Recd from Henry Smith 30/07/01

Glentress Forest School 1947-1949 Tom Johnstone.

The school was housed in a former camp for unemployed men in the 1930's. It was situated about 2 miles south of the town of Peebles. The buildings were the usual long, low wooden huts like an army encampment. Quite comfortable, each student had his own cubicle. Not quite so regimented as an army camp. Toilets and bathroom in a separate hut.. The bus from Newcastle passed the entrance but walking or cycling to Peebles was the norm. The forest of Glentress clothed the hills behind the school. The Beat forester lived nearby and there were the usual small holdings. Most of the forest squad came from the town. The Principal was Tom Robbie with two foresters to assist him. John McKay and Bill Stoddart to supervise the work on the hill and a lecturer Norman Tulloch for the majority of the scholastic work. The school started in 1946. The seniors had done one year. They numbered 21 and our year 36.

The FC had forecast the need for 300 foresters in the years following the 39-45 War with a planned expansion of afforested. The existing schools at Benmore and the Dean were supplemented by Glentress, Gwydr and Lynford. The students had to have spent a year in the Forest Workers Scheme or had worked in the forest before the war

The first entry into Glentress was rather hurried and some had only done six months work. In other cases they had not done a cross section of the work needed. One chap had spent all his time brashing trees.

I do not wish to sound critical only truthful. The second entry, my year, had a lot more experience in forestry work, several were one time forest workers and it was very evident in their approach to work and the actual work. The students were divide up into squads of 6. They sat at the same table in the dining room but were not in the same hut. I was domiciled with senior students due to joining after the starting date, I was destined for Gwydr but managed to change to Glentress.

The forest work proceeded by the season and what was needed.Things like windblow changed the plans. At times we could have done with a change of job and scenery but no doubt the local DO cracked the whip and pointed out he had a programme to complete. I complained to Tom Robbie several times that we should have more classroom work and he always replied "Tom, your work will be 80% on the hill and that is what I train you to do". He also used to state that he was the only school principal who had actually ran a district.

There was a small research team at Glentress and it was always interesting to spend some time with them on their various jobs. I found an interest in forest mensuration which has lasted to this day. I have left sample plots wherever I was stationed. As Glentress was an established forest we had to travel for planting experience together with draining, plantation and road layout.

We joined the local Forestry Society groups in their visits to each others estates. Most interesting to hear other views and appreciate the private estates problems. I had been trained on a private estate and could get on well with private foresters. As one keen FC man remarked "Their biggest worry is when the Lairds hat stand blows over".

An adjoining field was purchased and a forest nursery started.

The classroom work was mainly writing down notes from a dictated set of papers on different subjects. The chap with the best memory got the best exam results. Bill Stoddart did a lot of that work. Norman Tulloch tried to introduce his subjects in a more pedantic fashion

There was a big hut for social occasions. We normally played table tennis but held dances to which the local girls came. A choir was started and performed in the intervals. The Peebles Ladies Hockey team challenged the school. I formed a team and we had several good games. I married one of the girls. It was difficult to restrain the shinty players.

The town had a "Beltane Queen Day" which was greatly enjoyed. Our favourite pub was "The Cleikum". We had a yearly Sports Day" and dance at night. John McKay introduced me to "Tossing the Caber".

Several of the students had had what is usually called 'a good war' and for quite a while the local newspapers were keen to conduct interviews and publish small articles. At times the reporter was a bit over the top and the victim received quite a lot of leg pulling from his squad. The students had a good relations with the townspeople and other marriages took place in the following years. The schoolroom work was not as regular as a college. If the weather was foul it was sensible to spend more time under cover. As I mentioned earlier the emphasis was on the practical work but the syllabus was carried out in the course of the year. We had a catering officer (who married a student) and the food was good. We returned to the school for lunch if we were working at Glentress Forest but when on other forests the school van brought the lunch. After the evening meal the time was our own. Study was a bit erratic,especially on fine sunny nights, but the onset of the exams increased the time spent on evening study. One night, during the intensive study, Tam Robbie entered to tell me I had a phone call. 5 minutes later I was pedalling furiously towards Peebles My thoughts of a Gold Medal abandonned. Our medallist was D'Arcy Black.

