

Forest life in Abernethy

Local resident Jane Macaulay tells the story of the 'forest village', Nethy Bridge, and how its people have made a living from the forest through the centuries.

The community of Nethy Bridge, located in Strathspey between Aviemore and Grantown-on-Spey, is often called 'the forest village' because it is surrounded by the ancient Abernethy Forest. We residents could almost say that we are all living within the forest, with red squirrels, woodpeckers, tree-creepers and even crested tits paying regular visits to garden feeders, while roe deer roam just outside our gardens.

The forest, which covers a vast swathe of land from the edge of the village to the lower slopes of the Cairngorms, has been home to many inhabitants over the centuries and has a rich history of crofting, forestry and various small industries.

Life for the original forest dwellers was not exactly a rural idyll, however. They eked out a living from barren hill ground, clearing small areas among the trees on which to grow

their scanty crops of oats and barley and keeping a few scraggy sheep and goats which roamed around the high ground in the summer. They also kept black cattle, for which the area is famed, but rarely ate their meat, subsisting instead on cheese made from their milk, while the spare animals were sold – in exchange for money to pay the rent or buy such essentials as salt – to cattle drovers who walked them to the markets at Crieff. Tracks through the forest were used by these drovers and also by the 'caterans' who travelled from the wild lands of the west to the fertile Laigh of Moray to steal fat cattle.

For the landlords, on the other hand, the forest was a playground where they hunted roe deer and capercaillie among the trees, as well as red deer, ptarmigan and mountain hare on the higher slopes. There was a tradition that each tenant should be allowed 'a tree from the forest, a deer from the hill and a salmon from the river' – but the taking of all of these was poaching, subject to harsh penalties.

Timber and tourists

As life became more industrialised from the mid-1700s, landlords began to see timber as an asset and many trees were felled and sent to the lowlands to build houses and ships. The felling does seem to have been relatively controlled, however, with only certain trees selected, so that much of the original character of the old Caledonian forest remained. Transporting the trees was difficult, so use was made of the many burns that meandered down from the high Cairngorm plateau. Dams were built high up these burns and trees dragged

Opposite, clockwise from top: A view of Abernethy Forest; log extraction by horse, Dell Woods; accessible paths for ramblers of all abilities; the mill lade; an earthen and thatch cottage at the Highland Folk museum. Photos: Andy Hay/RSPB, Lorne Gill/SNH, Angela Evans, Jane Macaulay, Sebastian Ruff (used under Creative Commons Attribution License).

About Explore Abernethy

The rich history of the Abernethy forest and livelihoods of its inhabitants is the focus of Explore Abernethy, which aims to record, interpret and share the cultural and natural heritage of the Nethy Bridge area.

The first phase of its predecessor, the Nethy Bridge Interpretive Project, was to create a network of waymarked paths in 1997-98, using walking tracks which had been known to generations of local people but had possibly fallen out of use.

For the second phase, in 1998-99, the Explore Abernethy Room was set up in the Community Centre as a place

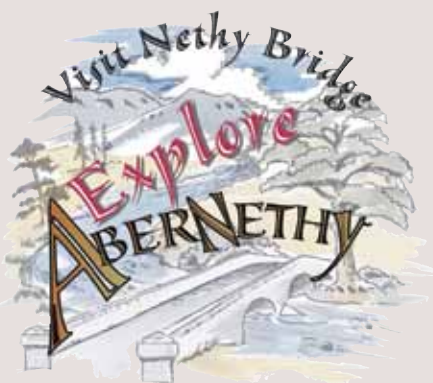
where residents and visitors could find out about their heritage, both historical and environmental.

In 2000, the project began to employ a seasonal ranger to look after the centre and the network of paths. This has included laying on guided walks and events, as well as much involvement with local schoolchildren. By 2010, the post had been made permanent, although this status remains dependent on funding from year to year.

One of Explore Abernethy's recent projects has been to restore a mill lade, once used to power a sawmill, on one of the small burns within the forest. Currently, the ranger and volunteers are involving local schoolchildren in creating a wildflower meadow in a field beside the riverside path.

www.exploreabernethy.co.uk

For more information, contact the Explore Abernethy Visitor Centre and Ranger Base on tel. 01479 821565 or email ranger@nethybridge.com





towards them. Then, given sufficient build-up of both wood and water, the sluices would be opened and the trees sent on their way towards the mighty River Spey, where they would be lashed together into rafts and steered onwards towards the mouth of the Spey at Garmouth on the Moray Firth.

