NO DATE WHEN COMPILED.

CULBIN
Laigh of Moray Forest
Forestry Commission

After the Ice Age, the sea stood much higher along the Moray coast than it does today. The older shore line is followed by the road from Nairn to Kintessack and, conspicously by Forres High Street.

The physical story of the Culbin Forest over the past eight or nine thousand years is the story of the recession of the sea from these old cliffs, and the appearance on the flat lands so exposed, of shingle ridges, saltings, marsh and dune.

Looking today at the sands laid bare at low water it is easy to see what would happen if sea level dropped again. Storm beaches built on the raised sand, as they do today to make the Findhorn spit. They were composed of rocks from the hinterland, washed down to the firth as the glaciers melted, and there ground pebbles of innumerable shapes and hues.

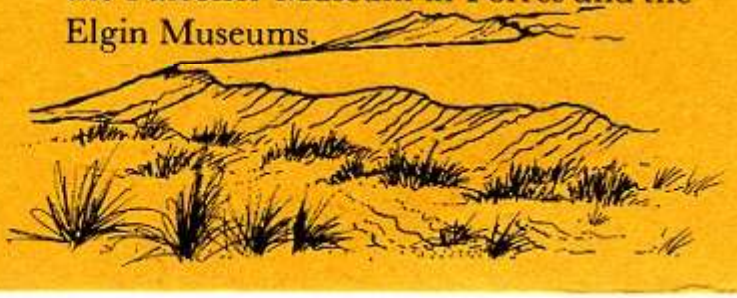
The sea retreated further. Storm beach built against storm beach. Gradually the protected land behind became saltings, then dune pasture, eventually the arable lands of the Barony of Culbin, interspersed with freshwater lochans and ringed with sand dunes.

All the stages can be seen today somewhere along this dynamic, fascinating coast.

Such a country with safe harbour and sources of food to hand was settled early. The first arrivals may have been 5000 years ago but the best evidence comes from shell heaps or kitchen middens, one at least dated to 1100-1400 BC. These are piles of shells, mainly cockles, mussels and periwinkles, but including fragments of the bones of goat (?) pig and cow, and seeds from plants like corn spurrey, goosefoot and chickweed.

Archaeological examination of later settlements is virtually impossible because artefacts of quite different ages are found in the same horizons in the loose sand. On the other hand, before planting fixed the dunes, the Culbins were a happy hunting ground for collectors after each big gale uncovered a new bit of land.

Among the most interesting items found have been stone axes, saddle querns, numerous flint arrowheads, spears, knives and scrapers, large numbers of bronze, brass and silver brooches, over 200 objects made of jet, including the fine terminal plate of a necklace, and a few, much prized, colourful glass beads of Venetian origin. Examples can be seen in the Falconer Museum in Forres and the Elgin Museums.



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By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Barony of Culbin had been in settled ownership for at least 350 years, first in the feudal possession of the family of de Moravia, then, from about 1440, of the Kinnairds. At this time, besides the manor house of Culbin, there were two large tenancies at Aitkenhead and Delaith or Delpottie, two smaller tenancies at Earnhill and Easter Binn and six others of small or trivial dimensions. There was no village west of the river Findhorn.

Around 1660, there were, near Nairn "great floods and inundations of water which did threaten much prejudice to the land". These were presumably the origins of the huge quantities of sand, which, over the next 30 years, moved inexorably eastward. A great storm in 1694 was the final blow so that the laird, Alexander Kinnaird petitioned "his Majesties.... humble Estates of Parliament" for a reduction in land tax or cess in these words: "the best two pairts of my estate of Culbin by ane inevitable fatality is quyte ruined.... occasioned by great and vast heaps of sand which has overblown the same so that there is not a vestige to be seen of my manor place of Culbin..."

No wonder they said the Devil had a hand in the work!

For the next two and a half centuries the eastern quarter of Culbin was a true desert of barren, constantly shifting sands, crossed only by salmon fishers, wildfowlers, amateur archaeologists and the curious.

From about 1840, sucessful attempts were made by the local landowners to establish protective plantations of Scots pine and the European larch around the perimeter of the sands. How they did it is graphically described by John Grigor, a nurseryman and forestry contractor in Forres, in his book "Arboriculture". Rabbits were a major problem. The plantations established around Binsness by Major Chadwick at the turn of the 19th Century included Wellingtonia, red oak and a palm tree, as well as the first Corsican pine.

The Forestry Commission bought the main part of Culbin between 1922 and 1931. Their first task was to replant the Low Wood felled during the 1914-18 War. Initially, the open dunes were stabilised with marram grass. Latterly, particularly in the big areas tackled after the '39-'45 War, the sand was 'thatched' with pine branchwood, birch and broom. Great attention was paid to wind direction and if necessary the thatch was pegged down with wires. The trees were planted almost immediately.

By the late 1960s all the dunes were planted and Culbin was then about 7000 acres. It is part of the 17000 acre Laigh of Moray Forest, the centre of which is at Newton Nursery just west of Elgin.