In the second year I attended Benmore Forestry School for a term. The idea was to widen one's thoughts and see other forests. The school was in a large house, what one might call "Scottish Baronial" a few miles from Dunoon. I had been in the area during the war and had some knowledge of the area. The Principal was Harry Watson (he had written a booklet on mosses) assisted by two foresters Walter Scott and Mr Carmichael. The Benmore students had dispersed to the other forestry schools leaving the juniors who were quite young compared with our year. The intake to Benmore was around 12 students in each year maybe a bit more. I do not recall a squad system. Glentress was run on liberal lines with a student committee who could approach Tam Robbie with suggestions and complaints. Benmore was very autocratic, Harry Watson ruled the roost. We did manage to get a committee to address our feelings to Harry but he made it quite plain that his ideas were the Gospel. The first working morning young Walter Scott addressed us as "boys". I looked at some of our balding and hid a quiet smile. The work at Benmore for our party was mainly planting, draining and turfing in Glen Masson. We cycled to the jobs. A mornings work would consist of getting to the job, climbing the hill to the planting area, planting 300 plants and then returning for lunch. The Kilmun Forest Garden with plots of trees was run by Research and we took turns to help the foreman at the Garden. Quite interesting. I think it suffered in the 1963 gales. There was a large forest nursery nearby at Uig and we worked there, mainly lining out with boards. A Mr Jackson was in charge and lived nearby. I do not recall doing any production work. A lot of felling had been done in the war years. A strip of trees had been left alongside the lochside to mask the felling. It was all hillside work and we had several trips to see extraction of logs by chutes and overhead wires. We saw road making with Ransome diggers and bulldozers. We did not visit any private estates with the

exception of Bryant and May's poplar areas.
Later as a member of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society I visited many private estates in Scotland/
The class work was given by the 2 foresters on the same style as Glentress reading from notes which we copied down. I don't recall any lectures from Harry Watson although he might have held forth on Mosses. One thing about Benmore which I hated was being put in the " stick shed" on a wet day. I would have preferred to go up the hill and get wet. The food was not as good as Glentress. The cateress was Mrs Watson.
Complaints were not welcomed. I have not eaten venison since then. I would not have liked to spend two years at Benmore.
There was a very keen football team and our footballers joined in with enthusiasm. There was a bus service to Dunoon and Saturday was free to go and sample the delights of Dunoon
The school stood in what could be termed a botanical garden with many trees. I recall some fine sequoias. Apart from the girls in the nursery and the foreman at Kilmun we had very little contact with the locals.
I did meet some of the Benmore students in later years
I returned to Glentress after the term at Benmore a married man. My wife worked in the Mills in Peebles.
We did much more work on other forests in the second year. Cademuir Hill south of Peebles and Elibank near Innerleithen and possibly Traquair (where the Laird closed the Park Gates and not to be re-opened until the Jacobites came back into power). We went through the gamut of operations as necessary plus more work laying out rides and roadways and making out planting plans. I should have mentioned that we took turns being the squad leader (like a ganger). We did more class room work with planning, preparing stock maps etc. We did more outside visits e.g. Stobo Castle, a well known estate in the area. The Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh and Philiphaugh Estate (where the Coventers were defeated). All with the idea of preparing us for the job of a forester.
After the final exams we were informed where we had to report for work. I was quite keen to go to the north of Scotland but a Highlander advised me to go back where I spoke the language and I took his advice. John Kelly left the FC and went to the Roxburgh Estates near Kelso. I met him several times over the years. A man whom I respected and liked. He,too,married the cateress from Glentress. My working life has been modelled on Tam Robbies 80% on the hill and I have never regretted it. Maybe once, when I had the chance of being Bowaters woodbuyer and backed out.
And what of the students. They surely play a big part in the grand scheme to increase the amount of woodland in the UK. I do not think that we felt as if we were holding the Holy Grail. We liked forestry and the open air life. Many of the ex-servicemen did not fancy going back into an office or factory after life in the army. Wecame from the working class background, some from the middle class but all with the intention of getting stuck in. We got on well together, I cannot recall not liking anyone in the two courses. I remember, particularly, Alec Piper, a very good raconteur. He played the part of Col Blimp in a ltte charade we put on. Bob Hart who ran the choir. Joe Metcalfe, the man that Tam Robbie could not handle. David Bridges, who branched off to Estate Management and became the Factor for the Monteviot Estates. Don Slater,ex RAF, who had served in the worst station in the Middle East 'Shabah' and was wont to sing the "Shaibah" Blues. Only a small selection

McKAY.