NEWS-LETTER

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Front cover photo: young oak at Woodland Trust's Blaeberry Wood near Whitburn, West Lothian (photo: Ben Averis)

EDITORIAL

Ben Averis

Welcome to the spring 2022 Newsletter, and thank you to all who have contributed. There's quite a varied mix of material here, ranging in subject matter from ecology and woodland management to Tansy Lee Moir's artwork and reports of the recent one-day NWDG meeting in Argyll. For the next issue (Autumn 2022; deadline 15th October 2022), please email any woodland-related material, no matter how short, to me with your contact details included. To get a book reviewed, send a copy to me at 6A Castle Moffat Cottages, Garvald, Haddington, East Lothian, EH41 4LW. If you want to review a book, please tell me; we can often get a free review copy from the publisher, and if you review it the book is yours to keep. Best wishes.

Ben ben.averis@gmail.com

NOTES FROM THE CHAIR

Malcolm Wield

NatureScot is currently considering its draft 'Developing with Nature' guidance, which seeks to secure positive effects for biodiversity, from local development in particular. The draft National Planning Framework 4 refers to 'appropriate measures' to enhance biodiversity against what it refers to as the 'Nature Crisis'.

With such a dramatic stance, we may be pardoned for expecting the 'crisis' to be urgently reflected on the ground, particularly with relief for our under-threat, non-designated ancient and semi-natural native woodlands, frequently being nibbled away by small-scale housing development.

Yet as far as I can tell, with developers there is little awareness of any urgency over a crisis. Most seem oblivious or even surprised that trees are regarded as anything more than a nuisance to the construction process. It constantly surprises me that despite so much effort going into writing such good guidance by good bodies like NatureScot, the importance of healthy and thriving native woodlands remains lost on so many people.

At best we might find this is due to woodlands in the landscape generally being taken for granted – "They have always been there, so they always will be".

At worst, is it because people just don't care?

Going by small scale (building) development in so many places containing native woodland remnants, particularly in places near to watercourses and the subject of my article in this Newsletter, you might be tempted to think so.

The more we can do to influence the care that should be taken during the planning process in this respect, the better.

In a similar vein and thinking about the wider landscape, I recently participated in a 'Landscape Vision Working Group' workshop arranged by the University of East Anglia and Edinburgh University as part of sister research projects to look at the values we associate with our landscape.

During part of an exercise I found myself jolted into immediate focus when I heard one of the participants say "planting trees is actually going against nature". Uh? Trying to remain positive, I reflected on their words. Why would anyone think like this? Then it occurred to me that in many situations this is true. On peatland for example – and in fact on many other non-tree habitats, of course. And, yes, actually *planting* a tree is not nature purely being itself. But is this really going against nature if that is what was being alluded to?

So, what might seem like outrageous comments either from housing developers or land users of any sort would need to be first fixed in context. And doing so might lead us to at least understand. And if we can do that then we might be able to focus on the root causes of what might sound at first like heresy.

I'm full of hope for refreshed planning guidance and would urge everyone to become as fully engaged as you can be with the subsequent management process. We can all do our bit to help practitioners and decision makers (including property developers) protect and conserve our valued and valuable woodlands as they should be doing.

Talking of valued and valuable things, our committee has been active and diligent in lots of respects. It always impresses me that committee members voluntarily give so much of their personal time so enthusiastically on our behalf, despite their busy personal and professional schedules. It is no easy task, but one that has to be enjoyable and worthwhile, so it is so good to know that in straw polls on our membership, their efforts are so clearly appreciated.

None more so than this year. As Covid at last begins to give us some more freedom to enjoy our woodlands, it has been so heartening to see our new programme of one-day events being received so positively. As I write this, we have already enjoyed fantastic days at Glen Finglas and at West Loch Tarbert in Argyll, courtesy of very hospitable hosts, who enjoy our unreserved gratitude. Logie Estate and the River Findhorn woodlands are very soon to be enjoyed too. I'm looking forward to being there.

