

Memories Of The Ardgarten Forest in the 1970's- by John Keenleyside



Introduction

Ardgatan was one of the earliest Forestry Commission Forests in the West Scotland Conservancy based in Glasgow with a District office at Kilmun near Dunoon and a forest office at Succoth eventually moved up to the main entrance to

the Forest at Ardgatan. In the seventies the area of the forest was over 5,000 hectares. Geography of it was that plantings reached the Lochlomondside road at the entrance to the Loch Sloy power station and stretched right down to Tarbet behind the existing properties, right over the hill and down behind Arrochar into Glen Loin. The forest then followed the lower slopes of Ben Arthur (The Cobbler) from Succoth along past the Torpedo Range to Guithas and the Cobbler Block culminating near the top of The Rest and be Thankful where the road runs down into Lochgoilhead.



The whole of the peninsula that lies between Loch Long and Loch Goil formed the main part of the Forest. The steep slopes on the side of Loch Long were planted by the Forestry Commission starting in the mid 1920's. Whilst at that time much of the land along the shore of Loch Goil was owned by Glasgow City Corporation and they afforested much of the Western slopes of the peninsula behind the existing properties and stretching down the shore line. Glasgow used this area as a recreational area for the people of Glasgow and transported people up there mainly by steamers which berthed at the pier

in Lochgoilhead, they eventually gave up maintaining this facility and sold the land and the forest to the Forestry Commission so they became the main landowner of the whole peninsula. On the West side of Loch Goil there was considerable planting at Drimsynie, Lettermay and down behind Carrick Castle.

The thing that set the scene for the activities in the 1970's was the huge gale of 1969, it was estimated that over 100,000 tonnes of timber blew down in one night due to that gale. Much of this timber was on steep slopes with minimum amount of roading in the forest at that time. Most of the timber had to be extracted by Sky Line Winches. The amount of timber was increased by windblow on raw edges and landscaping considerations.

The available plantable land was mostly afforested by this time but the windblow created the need to re-stock around 300 hectares of forest where the trees had been blown, mostly on steep slopes where machines could not work and masses of branches from the previous crop lay in big heaps on the ground. The huge areas blown down were also a problem because of a high deer population, these were mainly red deer, roe deer thrived in the environment created by the windblow.



People were becoming more mobile at this time and the demand for caravan pitches and camping sites rose steeply in the seventies. Forest walks and recreational facilities had to be created to meet the needs of the number of tourists wishing to spend some of their time in a forest environment.

Thus the challenges and needs of the 1970's arose and future sections will describe how we attempted to meet these needs of the public and tidy up a forest ravaged by the 1969 windblow.

Staffing:-There were five foresters working from the office at Ardgartan. One Chief, one Head and three foresters with their own functions. The industrial work force varied between 25 to 30 all male workers out in the forest at that time. The Forestry

Commission had built 24 houses at Succoth in the 1950's but they owned some scattered properties and some accommodation in Lochgoilhead.

The Succoth houses were made of timber imported from Sweden and estimated to have a 20 year life in the high rainfall encountered in the West of Scotland, they are still there 50 years later, The wooden Shingles on the roofs are not.

Three of the staff were employed as forest Rangers, one as the camp site warden. The camp site warden post was held by Tommy Burden, this was an onerous task as the site was very busy from Easter till the end of October. We had one Clerical person in the office, Mrs. Mary Haggarty who was the Queen Bee and co-ordinated all the



paper work. We went metric in 1972 and had our first computer terminal installed which fed data to Kilmun and the Conservator in Glasgow, although we could input data, we could not print it out. A monthly summary came from Glasgow and covered everything from planting to harvesting and the issue of wet weather and safety equipment, it was a nightmare to digest it and balance it to the nearest penny.



The permanent staff was augmented by contractors and sub contractors employed on clearance of windblow and harvesting operations, if one took into account people employed by log hauliers the number gaining their living from the forest was around 50 but tended to fluctuate.

The bulk of the forest squad lived in Succoth in the Forestry Commission Houses, some came in daily from Arrochar and Lochgoilhead. The Rangers were scattered in various individual properties near the areas they were responsible for, they were all characters in their own right. Alex Seaton lived in Guithas cottage for many years, one of his jobs was to take the weather station reading every day and he did so for 50 years carrying on with it even after he retired.

Callum McLean lived in one of the Steel houses at Succoth and apart from his Rangers duties he was the local Mr Fix it man, there was a constant stream of callers to get things mended or repaired, he even made parts on his lathe in his back shed. Duncan Henderson was the Ranger for Lochgoilhead and lived at Drimsyniebeg. He was a pillar of the community of Lochgoilhead and knew every inch of his beat

Tommy Burden lived in the little cottage at the camp site and knew people from all over the country. He could put a name to them on arrival and give a warm welcome to all. He was keen on boats and fishing, earlier in his career he used to take the forest squad down the loch and land them at Coilessan, Mark Cottage, or Corran point and they proceeded up the hill to do their planting, he came back for them at night as roads had not been constructed at this time. The three rangers gave over 100 years service to the Forestry Commission which demonstrates their loyalty and dedication to the task in hand, many other characters were present in



the squad but to give details would fill a book.