In the dry climate of the inner Moray Firth and with mainly free draining soils, only pine trees will thrive in most of Culbin. A few examples of many different species can be found here and there, but the three common species are Scots pine, Corsican pine and Lodgepole pine. Birch is an abundant natural species and locally, willow.

Scots pine is the native tree. It covers two-thirds of Culbin, especially on the flat or flatter ground where young Corsican pine will frequently be killed by frost. Generations of Moray foresters have been most careful to collect cones from the best Scots Pine stands so that it is exceptional to find trees which are not straight and fine branched. Consequently, a large number of valuable telegraph poles have been and are being cut from these woods.

Corsican pine, once it is established, grows better than Scots pine, and so has been preferred on the slopes and dunes from which the cold air will drain. It is a Mediterranean species and will only grow this far north, in the warm sunny lowlands fairly close to the sea.

Lodgepole pine is the name given to a very variable species with a huge natural distribution from Alaska to California, and from sea level to timber lime.

Interest in the species has increased markedly as foresters realised its capacity to grow well on the peat lands of the north.

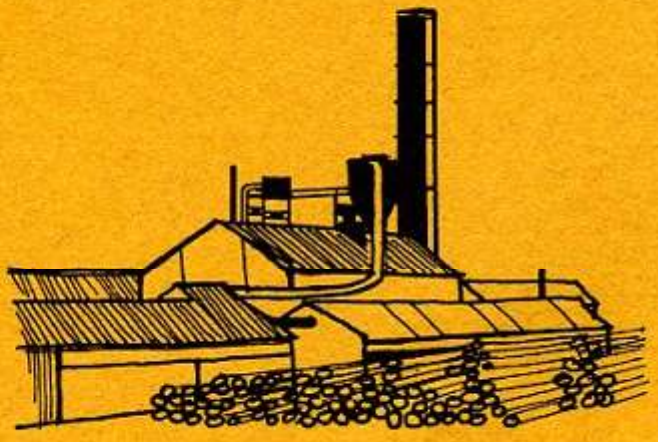
The Lodgepole pine, of many origins was planted over about a tenth of Culbin, on some of the most difficult sites.

How fast the trees grow depends a great deal on how much organic matter lies under the blown sand. Some grow fast on fertile ground marked with grass, ferns and holly. Some are on areas so impoverished that they are little bigger than bushes after 30 years.

The majority grow at much the same rate as other pine in Moray. Corsican pine in particular can be very responsive to nitrogen fertiliser. This is applied by helicopter early in the summer.

These plantations are felled after 55-75 years and immediately replanted so that there is no possibility of fresh sand movement. At this stage three quarters of the volume will be sold to the sawmills and the rest for pulp. Thinnings go to the same markets but there is more pulpwood in the smaller trees.

Every year about 6000 tonnes of wood are sold from the Culbin forest. Gone are the days of the horse, the axe and the crosscut saw. Now trees are felled and debranched by chainsaw and hauled from stump to lorry road by purpose built tractors capable of carrying 8-10 tons.



There are about 200 roe deer in the forest and perhaps 50 badgers. Other mammals are less frequent although red squirrel can often be seen and there are very rare glimpses of wild-cat, otter and even pine marten.

There are many birds to be seen in the forest and more in Findhorn Bay and along the coast.

Perhaps the most distinctive birds are the crested tits. They have been spreading northwards from the Spey valley during this century but were not seen at Culbin until 1948. Now there might be 150-200 pairs. In winter they occur mostly in pairs or small groups but may join other tits to form flocks of up to 50.

There are perhaps 60 capercailzie at any one time. At some moments of the year they are elusive; at others they can often be seen and heard exploding away from the passer by. People lucky enough to see their mating display will not forget them pirouetting round to a jumble of weird noises.

Undisturbed tracts of forest like Culbin are ideal habitat for the woodland raptors, buzzard and sparrowhawk. The period of maximum uniformity is now past. As the trees are opened out by thinning and further areas are felled, the total number of birds will increase and there are exciting possibilities of new species to add to a list which already includes great spotted woodpecker, short eared owl, long eared owl as well as common species like wookcock, snipe, goldcrest, siskin, tree creeper, and members of the tit family.

Culbin is of great interest to botanists partly because there is a mosaic of very different habitats close together — pinewood, saltings, freshwater marsh and so forth — and partly because the exceptional climate of the inner Moray Firth means that some 48 plants are here at their northern limit in Britain.

On the saltmarsh around the forest, perhaps the most conspicuous plants are thrift, the sea milkwort and, along the salt water channels, the sea aster. Amongst the less obvious but equally interesting plants are long bracted sedge and the Baltic rush, growing in regimental lines from a horizontal root.

Much of the heather growing along the coast and inside the forest is a grey variety, adapted to the dry climate of the Moray Firth. A pinewood flora appears very quickly beneath the trees on what was sand dune not long ago. A frequent plant is an attractive orchid, the creeping ladies tresses or Goodyera repens, but the flowers most visiting botanists wish to see are the one flowered wintergreen called Moneses uniflora and an inconspicuous orchid called Corallorhiza trifida.

The Chief Forester can be contacted at Newton Nursery, nr. Elgin Telephone: Elgin 2832