Regrettably, despite best efforts there have been major casualties in our programme and what we may have continued to enjoy had life been 'normal' over the last year or two. Our annual multi-day excursion to the Lake District was the earliest victim last year. And this year, despite our early hopes, the Woodland History Conference has not proved possible to arrange. Feedback from members was far from conclusive over

what type of conference would be preferred, indoor vs outdoor for example, and for a number of reasons it proved difficult for committee members to fully engage with preparations. Together with the necessary diligence required for these things to be financially viable and despite goodwill all round, the eventual whole committee decision was not to take this year's proposals forward.

On a much more positive note though, feedback from members suggests that interest in the history of woodlands remains comprehensive and as strong as ever. The fascination with where our native woodlands came from, and how and why they have changed over the centuries, is undiminished. A historical thread has become part and parcel of all our one-day events and is clearly as inseparable from the story of our woodlands as is the current outlook for their future. The committee very much hope that the enticing subjects that were intended to form the core of this year's history conference will remain as subjects for future events, such as one-day events or workshops.

Once again, may I ask you to thoroughly enjoy this edition of our Newsletter, put together as usual and so ably by our Editor, Ben Averis. We have some cracking views on a wide spectrum of subjects – so reflective of you, our members, who represent such a healthy and wide spectrum of interests and specialisms. This diversity is surely the trademark of NWDG – and long may that continue!

Woodland stream in Morvern (drawing by Ben Averis)

NWDG ADMINISTRATOR'S REPORT

Alison Averis

Welcome to everyone who has joined the NWDG in 2022. We are delighted to have you in the group, and look forward to meeting you at our events.

At the time of writing this we have 194 members, compared with 188 this time last year. Thanks so much to all of you, for continuing to support us during the last two years in which we couldn't offer our usual range of activities.

We've got £14,783 in the bank compared with £9,823 this time last year. Our finances have taken a turn for the better during the pandemic, with no events to subsidise, and now with no printing and posting costs for the Newsletter. We're thinking about how we might best use surplus funds in benefits for members. More content on our YouTube channel is one possibility, and as a start we are intending to film the activities at some of our one-day events this year.

As Malcolm says in his *Notes From The Chair*, these one-day events are proving very popular, so even with modest attendance fees they are covering their modest costs, in contrast to the traditional three-day residential excursions which had been making four-figure losses over the last few years. They also give more opportunity for you, our members, to be involved in running them – please see the article on page 37.

Many thanks to everyone who responded with an opinion about their preferred format for the proposed Woodland History Conference. These responses suggested that although you were still not happy about attending a full-day indoor event, you weren't that keen on a full-day Zoom event either, and this is part of the reason for our deciding not to hold indoor events until people feel generally more comfortable about them.

Finally, we will have a vacancy on the Committee as Alan MacDonnell will be stepping down at the AGM. If you would like to join the Committee, please get in touch. Apart from the AGM we hold four meetings a year, all by Zoom on weekday evenings, so being on the Committee involves far less time and money than when we used to meet in person.

All the best for 2022.

NWDG VISIT TO FERRY WOOD, ARGYLL, ON THE MORNING OF 20TH APRIL 2022

Elen Averis

On the morning of the first of this year's NWDG day excursions the group made their way to Ferry Wood – 40 acres of woodland bought six years ago by current owners and today's hosts Ed and Carina Tyler. The woodland was bought with the intention of preserving what was already there and to conserve what little we have left of Scotland's disappearing temperate rainforest.

Photo: Alison Averis

The wood is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the owners were awarded a government grant three years ago to help fund the removal of the abundant and problematic Rhododendron: a project which has already been enthusiastically started, resulting in the removal of all mature Rhododendron from the site. Today's visitors were invited to pull out any small young Rhododendrons we came across – this was eagerly adopted by many members of the group.

Photo: Alison Averis

The visit began outside the deer fence that was erected at the same time as the clearance project began. We then moved on within the fenced off area, noting

differences in the vegetation and regeneration as we went – noting very healthy Holly regeneration still outside the deer fence, along with young Birch and Rowan.