The forester staffing was dictated by Headquarters of the Forestry Commission. so none of them were native to the area, they were posted in, usually moved after a period of around five years, so we had foresters with very different backgrounds and training, these foresters entered into activities in the community, Mountain Rescue, Community Council, Fire Brigade, Youth Club, Scouts.



Afforestation.

The areas completed in the 1970's were over the hill from Tarbet to Arrochar, then from the end of the Succoth plantations over towards Loch Sloy and the base of Ben Ime. A large area at the foot of the peninsula linking the plantations at Corran point with the older plantations on the East side of Loch Goil. On the West side of Loch Goil large areas were planted at Drimsynie, Lettermay and ending up at Carrick castle where the boundary of that afforestation linked up with the Ardentinny forest boundary.

Re-stocking.

This operation was mainly concerned with replacing the areas devastated by the 1969 windblow, choice of species and Landscaping became more important, these areas were mainly in the older plantations and the gales made holes in these from Succoth to Corran point and some of the older plantations at Loch Goil which had been planted by the Glasgow Corporation much earlier. Sitka Spruce was the main species used as it could stand up to the exposure and salt laden winds. Douglas fir was introduced on the better soils and at lower elevations, some Hybrid Larch were introduced to give Spring and Autumn colour. Broadleaves were introduced up stream sides to add diversity to the environment and create corridors where wild life could move, these proved difficult to establish in view of the high population of red deer and increasing numbers of roe deer in the forest at that time.

The re-stocking was a difficult and tedious process. The drainage system was ruined by the upturned roots of the previous crop. Huge quantities of brushwood lay on the ground. The pine weevil and bark beetle populations soared due to the amount of material for breeding lying around. We had few machines capable of working on such steep wet ground at that time so it was hand work for much of the draining and all of the planting. The men engaged on this work tended to be the older men, no longer fit for the harvesting operations. The wet climate and the midges in Summer added to these problems.



Harvesting.

In the 1970's the major effort was concentrated on clearing up the 1969 windblown timber. The areas with good supplies of saw logs were exploited first as this material was in demand and good prices were paid for saw logs. Many of these logs went to a mill at Workington in Cumbria. The haulier was E. McGinty from Dalavich Inverliever Forest where vast amounts of large timber was blown. Inverliever was a forest partly planted by a Government body called the Office of Woods and did planting from 1908, it preceded the Forestry Commission which was formed in 1919. This haulier moved vast amounts of logs from the Cowal peninsula Benmore, Glenbranter etc. The small round wood went mainly to the Corpach Pulp Mill situated near Fort William, initially this material was hauled by motor transport to

Crianlarich, transferred to rail and delivered to the mill by rail. Later on with improved transport and many road improvements it was taken all the way to Corpach by road transport.

A firm called Smiths of Kirkoswald in Ayrshire bought all the blown timber at Corran point, it was such a jungle that it was sold by weight of timber recovered. They purchased and set up an Alp Cat Skyline winch with a capacity to bring in timber from 600metres. The winch sat at the end of the forest road at Corran point for a year and a half and brought in 9000tonnes of saw logs plus the pulp element from these trees, this firm eventually became part of B.S.W.

They were originally a family firm with the members playing an active part in the day to day running of the



operation, they were good to their employees and received much hard work, loyalty and dedication to duty from them, they needed this loyalty as it was before mobile phones and the supervisor only came round once per week.

Callander of Falkirk was a firm of saw millers and box makers who cleared some of the windblown areas in the Coilessan Glen area. They purchased several parcels of saw logs produced by sub contractors working in the forest

In 1972 when the bulk of the windblow had been cleared normal sivicultural thinning resumed, clear felling of some of the early plantations commenced. The area at the entrance to the forest planted in 1926 with D.F. and S.S. yielded a lot of fine timber. The average D.F. contained 1 cubic metre of timber and the S.S. 0:75. In the actual felling two very large S.S. were found. One contained 5:6 cubic metres and the largest one 6:2 cubic metres, these trees had 6 saw logs in each tree.

Recreation.

