

CULBIN FOREST

Culbin Forest now extends to 7,380 acres of which approximately 6,000 acres is situated in one block of low lying coastal sand dunes. This runs approximately 7 miles westwards from the mouth of the River Findhorn on the southern shore of the Moray Firth.

The early history of this district is uncertain, but it is probable that for hundreds of years large quantities of sand were brought down to the sea by the River Findhorn and deposited along the coastline by west-flowing currents and tide, building up sand dunes of considerable size, particularly in the area known as the Maviston Sandhills towards Nairn. In 1694 the Barony of Culbin, a large and fertile estate comprising many farms and crofts, was completely buried by sand which was blown from the west in a windstorm or series of storms of great violence. Not even the River Findhorn escaped, for sand blocked the river mouth and the water found another course to the sea, some miles to the east, where it still runs today.

From then until the early 19th century the Culbin sands lay bare, a desolate waste of moving sand dunes with here and there shallow depressions filled with water and known as "Winter Lakes". In 1839 Mr. R. Grant of Kincorth, made the first planting on Culbin when he planted Scots Pine and European Larch on 70 acres, primarily to create a barrier which would present further movement of sand on to agricultural land. This was followed by further plantings by other estates so that by about 1860 there were believed to be about 500 acres planted. Scots Pine regenerated freely on the more sheltered, stable sand areas where it could escape rabbit damage, so that by the end of the 19th century there were approximately 3,000 acres of woodland, though much of this was of poor quality, particularly on the seaward side.

The whole area was logged over during the 1914-18 war leaving only a few scattered blocks and a strip to the north and east to prevent sea erosion, and the  
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encroachment of moving sand on to agricultural land. Culbin was the second forest started by the Forestry Commission in North-East Scotland when the sand-hills were acquired in 1922. This was closely followed by other blocks in the late 1920s including the felled areas in the Low Wood. Further land was acquired following fellings in the Second World War.

Planting on stable sand was straightforward for trees were direct planted without any ground preparation. Moving sand proved more difficult and early trials of sand fixation using marram grass where only partially as gales tended to blow out sand, marram grass and plants on the windward side of the dunes. Thatching trials were instituted in the 1930s using brushwood cut from scrub areas prior to planting and branches or tops of conifers produced in the course of brashing, pruning or felling. Supplies were hauled from plantations over a wide radius by lorry to the nearest point on a hard road. The final journey to the planting site being by wheeled tractor and trailer or crawler tractor and sledge. The brushwood was laid in an overlapping pattern with the butt end pressed into the sand to windward. The weight of the brushwood helped to keep the sand in place but in exposed situations it was pegged down with wires and stakes. As the thatch decayed it gave a useful bonus in the form of humus addition to an otherwise infertile soil. In addition, seed, particularly birch, was carried in and germinated to form a useful mixture with the planted conifers.

About half the present area had been planted when the war broke out in 1939 and work almost ceased when the forest was taken over as a battle training area. After the war following further acquisitions and with the knowledge gained from earlier trials, the pace of planting was again speeded up to about 200 acres per annum. The last big planting programmes were completed about 10 years ago.

Because of the low rainfall varying between 19 - 30 inches per annum, Pine is the obvious choice of tree and 65% of all crops are pure Scots Pine. The climate is also mild with a high sunshine record and low incidence of frost, these conditions favour Corsican Pine and over 2,000 acres have been planted.

This is believed to be the furthest north planting of this tree on such a large scale. Lodgepole Pine has been planted on only a small scale because of its high moisture requirement, other species play a very minor role.

In the ten years up to 1964 almost all the timber output from Culbin was used for mining timber, either sawn or in the round as props, in about equal proportions. The situation has changed and at present 67% of the outturn is made into pulpwood for the Port William mill, most of the remainder being used for saw timber, although small quantities of wood wool and G.P.O. telegraph poles are also prepared. 200,000 hoppus feet of timber is cut annually, mostly in the form of thinnings, with small final fellings of old acquired woodlands. Half this amount is sold standing and half is worked by Commission personnel.

From 1947 to 1954 there were about 80 men in the squad, working on thatching, planting, road-making and production. Planting has ceased except for replanting felled areas and road-making is almost completed. These changes in work availability, coupled with increased productivity through training, have lead to a drastic reduction to the present labour force of 18. Three of these men are currently helping to clear timber blown during the January Gale in West Scotland.

It is necessary to maintain a certain minimum labour force for fire protection. The combination of low rainfall and light sandy soil sometimes causes a wilting condition in the trees which makes them particularly inflammable. To combat the danger of forest fires there are two fire towers linked by telephone to a Fire Control centre at the Forester's Office, which is equipped with V.H.F. radio, so that squads working in the Forest can be summoned immediately any emergency arises and contact can be maintained with fire fighting vehicles which are similarly equipped. Happily there have been no fires at Culbin for several years.