

Historical Information About the Ancient Forest of Darnaway Estate, Morayshire

By M TT Phillips, Greenacres, Newton, Elgin, Morayshire IV30 3XW

Introduction

Evidence as to the native origin pertaining to much of the forest of Darnaway, which lies adjacent to the Moray Firth in North East Scotland, and referred to in ancient times as Tarnaway, has been recorded in Estate records for 1767 onwards. Many authors refer to the large scale planting of fir reputed to be of local origin and to the ancient relics of oak and ash. Blaeus maps of 1654 and earlier sketches (late 16th century) and more precise maps by Timothie Pont (Stone, 1989) show very large areas of forest covering much of the land owned by the Earls of Moray.

Much of the low land was a vast oak forest, latterly planted with pine to a large extent, with the poorer upland ground believed to have been natural native pine forest. Much of the low ground is now agricultural. There are early references to the use of oak timber from the Royal Forest of Darnaway being used in particular at Darnaway Castle, and in the flooring and other parts of the stone castle of Duffus in 1305 (Anon, 1986), and with some indication as early as 1151 when the castle was founded by David I (Anon, 1986).

Early Mentions of the Estate

The Great Hall of Darnaway Castle has a medieval roof of oak taken from Darnaway forest and recently it was found that it was constructed about 1387 (Stell and Baillie, 1987). Although some of the oak beams have been renewed much remains of the original oak construction.

The earliest references indicating a natural native forest of Darnaway refer to Duffus Castle stating that in the year 1305, a grant to Sir Reginald Cheyne of 200 oaks from the Royal Forest of Darnaway and Longmorn was made to build his manor at 'Dufhous' (Anon, 1986) indicating that a major building programme was underway at that time, and it may be that the wood was needed for flooring and other parts of the emerging stone castle (Anon, 1986). Also in the 13th century when the Comyns were keepers of Darnaway Forest it was recorded that Edward I ordered Alexander Comyn to deliver 400 oaks to the Bishop of Caithness for the building of Dornoch Castle in 1291 (Morton, 1928).

The felling and transport of Darnaway oaks to Leith was a regular and systematic process, possibly for the construction of the Kings ships; other possible destinations were for the roofs of the great halls of Edinburgh and Stirling Castles (Stell and Baillie, 1987). There is unsupported evidence of oak timber from Darnaway being used in the roofing of St Magnus Cathedral in Orkney and also Spynie Palace in Moray (Chapman, 1997; Anon, 1881; Anon, 1986).

However, it is the great Randolph Hall of Darnaway Castle which has recently been the subject of very detailed study carried out by the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, while Mike Baillie of the Palaeoecology Centre, The Queens University Belfast, was invited by Moray Estates to carry out a dendrochronological analysis. This analysis of the oak timber shows that the trees used in the roof were felled after the 1387 growing season (Stell and Baillie, 1987).

Blaeus Map (1654)

The Blaeus Map shows the forest which he called Tarnaway, as approximately 5 miles north to south by 5 miles east to west, and lying east of the Castle and west of the River Findhorn, which includes Barrelley (now known as Berryley), Dunduff (Dounduff), and Dumfaill (Dunphail). The map also shows a further large area 3 miles in length by 1 mile in width lying east of the Tinmeny River (Muckle Bum) and its tributary which covers Terry (Tearie) and Earlsmill. Other woodland at the southern end of the Estate, west of the Dorback Burn at Kero Gririe (Kerrow), covers part of the Dava Moor and extends approximately 1 mile by 1 mile.

This large area of Damaway is rather romantically presented in 'Lays of the Deer Forest' by Sobieski and Stuart (1848) regarding Tarnaway (Am Fasach-The Wilderness):

'As having a vast expanse of wood over the plains and braes of Moray, where every tree bore testimony to its aboriginal vigour and the remains of the mighty aboriginal pines, oaks and ash which no doubt have seen the Raid of Harlow in 1411, and the gigantic hollies, which in some parts covered the 'pots' and brass, and were not exceeded, perhaps not equalled, in Great Britain. Along the Sluie on the Findhorn arid near the Ledanreich grew the tall pillars and the deep blue cloud of giant pines. The remains of this great Silva Caledonia are still left in the low-country woods of Tarnaway and some of the oldest inhabitants alive, within our knowledge, have remembered how, "when they were bairns" the wives and lassies from the Laich of Forres were used to visit the braes of Moray at Autumn, to gather nuts in and around the foot of the K-Nock (sic) - now a wide extent of naked moor - and how in the recollections of still farther times, they heard their grandfathers describe the travellers, who passing from Strathspey to Nairn, when they entered the woods at Castle Grant "had never seen the sun until they came out below Calder".'