The Arrochar area had been an area for mountaineers since the Argyll Forest Park was formed in the 1930's. Much useful information was contained in different issues of the Argyll Forest Park Guide and it was updated in the 1970's The Ardgartan camp site was established in the 1930's and was one of the earliest Forestry Commission sites, The site attracted Mountaineers, Climbers, Sea Fishermen to Loch Long and Loch Goil People from the Glasgow area came up originally by Rail, Steamer, Bus, or cycle. At Ardgartan the following sites were available. The Forestry Commission site, The Caravan Club site, The Forestry Commission Youth camp site adjacent to the youth hostel and The Camping Club of Great Britain and Ireland further down Coilessan road. There was a further Forestry Commission Youth camp site at Coilessan farm house right on the shore of Loch Long and much used by the Rhu Sea scouts a wonderful location for their activities but the midges in a wet humid summer had to be reckoned with.

In the 1970's most people came in some form of motor transport and had motor homes, caravans, trailer tents or just tents. In Lochgoilhead there was facilities at Drimsynie and Carrick Castle privately run by Douglas Campbell and the National Scout Centre in the Village by itself.



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much maintenance work to be done. The people who came to Ardgartan tended to use it as a base for touring further West, in the old days people feared towing a caravan up the old Rest and be Thankful road, some vehicles failed the task in some cases caravans were blown off the road. Many people came for the sea fishing, cod, mackerel and Mussels were plentiful in season.

Many just came to relax from city life and work in industry, they tended to use the Forest walks, Enjoy the Scenery, The Birds and the Wildlife. Aqua sports and diving were carried out on Loch Long and many visitors brought their own boats, launched them into Loch Long from the various camp sites.

The youth camp sites tended to attract uniformed youth organisations, mainly Scouts and Guides they came from as far away as Holland and Germany. They were allowed to have camp fires on site and did their own cooking on them, it gave city children a great opportunity to enjoy outdoors and the basic skills of camp life.

River fishing.

This was available at the mouth of the River Croe or the River Goil where salmon and sea trout were available in season.

Pony Trekking.

This was available from Drimsynie where they had a permit to use certain routes in the forest, this was a popular form of recreation with locals and young people visiting the area.

Motor Sport.



Ardgartan had long been an attractive location for motor sports. The Rest and be Thankful road was upgraded in the 1950's and the old road left intact within the Forestry Commission property, it was a desirable location for hill climbing events as the old tarmac surface was still

available but showing signs of weathering. Motor cyclists and Car enthusiasts loved negotiating this hill climb and several events were held each year at a later stage these were linked to forest tracks and provided several sections suitable for car rallies, because of the nature of forest roads and the climate car rallies caused a lot of damage to these surfaces. These roads had to be re-graded and rolled after each event as one was not sure after a car rally whether you were driving on a forest track, a river bed or a ploughed field !!! Cars travelling at speed in the Range block tended to send stones hurtling down to the A83 main road below. This range section was around 3 miles and drivers attempted to do it in less than 3 minutes. The next day it took forestry vans almost half an hour to negotiate this section until re-grading had been carried out.

Day permit deer stalking.

This started in May when Roe bucks came into the shooting season, they tended to attract hunters who came mainly from Denmark, and usually spent a week on each occasion. In mid July Red Deer Stags became available, these attracted hunters mainly from Germany they usually went stalking Mon.-Friday and hoped to get a stag each day. Payment was based on the number of points on the stags head. A good marksman could get three to five stags per week and end up with an account of over £500 pounds

sterling, considered a lot of money at that time, as they had their hotel bill on top of this.

A weeks stalking plus travel and hotel bill could end up with a bill of £1200-£1500 so it was not a sport for the poor and needy. The annual cull of Red Deer in the forest at that time was 70 stags and 140 hinds. Hinds came into season in Oct. and attracted fewer clients mainly the Dutch and English as fees were much lower. The majority of hinds had to be shot by the Rangers to achieve the cull figure. The hinds loved the open areas created by the windblow as these areas created a Bed and Breakfast situation, Bed in the shelter of the piles of brushwood. Breakfast from the soft grasses and vegetation colonising the windblown areas, they tended to claim areas for small family groups. The shooting clients were accompanied by a skilled Forestry Commission Ranger on their stalking expeditions as they knew where to locate a suitable beast. The Rangers were essential for public health and safety reasons due to the amount of mountaineers, ramblers, walkers and bird watchers out in the forest at any time. The day permit clients had to assist the Ranger in getting their carcass off the hill and down to a suitable point where it could be picked up by a vehicle. Later on Argo-Cats became available which made the task of getting beasts off the hill much easier.

Summary.

It is hoped that this account gives a fair picture of the activities in the forest at this time. The efforts in growing the trees, the thinning and harvesting of them. The huge task in clearing up the blown timber from the 1969 gale, the thought we gave to the landscaping and the care for the

environment. The range of recreation available in the forest and how we catered for special interest groups, it shows that forests can absorb a lot of people and provide first of all a resource in terms of the timber and the opportunity for many special interest groups to pursue their sports.

