance of the whole. Examples include particular locations such as Woodend (pinewood, wood mills, Joseph Farquharson paintings & Woodend as a 16<sup>th</sup> century encroachment from the Commonty) and particular themes such as Scots pine (major Caledonian pinewood, tallest pine in Britain, native pine buckets from Bucket Mill, national prominence of pine plantations in World War Two and 1953 Gale).

(x) Local Interest

Birse parish's forest heritage has the added feature of an exceptional level of local community involvement. Examples range from all key steps being locally initiated (eg. identification of pinewood remnant, rescuing of the mills, historical research...) and the leading role of the local community company in the conservation of the area's forest heritage (eg. mills / pinewood / ancient rights), to the high percentage of households in the locality with some professional involvement with forestry and timber.

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