'The forest was so dense that few ventured to [penetrate] far into it. If a forester ventured into the deep bosom of the wood alone, it was a chance that he took a tree to his host for the night. Poor Jenny MacIntosh, who ventured into the forest to gather pine cones, never came out again. Three years afterwards she was found sitting at the foot of a great pane, on the skirt of the Brae-riach, her wasted hands resting on her knees and her head bent down on her withered fingers.'

1750 to 1900

In more recent times Daniel Scott, Head Forester between 1872 and 1917, in his Estate Report (Scott, 1912) quoted Darnaway Forest, exclusive of the more scattered "natural" woods, was about 4200 acres (1700 ha). During the period 1767-1810 upwards of 1,000,000 oak and 10,346,000 Scotch pine were planted, plus 727,000 other broadleaves. Unfortunately there is no direct evidence as to the origin of the seed from which these large plantings were made. Scott made several references to "natural" woods at Hillside, Glenshiel, Sluie, Outlawell and possibly Braemoray though no indication is made as to there being native, or indeed if seed was collected from them.

Matthew Feaks (1918-1952) followed Daniel Scott as Head Forester and it was during his tenure that, following a visit of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society to Darnaway on the 27th October 1920, the Chairman, Secretary and one or two other members, stated

that the area along the line running from Grantown in the South to Forres in the North was, from their experience, the source from which the best quality of Scots pine seed was to be obtained. This is agreeable since the line indicated forms the East march of the Estate of Darnaway for a considerable distance. Accordingly Feaks, soon after his arrival, proposed that measures should be taken for the growing and planting of the whole Estate in future with plants grown from seed produced on the Estate (Morton, 1928).

There is much reference to the use of Scotch pine of local origin by many authors but little regarding the origin of broadleaved seed used in the plantings. Mention is made though that, prior to the death of the 10th Earl of Moray in 1848, large numbers of young plants, broadleaves as well as conifers, were found and recorded as growing in the Estate nurseries (Morton, 1928). As already mentioned between 1767 and 1810 1,000,000 oak were planted (Scott, 1912) and Francis, 9th Earl of Moray 1737-1810, great-grandfather of Morton, 17th Earl of Moray, had as his objective the planting of an Oak Forest and the 9th Earl thereafter became known as 'The Tree Planter' (Morton, 1928). Although there is no actual mention of acorn collections from the great forest of Darnaway perhaps one may be excused from assuming that this was indeed the origin of later planting.

The New Statistical Account, (Ferries, 1845) records plants raised from seed at Darnaway Nursery where "Scotch Firs are greatly improved in quality and their growth promoted by procuring the seed from the natural woods growing in Speyside", while the Rev John McDonnell in his statistical account for Forres writes of the extensive plantations of firs in a very flourishing condition on Darnaway (McDonnell, 1799).

Shaw (1775) records:

'Here I cannot but observe, as peculiar to Fir Woods, that they grow and spread always to the East, or between the North and the South-east, but never to the West or Southwest. The cause of this seemeth to be, that in the months of July and August, the great heat opens the Fir apples then ripe, and the winds at that season, blowing from the South-west to West-south-west, drive the seed out of the open husks to the East and the neighbouring Earths. In the plains, are the forests of 'Tarnuay', and the Woods of Inshoh Kilravock, and Calder, and in this last, and in Inveron, Alvie and Urquhart are large oaks. I incline to think, that these Woods are the remains of the Silva Caledonia, which Ptolemy extends, "Lelalonia Lacu ad AEstuarium Vararis", from Loch Lomond to the Moray Firth. With this abundance of wood, there are material for building found in great plenty.'