Not all the logs made the complete journey, however, for there were numerous small sawmills along the banks of the burns and logs would be fished out at various stages for use in local building schemes. Thus much work was provided for the forest-dwellers – felling trees, dragging them to the dams, working the sawmills and, for some particularly hardy souls, travelling on the timber rafts as they floated down the Spey and then walking back home to Abernethy.

Other forest activities in Abernethy Forest at the time included the making of charcoal, some of which was used to smelt iron dug out from the Lecht, beyond Tomintoul, and brought across the hills with the help of ponies; as well as an ambitious scheme to supply the City of London with water pipes made of tree trunks, for which purpose a boring mill was constructed.

‘Improvement’ was a watchword of the later 18th century, with the Grant landlords in particular being concerned to improve the potential of their estates. In forestry terms, improving meant planting more trees to replace those that were being

Residents and visitors are now able to enjoy the woods in new ways.

felled. Most of the trees planted were the native Scots pine, but some other varieties were introduced, including European larch. Later, nurseries were established, with seeds being collected from ‘granny pines’ throughout the forest, dried out in kilns and planted out, later to be transplanted throughout the forest.

The coming of the railway in the 1860s and the advent of tourism changed everything in Abernethy. Up to then, the community had been pretty much self-sufficient, though living at subsistence level, mainly in very basic turf cottages with heather-thatched roofs. As wealthy industrialists from the south arrived here, intent on enjoying the charms of this beautiful, unspoilt area, local people built large, solid granite houses which they could let for the season – houses which give the village of Nethy Bridge, as we know it today, much of its character.

Landowners also perceived how to make money from sporting tourism, letting out vast areas of their estates to shooting tenants. The upper Abernethy Forest was let out to the Earl of Stamford and Warrington, who first established a shooting lodge in the previous head forester’s house at Dell of Abernethy and subsequently built a new, grand lodge, wood-panelled outside and in, and called it Forest Lodge. The building is now RSPB Scotland’s headquarters in the area.

Exploitation to conservation

The Earl of Stamford and Warrington was not happy about all the little crofts getting in the way of his shooting, so the crofters were moved out as their leases expired and a fence built round the outside of the forest to keep the deer from escaping, with gatehouses on the road around it. This may have been a positive move for some of the tenants, as they were generally moved to farms on better land, but it left a vast, empty space where once so many people had carried on their daily lives.

Meanwhile, on the lower land around the village, forestry operations continued, with Abernethy timber making a major contribution to the two World Wars. With local men away at the front, foresters were brought in from Finland and Canada, while German prisoners-of-war also helped with the work.

Land that was felled during the war was replanted in the 1960s, with non-native tree species brought in to grow more quickly or to cope with wetter ground. After agriculture, forestry was still the second biggest employer in the area, although it was gradually being overtaken by tourism, especially after the construction of the Aviemore Centre in the mid-1960s and the advent of winter sports in the area.

Then, gradually, a change occurred as conservation became the watchword. RSPB Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) took over the stewardship of Abernethy Forest, clear-felling was discouraged and the dense, planted forests thinned to let in light and improve the habitat for wildlife. Today, Abernethy National Nature Reserve (including SNH’s Dell Woods) covers 12,754 hectares (over 49 square miles) and is one of nine national nature reserves in the Cairngorms National Park.

With the help of RSPB, SNH and Explore Abernethy, residents and visitors are now able to enjoy the woods in new ways – walking along its network of paths, stopping to appreciate the flora and fauna along the way or just soak up the glorious sense of peace among the ancient, gnarled pines, some of which have been around for many generations. Hopefully, as they do so, they will also gain a sense of Abernethy’s rich cultural past and the many people who have lived, struggled and earned a living within this remnant of the old Caledonian forest.

Jane Macaulay is a writer and a resident of Nethy Bridge, and was involved in establishing the Nethy Bridge Interpretive Project.



Walkers in Dell Woods. Photo: Sandy McCook.