

FORESTRY COMMISSION (SCOTLAND)

(WEST CONSERVANCY)

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ASSOCIATION

VISIT TO BENMORE FOREST

SATURDAY - 20TH SEPTEMBER 1952

B E N M O R E

Benmore, with its forest-clad hills and woodland garden abounding in alien trees and shrubs, is an ideal demonstration ground both for forestry and for horticulture. The estate, which is national property and now forms part of the Argyll National Park, is situated in the Cowal district of Argyll, a region which, with its rugged grandeur, its lochs and mountains, is as varied in its scenery and as full of interest as any part of Scotland. Seven miles distant from Dunoon, Benmore House is easily reached by car or bus and the policies are entered from the main gate on the Loch Eck road.

By the great generosity of the late Mr. Harry George Younger of Benmore and Kilmun, this magnificent estate became the property of the nation in 1925. The greater part of the area is now under the administration of the Forestry Commission, but the policies are controlled by the Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh; they occupy an area of about 100 acres in the immediate surroundings of Benmore House.

Since the handing over of the estate the development of the policies has continued upon a definite plan, that the area should become a Wild or Woodland Garden upon a magnificent scale. The idea was that it should be a wild garden in the modern sense - a place where trees, lending their canopy, make shelter for well-chosen specimen plants brought from all parts of the world - not a wild garden in the traditional sense which is so often merely a tangle of shrubs and herbs native to the locality, growing in a neglected woodland. At Benmore we have the ideal setting, and now exotic plants, and particularly Rhododendrons which here flourish as in their native homes, add interest to the woodlands and an attractive richness of colour.

Many of the larger trees, now reaching maturity, were planted as long ago as 1870-80 by James Duncan, a former proprietor. When he began to plant the hillsides were bare; but he sought to make of his estate a great nursery for native and exotic plants, and through his foresight and labours the hillsides became clothed with stately forests. Although during the war the forests on the hillsides, which were reaching maturity, had to be felled, most of the trees within the policies were preserved.

In addition to the gift of land by Mr. Younger a further area of land was purchased from Mr. J.A. Dow of Clachaig and in 1929 Mr. Younger gifted Benmore Mansion House which was immediately set up and continues to be used as a Forest School for the training of Foresters.

The area of acquired wood and plantations was 609 acres and of bare land 9070 acres.

War-time fellings accounted for 162 acres of acquired wood, the property of the Forestry Commission, and of 232 acres, the property of Mr. Younger. The 232 acres of land reverted to Forestry Commission ownership after clearing of the wood and is included in the bare land acquisition figure.

Climate and Exposure

The climate is typical of the western seaboard of Scotland with no extremes of heat or cold and very high rainfall. Annual figures show the average rainfall to be between 80 and 90 inches. Snow is infrequent and does not generally lie long below 1000 feet. Any hard dry weather is generally experienced in the Spring thereby increasing the danger from fire. Late frosts are frequent and damaging. Winter gales are common and are to be feared from the thinning stage onwards due to the heavy rainfall and proximity of rock to the surface.

Exposure on western slopes can be very severe due to Atlantic gales and the western position of the district. There is no land mass between the majority of forests and the Atlantic ocean and therefore no break to the strong prevailing winds coming directly off the sea. The limit of planting is thereby much reduced in comparison with eastern localities and it is seldom possible to plant higher than 900 feet even when the quality of the ground above that altitude is sufficiently good for conifer species.

Geology

Mainly metamorphic - quartzites and schists with some igneous intrusions. The metamorphic rocks were originally sediments such as impure sandstones, shales, limestones, etc., but their mineral composition and structure has been greatly altered due to intense heat and pressure. They may be recognised by the presence of marked cleavage or foliation which causes them to split very readily in one direction.

The primary rocks have been formed by the consolidation of molten material and may be distinguished from the metamorphic rocks by their more homogeneous nature.

Excluding the glacial deposits which are still loose and uncompacted, the region shows no rocks other than metamorphic and igneous types.

Soils and Vegetation

The main soils are:-

- (a) Deep fine loams derived direct from the parent rock.
- (b) Gritty or rocky loams and clays of glacial origin.
- (c) Peats generally shallow over gritty or rocky loams and clays.

Soil type (a) carries a vegetation of scrub, bracken and the finer grasses, type (b) calluna and hill grasses, and type (c) molinia/juncus associations if of better quality and scirpus, erica and vaccinium if of inferior quality.

Elevation

Sea level to 1,874 feet.

Topography

The forest occupies the ground at the southern end of Loch Eck and extends for some three miles along its western side. The outline of the forest is of a very irregular pattern; the area includes also the north slope of Glen Massen and the whole western and southern slopes of the Strone peninsula from Inverchapel to the Glenfinart boundary. Plantations and plantable ground are very steep and all aspects and degrees of exposure are represented.

Tree Species

Apart from the selection of exotic conifers in the policies of Benmore House, acquired woods were mainly of Larch, Scots Pine, Norway Spruce and Douglas Fir. Very good quality timber was obtained from all species but the pine has done least well, possibly because it has always been put on the most inferior sites.

Conifers planted by the Forestry Commission have been mainly the Spruces and Larches with smaller amounts of Scots and Corsican Pines, Douglas Firs and Silver Firs. Norway Spruce is sited mainly on the lower, more sheltered ground; where exposure is greater, Sitka Spruce has been used and on the drier, looser soil areas there are now some satisfactory plantations of Hybrid and Japanese Larch, Scots and Corsican Pine.

Anticipated Final Utilisation

	<u>Acres</u>	
Plantations	3,616	
Nurseries	18	
Agricultural	540	
Forest Workers' Holdings	47	
Unplantable let for Grazing	<u>5,458</u>	<u>9679 acres</u>

Acquired Plantations 447 acres

Planted by F.C. 1,852 acres

F.Y.53 Programme 200 acres

Staff

One Grade I Forester	Mr. J. Jackson
One Grade II Forester	Mr. N. Robertson
Two Foremen	Mr. A. Hopkins
	Mr. C.J. MacPhee

Average number of Workers - 65