John Gregor, nurseryman of Forres (Gregor, 1868) writes that the Highland Society offered premiums, both for collecting the greatest quantity of seeds of *Pinus sylvestris*, L. from the most celebrated forests in the Highlands of Scotland with satisfactory evidence that the seeds were sown, or sold for sowing; and also the greatest number of plants *om seeds of this description. The effect was a reform in the cultivation of the tree, and planters generally now obtain native seeds, or plants raised from such seed, taken direct from the indigenous forests.

In his writings Gregor also highlights the many outstanding Scots pine, in particular those of Darnaway, as being supposed remnants of the old Caledonian forests.

Recent Times

Anderson (1967) states that the Scotch Firs are greatly improved, and their quality and growth promoted, by procuring the seed from natural woods grown in Speyside” (also Lauder, 1834; Loudon, 1838; and Gregor, 1832). It is of interest that reference is also made to a considerable area of what is now poor moorland in the counties of Nairn and Moray north of Lochindorb where for at least seven years (1566-1573) extensive illegal cutting of trees prompted a letter from Mary Queen of Scots, (who held court at Darnaway in 1564 (Anon, 1881)), to write in 1566 decrying the destruction in the lands of Kilmony (Culmony), Deltany, Farrens (Ferness), Etynoch (Aitnoch), Badenhall, and the woods thereof (Anderson, 1967; MacFarlane, 1906-8).

Following the 1953 gale six Scots pine from Tearie, Black Loch, and Dounduff were selected by the Genetics Branch of the Forestry Commission and grafted to form a small clonal seed orchard on Darnaway Estate. All these trees were initially planted between approximately 1774 and 1813 and although there is no record as to their origin the many references to seed collections during that period suggest a ‘local’ origin (Phillips, 1995a).

Some of the finest Scots pine in form and growth can be seen on Darnaway Estate and it is of interest to record that the Darnaway provenance gave outstanding performance over a range of sites in provenance trials (Lines and Mitchell, 1964). At the provenance trial at Findon in the Black Isle, planted in 1934, the Darnaway provenance also showed very good form and rate of growth (Phillips, 1995b).

Conclusions

Darnaway estate records and other sources indicate a long tradition of seed collecting from the Forest of Darnaway, in particular from Scots pine, of which there was an abundance. The older trees still surviving are recorded as having been planted in 1774, or thereby, and the seed origin of these old trees suggests a local source. Blaeus maps support this belief, also later reports indicate natural fir as having been regenerated from older ‘native’ woodland (Morton, 1928; Scott, 1912; Ferries, 1845).

In these early days of forestry there was a lively trade in pine seed, and as early as 1621 James VI asked the Earl of Mar to send seed from Mar Forest for use in England (Steven and Carlisle, 1959). According to The Earl of Haddington (1765) there was a regular trade in the export of pine seed from the Highlands.

While native pine seed was being distributed and used in the 17th century, therefore, it was not until the beginning of the next century that relatively large scale planting began, and principally in Scotland (Steven and Carlisle, 1959). According to Loudon (1838) Scots pine began to be used in plantations in various parts of Britain in the 17th century. It is possible that some of the seed may have been imported but, as already mentioned, there was a lively trade in pine seed from the Highlands of Scotland from at least the beginning of the 18th century and kilns were used for its extraction (Haddington, 1765). As already mentioned, as a result of the work of George Don (Don, 1814) in the early decades of the last century the Highland Society of Scotland offered premiums for the greatest collections of Scots pine seed from the best native pinewoods in Scotland, provided that all the seed was sold and sown (Ablett, 1880). The largest collection was made by Messrs Gregor & Co, Nurserymen of Forres, a firm which took particular

interest in Scots pine and extensive plantations were formed from these seeds by landowners.

On the basis of such evidence provided by Darnaway Estate records, and from such authors already quoted it seems likely that much of the pine planted on Darnaway Estate would have been from local sources and therefore in turn be of native origin. It should perhaps be borne in mind that very large areas of ancient pine first occupied much of Strathspey, certainly as far as Dava, indeed no doubt covering much of what is now desolate moorland. One cannot but help suspecting that the source of pine seed necessary for the large planting programmes of 1767-1810 might well have derived, indirectly, from the fellings referred to by Gregor (1832) and Lauder (1834). Although they referred to an earlier era (1566-1573), the source would have covered much of the southern end of Darnaway Estate for a very long period (Pont and Blaeus maps 1583; Anderson, 1967: MacFarlane 1906-8).