Photo: Alison Averis

The woodland is very mixed, mostly consisting of older Oak trees along with Birch, Rowan, Ash and the occasional young Sitka Spruce. Areas at the top of the hill were dominated by young Birch regeneration – a challenge to planting young Oak saplings, given the fierce competition. Old grazing pastures served as an example of the difficulties of encouraging new native growth, as they still remain mostly as open vegetation after several decades, threatened by emerging Sitka Spruce, an issue the owners are determined to tackle – but a challenge, as the Rhododendron issue is currently the highest priority and is extremely time-consuming.

We moved down from the highest point of the wood to the slopes where the results of three years of rigorous Rhododendron clearance were highly evident. Piles of brash (produced by the very effective Lever and Mulch method of Rhododendron clearance) are a useful by-product of this activity, and the owners are exploring ways to utilise it, including burning it to produce biochar, a product similar to charcoal but burned for less time. Biochar can be buried in the soil as carbon storage, or inoculated with bacteria and used as a fertiliser, as the particles have a very large surface area and are an ideal habitat for bacterial growth.


Photo: Alison Averis

Also discussed were the benefits of Lever and Mulch as opposed to the more traditional clearance method of using glyphosate – a substance many members of the group believe will no longer be legal in a few years' time. Despite the massive effort put into the clearance project, it was disheartening to see Rhododendron seedlings already making an appearance in areas of damp open ground. Some seedlings were also coming up within the brash piles, where they are almost impossible to reach and remove. This truly shows the scale of the threat facing Scotland's rainforests today, and highlights the necessity of a concentrated and large-scale effort to tackle the problem over the whole west coast of Scotland.

After a descent through the wood, we made our way to the shore where fantastic host Carina had provided a venison barbecue which, combined with the hot sun, had a soporific effect on members of the group (mostly me) and was very welcome after a morning of fascinating discussion.

Many thanks to Ed and Carina.

Photo: Alison Averis

Photo: Alison Averis

NWDG VISIT TO CLACHAIG, ARGYLL, ON THE AFTERNOON OF 20TH APRIL 2022

Angus Bevan

On a warm and sunny Wednesday afternoon, about 25 well-fed woodland enthusiasts visited Karen Pilkington and Andrew Pritchard's property at Clachaig Farm, South Knapdale.

The woodland on the property falls largely within the Ardpatrick and Dunmore Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and lies on gently sloping, fairly sheltered ground with a generally south-easterly aspect. The woodlands clearly have a long history of varied management, and we came across a number of old dykes and wood-banks, prompting much speculation as to what may have been the reasons for the various compartments. Some of the dykes were admired as rich habitats in their own right, covered in lush bryophyte communities and including rainforest species such as Wilson's filmy fern *Hymenophyllum wilsonii*.

Photo: Alison Averis

The majority of the woodland consists of even-aged pure oak stands with some evidence of coppice management around the margins. We discussed what level of management this implied; whether there had been planting carried out at some stage, or had natural regeneration been managed to result in this uniformity?

The one area which showed high levels of regeneration was close to the homestead, where an even mixture of birch and oak is well established. Regeneration through the rest of the woods was very sparse, presumably due to high deer numbers. Did the free-running dogs belonging to the previous owner keep the deer away from this patch? Where did all the acorns come from? The nearest mature oaks are at least 30

metres away, and downhill. It was pointed out that fairly minimal management of this area could result in woodland of a similar nature to the stands nearby.

Several small burns run through the woods, and the gullies around these support a rather more varied woodland with some ash and hazel and a ground flora that was noticeably less browsed than in more accessible areas. The high level of humidity in these gullies also seems to encourage the bryophytes and lichens, with masses of the lichen Black-eyed Susan *Bunodophoron melanocarpum* to be seen.

Photo: Alison Averis

As we approached the upper margins of the wood, we noticed that the oak trees were of a more spreading, twisty nature, suggesting that these areas had something of a wood-pasture origin. Discussion ranged into the cultural history that could be inferred from the woodland structure, and how levels of browsing and livestock management have varied over the years. At present there are no livestock on the property, but the neighbouring conifer plantations are undoubtedly harbouring large numbers of deer.

