



Land Revival Tour: to the Trossachs and beyond!

Donald McPhillimy *reflects on the latest Land Revival Tour, which took place in August 2019.*

The theme of our Land Revival Tour is ‘healthy communities in a well-forested land’, which neatly encapsulates the Reforesting Scotland vision. The first part of our vision is to dramatically increase tree cover—from montane scrub on the hills to urban greenspaces. ‘The right tree in the right place’, as was stated several times on the tour.

The second part of the vision is people, the people of Scotland, interacting with trees and forests in myriad different ways. From lone hikers in the remote natural landscapes of the Trossachs to primary school children running and playing in their school wood, just yards from their classrooms in Fintry. And in between, people working, earning a living from woodlands, living locally and creating resilient communities.

Glen Finglas

The tour started at Glen Finglas, three glens in the eastern part of the

Trossachs, running from Brig O’Turk up to the summit of Ben Ledi. Until recently, Glen Finglas was part of the largest sheep farm in Europe but is now in the responsible hands of the Woodland Trust and is its largest site in the UK. The principal objective is the protection and restoration of the ancient woodland there, notably the pollarded hazel and elm in the wood pasture. Ancient woodland is very special and is at the core of everything the Woodland Trust does, but the site is big enough to allow for other objectives.

Of great interest to Reforesting Scotland is the integration of livestock farming with the woodlands. Five thousand sheep were taken off the land and 200 remain, all black-faced. Two hundred Luining cattle have been brought in. They spend the summer in three smaller herds, each with a bull, free to wander in each of the three glens. Then in the winter, they are brought down to the lower woods between the reservoir and Loch Vennacher. The stock are looked after by an experienced local farmer.

Areas of woodland are fenced to allow natural regeneration to take place and it was notable that this was occurring most successfully amongst thickets of scrub species, such as gorse.

The James Hutton Institute is running grazing trials in two of the glens. They are finding that the removal of grazing on productive grassland with ‘bents and fescues’, results in very slow change. However, other sites dominated by dry heath and mat grass species responded faster to a reduction in grazing pressure. Trees did not reappear unless there was a seed source nearby. These results have implications for rewilding. How far should we intervene before allowing nature to take over?

It is early days for Glen Finglas. There is a lot which could be done and only a small staff to do it. A lot of effort is put into visitor management and the attention to detail in woodland management is not always there. For example, some of the birchwoods look moribund. More could be done to involve the local community

Above: In a birchwood at Glen Finglas. Photo: Donald McPhillimy.



with woodland management, and perhaps some of the large number of visitors from outside the area could be recruited as volunteers, as Trees for Life has so successfully done. The trees have come back to Lendrick Hill, despite a fire, and the resulting landscape looks natural and healthy.

Loch Ard Forest

If Glen Finglas is an ancient landscape, just starting its journey towards restoration from sheep-wrecked desert, parts of Loch Ard forest are into their third rotation of commercial plantation. The first attempt at it, shortly after the formation of the Forestry Commission in 1919, was pretty brutal—wall to wall conifers, dominated by Sitka spruce, with a powerline wayleave slashed through the middle of it.

At each felling and restocking, restructuring has taken place and the forest has changed its appearance dramatically. A new commercial forest landscape is emerging. It is by no means perfect but it is giving a glimpse of the future.

Above, left to right: Before and after at Loch Ard Forest - much better now, after 3 rotations; Kate Sankey with maps of West Moss side Farm; Land reforestation after a fire at Glen Finglas; Conversation in the school wood at Fintry; Steve Maclean in his workshop, Dovetail Studio. Photos: Donald McPhillimy.

What are the components of this landscape? The stand size is smaller, about 25 hectares, and dictated by the landform. Stands of different ages are scattered through the forest which is moving towards a 'normal' structure, with all age classes represented. Sitka spruce still dominates and is a useful tree, although other species are used in smaller amounts. There is a big focus on the riparian zone next to the Duchray Water. Native species are flourishing, helped by a certain amount of deer fencing. Water voles have been re-introduced and are doing well. Mink are being controlled. Deer are still a problem and are coming in from surrounding stalking estates. Overall, the visual diversity and the biodiversity are improving with minimal impact on the productivity of the forest.

