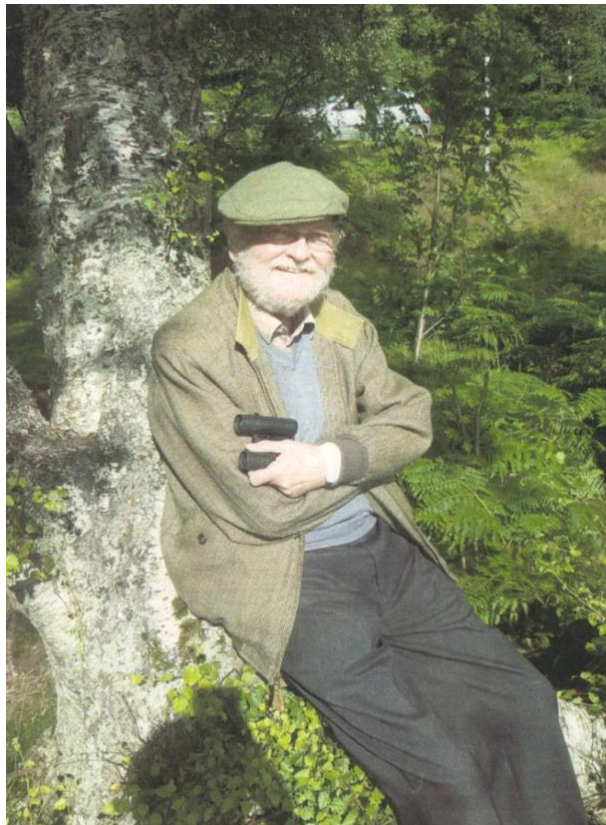


Baxter Cooper 1934-2017

An Appreciation



Baxter Cooper was at the forefront of forest ecology in Scotland, particularly within the world of commercial forestry.

Joining the Economic Forestry Group (EFG) in 1988, Baxter was soon encouraging foresters to “never mind the timber, feel the moss” and with such enlightenment, foresters were beginning to realise that forests and woods grow more than trees. These were radical thoughts at the time and, as Baxter said “we must embrace the fact that forestry is multi-purpose, and be as conscious of its production of wildlife as of timber. Our understanding of wildlife processes in the forests we manage will do much to improve communication and avoid conflict with conservationists”.

Before joining EFG, Baxter worked at Edinburgh University as a post-graduate researcher specialising in Red Deer ecology. As a result of this, he was appointed an Honorary Fellow of Edinburgh University’s Faculty of Science and Engineering on recognition of his work at the Institute of Ecology and Resource Management’s Division of Biological Sciences.

There is no doubt that Baxter brought a sense of gravitas to the role of Forest Ecologist with EFG and then Tilhill when both companies merged in 1991. He was respected both within the wider forest industry and within the growing nature conservation sector who were increasingly taking a view on woodland creation schemes and the need for Environmental Impact Assessments for which Baxter excelled.

It has to be remembered, that employing an ecologist was a radical departure for any commercial forestry company in the 1980s set against a backdrop of growing concern about the “right tree in the right place” and in particular the issues that were fast developing around the Flow Country. The need to reduce conflict and seek common ground was a key theme throughout Baxter’s working life.

John Gallacher, who replaced Baxter as Ecologist in 1999, recalls; *We first met back in the mid-1990s when he was working on a large new native woodland creation scheme and I was working for SNH. We saw in each other fellow travellers with similar interests, outlooks and the same sense of anarchic humour. From that point we never lost contact.*

As is the circularity of life, I ended up taking his job once he had retired in 1999. I always felt he wanted me to have “his” job – to pass the mantle on, to take his commitment to nature conservation forward into a new era. I have felt this sense of responsibility to Baxter from that day.

I used the term “retirement” but in reality, I passed work to Baxter through the years and worked with him in the field. This was a learning process for me – to learn from someone whose field skills had started in childhood and were honed throughout his long life. He never lost that child-like sense of wonder in the natural world. I couldn’t have found a better, more informed and patient tutor – and always there was humour.

When my daughter was born in 2003, I looked to Baxter for some advice: “Teach them about the things money can’t buy”.....and what else is there? When we last met, he talked about his last trip to one of his favourite places – Little Glen Shee. That day he made it up the hill and lay in the heather watching a red kite and a hen harrier. He returned home tired but exhilarated by the things money can’t buy.

And that strong sonorous voice, when even listening to his telephone voice message was a treat but it was put to best use when contemplating the day that had just ended in one of our “bothy nights” and with a glass of Bunnahabhain to hand: “Ah, John such is life....”

During Baxter’s illness towards the end of his life, John kept the older hands within Tilhill updated and from this came unsolicited affection and anecdotes about Baxter (or Bax as he was known to some).

Vaughan Hammond recalled; *“After Tilhill, via Booker, took over EFG’s forestry division and I was asked to merge Tilhill’s structure with EFG’s down in the Borders I met up with Baxter again as we had both been at Edinburgh in the late sixties. In the sixties he was a post-grad with Skilling prior to them joining up as advisors on grouse and deer management. So, we had a formally trained ecologist in Baxter and we had Ronnie Rose as a characterful ex-gamekeeper with strong views and me holding the jackets keeping the scorecards at the meetings down in the ex-EFG Wildlife Centre in Eskdalemuir. Baxter as droll and dry as ever and the neat one-liners.*

The *“cult of the noble savage”* is how Baxter described Ronnie Rose (RR). At one talk, RR puffed himself up and described all the wonderful work around deer management and ‘Ronnie’s Rifles’. Turning to Baxter he said, *“and if you want to know anything about grasses speak to Baxter”*.

John describes Baxter as *“a great field ecologist”* which is epitomised in the undernoted photograph of Baxter surveying a watercourse.



John recalls, *“there was a picture sitting on his mantelpiece showing Baxter leading an expedition in the Arctic with rifle strapped over the shoulder for protection against Polar Bears. Of course, he had not been allowed to carry ammunition onto the plane so the rifle was for effect only – a false sense of security if ever there was one”*.

Baxter was a skilled cartoonist, as can be seen by his cartoons that featured on the front page of the Times Educational Supplement, 10th Anniversary Edition. Vaughan made the point, *“he always had the knack of the cartoonists eye for spotting the particular detail and I thought one delight was his report for a large estate area in the northwest Highlands. The front cover showed a big boulder sitting perched on a sloping rock slab on a hillside. Underneath was the heading title: “A Question of Balance – Natural Resources On North Morar Estate”*. What a brilliant cover!!”



A Question Of Balance

Natural Resources On North Morar Estate

Compiled by Baxter Cooper, MSc, MIBiol, MIEEM

Tilhill Economic Forestry

The following anecdote from Stephen Tong, a colleague of Baxter’s from his EFG days, captures the true essence of the man:

“my strongest recollections of this dear man are of being in his company when he was sat comfortably at a bar, with his pipe, chatting and telling stories. His voice was always quiet and he never sought to project or promote himself, but other conversations would fall silent as his spell was cast and people were drawn to listen to tales that were amusing, educational and enriching in equal measure. I have never witnessed another who has come close to matching Baxter’s warm, humble and effortless gift of attracting and enthraling an audience”.