Photo: Alison Averis

Andrew has cut out most of the self-sown Sitka Spruce that were spreading through the woods, but we decided he should not rest on his laurels: a few *Rhododendron luteum* were spotted that have spread from a patch near the house; while not as harmful to the environment as their *ponticum* cousins it was agreed that their removal could represent a stitch in time.

Our circuit of the property finished in the ancient pasture alongside the burn which forms the boundary of the farm. We learnt to avoid sitting on the inviting, grassy hummocks that the yellow meadow ants had provided, and retired instead to mossy boulders and the shade of some ancient oaks – a charming part of the mosaic of habitats so typical of Mid-Argyll. After hearing about the aspirations of Action West Loch, and the synergies between ecological and social restoration, we felt the call of the kettle. Pausing only to admire an ancient ash which must have seen many a passer by, we retired to an old fank near to the house where we were treated to a fine array of cakes.


Photo: Alison Averis

Many thanks are due to Karen and Andrew for their hospitality and for showing off their lovely woodlands; it is great to know that this slice of Argyll is in good hands.


Photo: Alison Averis

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON ANCIENT HAZELS

Robin Noble

Pursuing the topic of ancient hazels and the strange forms they may take, I have found and have been reading an important paper by Carl-Adam Haeggstrom of the University of Helsinki; some readers will no doubt be aware of him. He must be one of the great authorities on hazel, and has studied many ancient trees on the Åland Islands in the Baltic. In March 2003 he visited Glen Finglas and Rassal 'Ashwood', on a tour organised by Peter Quelch. The paper appeared in 2012, in MEMORANDA SOCIETATIS PRO FAUNA ET FLORA FENNICA as 'HAZEL POLLARDS' and I recommend it. Here I will simply highlight a few points he makes; some will be referred to the paper I wrote last year on the ancient hazels of Assynt, others need no further comment by me.

1. "The hazel always forms ring-shaped multi-stemmed shrubs in natural, more or less undisturbed stands".
2. "If coppiced, hazels behave in the same way as in natural stands; the stools form ring-like shrubs with a varying number of aerial stems".
3. "The hazel was formerly mostly used as a coppice shrub".

Then, quoting Oliver Rackham and his own study of Åland hazels, he shows an illustration of a "typical multi-stemmed hazel shrub with a height of 8 metres, approximately 95 stems, and a basal girth of a little over 8 metres". It is shown with one person standing inside the internal space. He calculates the age of this hazel to be 934 years. I am in no position to compare the geology, soils and climate of Åland with that of Achmelvich in Assynt, but to suggest that the big hazel on the Feadan croft there, with a girth of some 5 metres, might be in the region of 400-500 years old might not be entirely unreasonable?

He then moves on to discuss hazel trees; he does not define 'trees' here, but the inference has to be that they are single-stemmed. In a group of nearly 100 hazel trees, in Mölndal, close to Gothenburg in Sweden, "the largest were about 7 m high, and the circumference of 52 trees varied between 21 and 96 cms (average 62 cm; measurement at about 1.3 m in height)". The examples from Glenleraig in Assynt easily fit into this group. Then, crucially: "The crowns of the trees were amply branched, indicating pollarding". Furthermore, quoting one Palmgren, (writing in

1915/17): "He is of the opinion that hazels are single-stemmed only if all stems but one are cut and the development of new shoots was prevented by grazing".

In March 2003, visiting Glen Finglas and Rassal, he states clearly that veteran hazel pollards were "abundant". It is a pity that he was not able to visit Assynt at the same

time; as will be seen from my previous paper on this subject, I am convinced that he would have found several others. He remarks that the point of cutting of most of the hazels (and, importantly, black alders), was at about 1.5 metres, and that the hazels grew in groups, like ‘mine’ in Glenleraig: some grew “like fruit trees in an orchard”.