Great efforts are being made to engage with the local communities. Drop-ins are well attended and a new system of 'ambassadors' selected from the local community is looking promising. They learn about forestry activities, share perspectives and report back informally to their communities.

Fintry

A small rural community through hard work, opportunistic thinking and good timing has diverted funds

from a nearby wind farm into the development of a sports centre which would not look out of place in a wealthy Edinburgh suburb. As well as squash courts, gym and huge indoor bowling/events hall, there is a bar, a restaurant and multi-purpose community rooms. The building utilised local timber and runs off a wood biomass heating system. Although it is not strictly forest based, it shows what a community can do when it comes together. Future forest communities have much to learn from Fintry.

Fintry Primary School pupils may have fairly tired-looking school buildings but just 20 yards away, across the playground, they have a gateway to a magical kingdom. Children streamed through the big wooden doors, over the drawbridge, past the Land Revival Tour participants and up onto the tree platform, across the old wonky tree, along the secret valley and up the lookout tower. All during break time. And all after pretending to be a forest, under the guidance of Hugh Chalmers.

Nearby, Steve McLean has fought hard for ten years to establish his largely off-grid furniture business, Dovetail studio. He has produced beautiful furniture and wooden



objects, some of which he has sold, others he has swapped for stone and other useful materials—for example, a beautiful elm coffee table was exchanged for several loads of hardcore to create the road to his caravan. Steve started life as an engineer and has solved all his engineering problems as he's gone along. He has planted 24,000 trees, mainly oak, so that some future craft worker can use them to make furniture hundreds of years from now.

Next to the site is a small area of mature woodland, dominated by ancient oak trees. Steve's timber is mainly sourced locally, using trees which have come down during storms or which need to be replaced, locking up the embedded carbon for a second life in a well-crafted product. He has recently invested in his own small sawmill, which will make conversion easier, and plans to build a solar kiln which will greatly speed up the seasoning process. He is phasing out his reliance on diesel, replacing it with solar and hydro energy. It is not

an easy life but as Steve says, "I love coming to work in the morning."

West Moss-side Farm

At West Moss-side, Kate Sankey rents out yurts located in woodland glades, weaves baskets, runs art classes and cookery classes using locally foraged resources and runs a herd of Shetland cattle. Local forager, Jim Riach, takes groups out to forage in the local woods and learn about edible plants and fungi; he also teaches bushcraft skills and promotes electric bikes. The Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park area has 15,000 residents and four million visitors. The visitors are a resource, but as the Covid-19 crisis has reminded us, to be truly sustainable, a community has to rely on more than tourism.

Kate, who owns the farm, believes in taking the resources at her disposal and using them in a sustainable way to generate happiness and income to allow her to continue to live in this beautiful place on the edge of Flanders Moss. The resources are

human as well as natural. There is a professional kitchen where guests are shown how to make very special food, often including foraged ingredients. The three luxurious yurts allow for nights under the stars.

The natural resources are found in a mosaic of habitats of which young native woodland is one. A herd of Shetland cattle graze on Flanders Moss and adjacent fields. Willow is cut to weave into baskets. Cotton grass, rush and grasses also find their way into woven objects of all kinds. Foraged products are preserved in a variety of different ways.

Healthy communities in a well-forested land will find new ways of making a living from the land. They will look at resources with a critical eye and create ways to add value to them in order to generate a living from the land. Different kinds of forests will provide a cornucopia of resources which can support rural communities.

Donald McPhillimy is a founder member of Reforesting Scotland, runs a woodland management business (see advert on back page) and is the lead organiser of the Land Revival Tour. He is also part of the Thousand Huts core team and lives in Earlston in the Scottish Borders.

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