As regards the broadleaves, Darnaway Estate has a very long history (as far back as 1150 AD), covering its oak forest in particular, with reference to its oak timber, but here again, as with the pine, there is no positive reference to any seed collections prior to 1767. However with such a large area of ancient oak forest covering most of the northern reaches of the Estate the ease of collecting, one can postulate an intelligent guess. Other broadleaves are more difficult in respect to seed and origin, however it is of considerable interest to read of large ash mentioned in the Lays of the Deer Forest (Sobieski and Stuart, 1848) and even more so regarding the gigantic hollies.

In November 1997 a population of sessile oaks (*Quercus petraea* Liebl) were noted along the banks of the Findhorn River at the Meads of St. John. Provisional measurements and observations indicate a native population of local origin, and this will be reported on in due course.

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an extract from
**The History of the Ancient Oak Forest of Darnaway
and its Timber**

a paper by
M.T.T. Phillips

In 1997, a population of 151 sessile oaks (*Quercus petraea* Liebl) was noted as a result of a heavy seed fall. The trees were growing in a thin line along the banks of the Findhorn River, at the Meads of St. John. (map reference NJ 014548) Subsequent inspection, core sampling and measurement indicated ages ranging from 63 to 727 years. The DBH of the largest tree was a massive 310cm, (32 ft in girth) with an estimated age, based on an average ring width of 2.1 mm, of 727 years, and its top height was 17m.

Historical Research about the Ancient Oak Forest

A study of the seed collection indicated that it was a possible remnant of the once vast ancient semi-natural oak forest of 'Tarnua', reverting to the Crown and becoming a Royal Forest in 1346. The first Earl was Angus, Comes de Moravia, in 1130, said to be the descendent of King Duncan (Anon 1881). The forest was the source of much of the timber used in the construction of buildings during the period 1100 - 1700 AD.

Thomas Henderson (1932) refers to the Meads of St. John and says:-

"Local legend says that at its eastern end there was once a cell of the Knights Hospitallers, from whom its name is derived. There is no confirmation in history of this legend, but, in Scottish phrase, the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem '*nicht hae dune waur*' for the Mead is a delightful, sunlit oasis in the dense forest."

Oak must have flourished on parts of Darnaway since early prehistory. In the 13th century when the Comyns (Cummings) were keepers of Darnaway forest, it is recorded that Edward I ordered Alexander Comyn to deliver to the Bishop of Caithness 40 oaks for the building of the roof of Dornoch Cathedral in 1292. (Scott, 1912, Stell & Baillie, 1987).

Darnaway forest was originally part of the natural forest of Scotland, and James II is reported to have spent parts of two seasons there in 1437 and 1460, hawking, trapping, spearing wolves and hunting deer with hounds (Anon, 1939). The only remnants of this ancient forest are to be found close to the riverside (Henderson, 1932). Shaw in the late eighteenth century had already identified it as an ancient forest:-

Watson (1926 -1930) in his 'History of Celtic Place Names' says:-

"*Taranaich* in Moray is anglicized as Darnaway, in 1368 Ternway (RMS), also Terneway (RM). Lachlan Shaw says 'probably from *taran* or *tarnach*, thunder, because there Jupiter Taranis might have been anciently worshipped". Apart from the speculation about Taranis, this is probably correct in substance. 'Thunder' is a Gaelic *torunn*, W. and Cornish *taran*; Adamnan gives *Tarainus*, i.e. *Tarain* as the name of a Pictish noble; it was also the name of a Pictish king, and is to be equated with *Taranis*, the Gaulish thunder god. *Taranaich* represents an early British *Taranu-magos*, 'thunder plain'.

One of the earliest castles was that of Duffus during the reign of David I, and built of wood by Freskin in about AD 1150, but there appears to be no mention as to the type of wood employed or its origins. However, there is a reference from the year 1305 recording a grant to Reginald Cheyne of 200 oaks from the Royal Forest of Darnaway and Longmorn to build his manor of Dufhous (Anderson 1967, Anon, 1986)

By 1845 it was being explained (Ferries, 1845) that -

"In the parish of Edinkillie more than one half of the land under wood belonged to the Earl of Moray, two thirds of the forest of Darnaway, as has been already stated, being in this parish which consisted of oak (and other species). In the course of the last 12 years a large quantity of wood which has arrived at maturity in the forest has been cut down."