Based on the arguments which I put forward in my previous paper, and this authoritative paper by Carl-Adam Haeggstrom, (and noting, too, the similarity of trees illustrated by both), I think it has to be accepted that in Assynt, and elsewhere, we possess ‘naturally grown’ hazels (and/or coppices) of great antiquity, and single-stemmed pollarded hazels which are almost certainly the product of human management; they have retained their form as a result of subsequent grazing of new basal stems.

This, however, leaves us with a couple of questions: should the ancient hazel rings be individually protected? Or at least fully recorded? And a dilemma: if, to encourage regeneration, we fence the hazel woods, we lose the grazing which maintains the single-stem form; should we then not also fully record these remarkable trees which must have been an important part of the local economy, from well before the time of the Clearances?

Hazel, presumably cut for firewood (photo: Robin Noble)

Double-pollarded Alder, Assynt (photo: Robin Noble)

Triple-top hazel, Assynt, identified by Peter Quelch as similar to some in Glen Finglas (photo: Robin Noble)

RIPARIAN WOODLANDS AND NON-EIA DEVELOPMENT IN THE HIGHLANDS – A PERSONAL VIEW

Malcolm Wield

At the beginning of March (2022), comments were invited from Highland Environment Forum members by Janet Bromham of Lochside Associates, a consultancy engaged by The Highland Council and NatureScot. The authorities were looking at the new 'Developing for Nature' guidelines to support the new national planning legislation.

Janet explained that, specifically, Policy 3(e) of the draft National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) refers to the inclusion of 'appropriate measures' to enhance biodiversity for local non-EIA development *(with the exemption of householders and aquaculture).*

Years ago, on a NWDG outing, I recall an enjoyable discussion on what was then the recently-phrased subject of 'Habitat Networks' – an all-embracing term that conveniently and succinctly summarised the concept of nature moving backwards and forwards through the landscape.

At the end of the discussion, after a natural pause for reflection and with perfect timing, someone whose feet had clearly never left the ground said "It's all about the riparian woodlands".

That simple, practical statement has stuck with me ever since. In fact, it has become something of a mantra for me. As a forester, I can no longer think of anything more important. When you stop and think, dismiss everything you know and focus on what really matters for biodiversity in the landscape in the most simple terms, it *is* all about the riparian woodlands.

Photo: Ben Averis

No matter what other specific habitats or species you might like to expand on, without that arterial network of watercourses, with their diverse woodlands, spreading from the sea to the top of our hills and mountains, and in all their forms, everything else would be isolated, scattered and confined without them. They are so important – perhaps much more than we realise.

Yet, apart from those individual SSSIs, those specific woodlands, wetlands and marshes that we all know about and talk about endlessly, the riparian arteries that carry and support the diversity we crave are so poorly conserved. Even ancient woodlands themselves fall under their scope, and where no designations exist are equally vulnerable to exploitation, destruction and loss. You simply cannot replace the ancient-ness of an ancient woodland. And our record for their removal on a global scale virtually hits the top of the Hit Parade. Forget the tragedy of the Amazonian rainforest for the moment – not many other nations on the planet have already lost so much of their ancient woodland habitat as we have.

'Compensatory planting' is frequently not much more than a sop to make planners and regulators feel better about themselves. Unless landowner goodwill exists and good, responsible care and management takes place, the destiny of any woodland forming part of an arterial network is really in the lap of the gods.

So, Janet's invitation spurred me into sending back some comments.

Whether or not the proposed guidelines hit the spot or not remains to be seen. Whether 'the authorities' do any more than approach them with 'tick the box' mentality is another matter. And whether planners take any notice of any of them is the bottom line.

If they don't, it's too late. The woods are gone, they are no longer functional and the artery is no longer able to provide the life blood of thriving biodiversity that it once could. And – if the land is developed, it's a permanent loss, despite any remedial action that might be proposed subsequently. Like compensatory planting – tick.

The importance of 'non-EIA' non-designated semi-natural woodland, natural watercourses and wetland seems to me to be fundamentally underestimated by the planning process. This may be by landowners considering development, a combination of some of those involved, or by everyone involved in total.

It is maybe not obvious to all, but surely watercourses form the arterial network supporting all habitats and consequently all species in the landscape. Yet this key function is seldom recognised or understood, especially in the planning context. The quality of this network is already substantially and significantly degraded across the Highland area, yet viewed from a development perspective is usually seen as having a

low intrinsic value or little worth. As such, it is frequently exploited and targeted by developers as low risk ground. This practice should be urgently halted.

Very little low-scale development takes place on designated protected areas. This leaves 'non EIA' non-designated but high ecological value habitat such as non-designated wetland or semi-natural riparian woodland highly vulnerable and with no form of environmental protection. Yes, it is certainly true that development proposals must follow the planning process and 'important' habitat considered. This often boils down to an in-house assessment of any trees on site in the most cursory and superficial way – like how old the trees are and if they are likely to die soon anyway. Nothing about restoration. Nothing about loss of connectivity. Nothing about what should be there, what was there previously or what could be there in the future. Nothing, in fact, about anything else at all.


Photo: Ben Averis

Of course, not all 'development' goes through the planning system. Non-EIA woodland or other habitat is often nibbled away bit by bit until its integrity is totally spoiled and it disappears altogether.

Consequently and in total contrast to its ecological importance, high-value habitat is frequently destroyed and permanently lost through small-scale development.

The cumulative effect of this is insidious and already represents significant habitat loss over the Highland area, and is constantly worsening through attrition. The degradation and destruction of arterial habitat networks is therefore incremental.

Once the connectivity of semi-natural watercourses and their associated woodlands has been broken, the remaining habitat above and below the fracture is isolated and is immediately no longer able to perform effectively. Under the current planning process, habitat fragmentation and permanent loss is a feature.

The seasonal attributes of wetlands and watercourses are more often than not ignored by small-scale development. Habitat health indicator species reliant on seasonal wetness such as amphibians migrating to natal pools and patches in minor watercourses are already being dramatically and adversely affected.

All species supported by semi-natural and riparian woodland ecosystems are in major decline, some dramatically so. Some have already been permanently lost. None are improving, a desperate situation being made worse by the inadequacy of the current planning system to protect the non-EIA environment.

All that being said, all is not lost. There is still scope to do something about it.

The planning process should be upgraded to increase the sensitivity to all non-EIA, non-designated but high ecological value semi-natural and riparian habitat.

Planning assessment should involve a mandatory and specific comparison with the Ancient Woodland Inventory and the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland, as well as existing Local Biodiversity Action Plans.

All riparian areas should be treated as sensitive, high value habitat. Riparian areas devoid of trees or with relict or remnant waterside trees, but assessed to be potential riparian woodland should be treated as an extreme priority for restoration, rather than 'easy' development land.


Photo: Ben Averis

Semi-natural woodland, riparian woodland and potential riparian woodland restoration areas should be regarded by planners as being subject to the guidance in the UK Forestry Standard and as described in the Forests and Water Guidelines, especially in respect of the extent of the riparian area and in terms of minimum distances from the water's edge. All development should be avoided in this zone and within these distances.

Raise sensitivity levels and avoid further woodland removal or damage.

The current local authority planning approach to non-EIA semi-natural woodland and riparian woodland is frequently superficial and often poorly-informed. The approach rarely reflects the important critical nature of this ecosystem in any respect, and particularly in the total absence of any assessment of the risk to this habitat and the negative effect on climate change mitigation or carbon sequestration.

Compensatory planting to counter proposed tree removal is an outdated, superficial and completely inadequate remedial measure for the loss of a semi-natural woodland ecosystem, or riparian woodland ecosystem loss.

Unfortunately, I can't readily think of any small-scale local developments in Highland that have undertaken measures to improve biodiversity by restoring, improving or enhancing riparian networks. There must be some, surely?

And, miserably, I can think of plenty that have done the opposite, despite 'proper' planning permission being in place.

Case studies showing positive biodiversity gain would be very useful for planners, developers and landowners considering development. Plus, the formation and adoption by the authorities of catchment-scale management plans as the mandatory basis for all forms of planning and development would be a major improvement.