Anderson (1967) in his 'History of Scottish Forestry' states:-

"In 1515, four merklands of the woods of Darnaway were declared waste by mandate of the king. A final mention of the forest occurs on 1 June 1566. It seems that, in providing large quantities of timber for national purposes, much of the forest was devastated and that cleared areas were then set aside for grazing from time to time but later declared to be forest again."

In 1881 it was stated (Anon, 1881):-

"The oak forest of Darnaway is acknowledged to be the finest in Scotland, and there are few which can compare with it anywhere in the British Isles. For a century the oak produce from this forest, which is over 3,000 acres in extent, has attracted attention all over the north of Scotland and shipbuilders and wheelwrights from all parts annually attend the sales, assured of the quality and size of the timber.

Descending from the somewhat steep banks or cliffs of the Findhorn, to what is known as St. John's Mead, or the Haugh of Logie, we come upon the remains of a great oak plantation. At the end of a long stretch of level sward, where tournaments were wont to be held long ago, we find growing by the river-side oaks of enormous dimensions, some rising from their own roots and some from stools..... This grove, previous to the great flood of 1829, contained some of the finest oaks in Scotland, according to Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, and on that occasion many of the trees growing nearest the river were washed away."

In 1224 Andrew, Dean of Moray, laid the foundation stone of Elgin Cathedral. The spires of the two west towers were made of wood and rose to 84 feet. There is also reference to timber work in Spynie Palace and Balvenie, Lochindorb, Raet and Ruthven castles all built of timber within their walls, though no mention if it is of oak or fir. In 1008, at the time of the battle between the Scots and Danes at Forres, Burgus (Burghead) old castle had a surround of strong rampart oaken logs (Shaw 1774). Anderson (1967) includes:-

"At Burghead 'there is among the rubbish (of a strong fort) to be found as yet a great deal of fyne wood of oak.'... Wight (1778) refers to the ancient Forest of Darnaway, stretching for several miles along the banks of the Findhorn and covering about a thousand acres of ground. The wood consisted of oak, ash, elm, weeping birches all remarkable for their great size, and several other trees."

In the Cawdor charter chest a bill in Latin dated 1457 showed 300 planks in the park of Darnaway, beams, oak planks etc. for the repair of houses at Inverness Castle (Anderson, 1967). The girth of the oak, which is considered to be the largest which grows on the Meads of St. John, measures at 6 feet (1.83m) from the ground 14 feet 2 inches (4.78m) and another nearby measures 12 feet 2 inches (4.17m). Large timber was chiefly in demand before iron and steel had entered into competition with oak for large buildings and large ships (Morton, 1928). It has been shown by dendochronological analysis that the roof of the great hall of Darnaway Castle itself was constructed of oak from the Royal forest about 1387 (Stell & Baillie, 1987). Darnaway estate has a very long history covering its oak forest in particular with reference to its oak timber (Phillips, 1998).

Anderson gives a lot of information about Darnaway (Anon 1877, Anderson 1967) including:-

"In 1464, timber was dressed in the Forest of Darnaway and sent to Leith by Treasurer's orders. In 1465, 15,000 planks of 'spune chak' (?aik) were in the forest. In 1464 and as late as 1509, Darnaway timber was sent to Leith from Findhorn..... In March 1494, 'the King came from St. Duthowis and left Schir David Amoth in Morraii to ger fell tymmer in the forest of Ternway.'... In 1508 and 1509 timber (*ligneis et lignicidis*) was cut in Darnaway and sent to Leith to construct the King's ships. It seems that the timber was both sawn and converted."

Conclusions

The finding of ancient sessile oaks along the banks of the River Findhorn on Darnaway Estate in Morayshire at the Meads of St. John, measured in 1997, are believed to range in age from 47 years to 727 years. Many of the largest trees, approximately 47, show evidence of coppicing following felling (also noted Anon 1881) which indicates a continuous population of between 700 and 1000 years approximately, if one accepts a felling age of 300 years. This must in turn assume an ancient lineage even before this and that these trees constitute the last native ancient semi-natural remnant of the once large Royal Forest which supplied oak timber to many of the early castle buildings and ships throughout Scotland

This paper in its entirety has been accepted for publication in "Scottish Forestry"