It is so important to see riparian arteries and their woodlands reflected properly in response to planning applications. Prevention is essential, in fact vital, to avoid damage and loss.

Regardless of all the designations, the protected areas, the specific research, the management plans … if the opportunity is missed on the ground, we will become no more than bystanders to the continued degradation of our nature. The 'Developing for Nature Guidelines' are an opportunity, and this is the time to see them given some proper teeth. Let's hope that happens.

MEMORIES, STORM AND SALVAGE

Paul Ramsay

Memory is a fickle thing. In February 1989 a storm took out plantation woodlands here: a destruction that was repeated in the winter of 1992/93 when storms brought down more woodland and flooded Perth. My memory of these blows, anguished at the time, weakened over the years. Every winter a tree or two would fall, and sometimes groups, but somehow the thought that a storm might come and throw my woods melted away.

I had been reflecting on this blindness when the spring 2022 number of 'Scottish Forestry' arrived. The main theme running through this edition of the journal was this winter's storms, the damage they had wreaked, and what to do about it. A review of Scotland's Forests after COP26 gave writers from a range of interests in the forestry scene in Scotland an opportunity to express opinions in its aftermath.

Much of this conversation focused on the status quo forest model for Scotland: how to make plantations more resistant to storms and other stochastic events. A letter in the correspondence section warned of the menace of the butt rot fungus *Heterobasidion annosum* in plantations, and described a fungicide that that had been developed to kill it but which had been banned by the European Union. A cure, whether chemical or biological, must be invented, said the correspondent. I thought this letter was key to the whole problem of monocultural plantation forestry: it is unsustainable unless you are prepared to use poisonous chemicals on a massive scale, particularly as plantation growers take their land into their second and third, or even fourth cycles of growing the same species.

In my piece for last autumn's number of this newsletter, I described a plantation of mainly Norway spruce here that I had been advised in 1997 to clear fell, but had kept standing and thinned over the years in the hope that it would become a continuous cover wood. At some point it seemed to me that the wood was probably more valuable as habitat for red squirrels and pine martens, and as background to a holiday letting, rather than as timber.

So here we are, in the aftermath of Storms Arwen, Malik and Corrie, Dudley and Eunice, forced to reflect. The beautiful Norway spruce plantation is shattered. The trees that fell to Storm Arwen lie north to south, while those that fell to the fury of Dudley and Eunice lie west to east. A cabin stands out on its own in the desolation, its shower smashed to smithereens, the dry closet battered but standing. People keep coming to stay, despite this, so the cabin, for which the spruce wood was background, is busy: contented visitors comment on the joy of their experience. The ragged appearance of the surviving woodland many even enhance it.

Disruption is part of nature, even when it is anthropogenically turbo-charged by the climate catastrophe. We intend to leave the Tay Bridge Wood (and doesn't its name tell you something about its history?) to recover by natural regeneration, once the

fallen timber is cleared (and how much of it should we leave to rot?). Perhaps there should be some enrichment planting in due course? In the meantime, the cleared ground means that sunlight can reach areas that had previously been in shade throughout the winter. The surviving trees are magnificent, though no doubt vulnerable to winds to come. The truly magnificent survivors are the nearby 150+ year old groves of conifers: Douglas firs and Sitka spruces and some fine firs.

This disruption, then, is not completely unwelcome: in fact it represents an opportunity to establish woods that can grow and survive in the climate catastrophe, even if they have relatively little value as cellulose feedstocks. Perhaps they will have a value in a post-apocalyptic world as reserves of biodiversity?

I thought I had read some of Anna Tsing's 'The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins' some years ago after reading a review in 'The New Scientist'. I say 'thought I had read it', but realised that I couldn't have done, when three anthropology students, who came to study us (individually and separately) in the context of our rewilding project, reminded me of the book. All that I remembered was the bibliography in which I found some helpful references, and a vague memory of the hunting of the matsutake mushroom *Tricholoma matsutake* in the mountains of Oregon, mainly by bands of assorted refugees from the wars of Southeast Asia.

The matsutake mushroom has been picked and valued by the Japanese since at least the eighth century of the Common Era, from which time its pungent odour has reminded its devotees of the time in the autumn when turning leaves are at their most colourful: a counterpart to the adoration of cherry blossom in the spring. Its taste is said to be repulsive to Europeans but prized by the Japanese. Its consumption was the preserve of the upper classes, but had extended to the middle class by the time of the Edo Period (1603-1868).

After Commodore Perry's gunship diplomacy in Tokyo Bay in 1853, the Japanese decided to industrialise rapidly to avoid the fate that had befallen China at the hands of the European powers and USA. A consequence of this was massive deforestation, as fuel had to be sourced to fire the forges in which steel could be made. Red pine *Pinus densiflora* colonised the areas that had been cleared of the old forests of oak and cedar. With the pine came the matsutake mushroom as a mycorrhizal mutualist. A new middle class, benefiting from the prosperity brought by industrialisation, enjoyed visiting the country where the new pines grew, and took on the old upper class's esteem for the mushroom as a delicacy and valuable gift.

By the 1970s changes in forestry practice in Japan had led to the near exhaustion of the matsutake there, but Japanese immigrants to Oregon had noticed the abundance of the closely-related species *Matsutake magnilevare* in the cut-over forests of the Cascades, and began to gather and export the mushroom to Japan. Demand for the mushroom in Japan seems to have reached a peak in the last decades of the twentieth century, and provided refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, along with US

army veterans and other war-weary folk, with precarious employment, though a degree of freedom from the formal world of work.

In the meantime, back in Japan, efforts have been made to restore landscapes in which matsutake can flourish, to the extent of cutting out regenerating oak and cedar high forest to favour red pine.

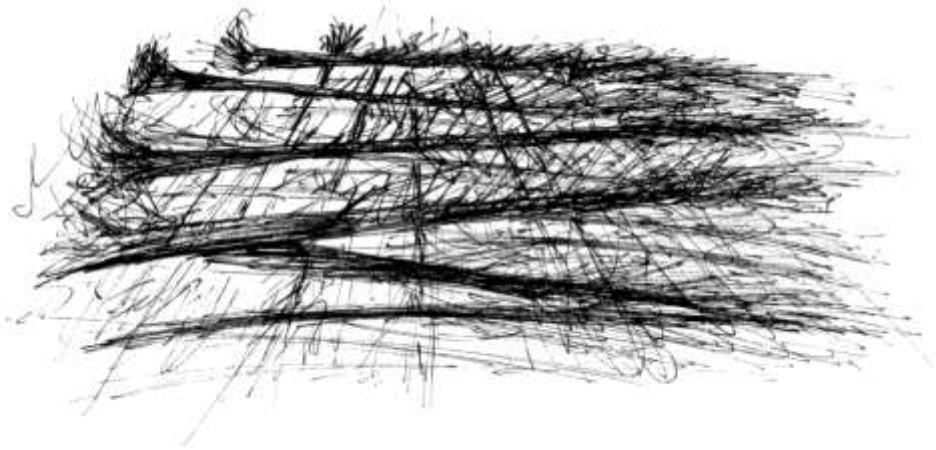
The notion of salvage out of the ruins of an industrialised landscape appealed to me greatly. Above all, as one who studied social anthropology a long time ago, I was delighted to encounter members of a generation of anthropologists for whom the study of humans as part of nature is central.

References:

Scottish Forestry volume 76, no.1, spring 2022.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton University Press.

They fell to the fury of Dudley and Eunice
As we can all see from their easterly skewness
At 90 degrees from the Arwen-blown trees
These winds, they were more than your average breeze
Three in a row, the storms did so blow
As to show no respect for a calm status quo
But everything down and untidily piled
Is setting the scene for a new kind of wild



Poem and illustration by Ben Averis

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING ASH AND ELM IN OUR NATIVE WOODS

Gordon Patterson

Maybe it is an age thing, but it's sometimes hard to be optimistic about the future these days, whether for human civilisation or native woodlands, beset as both are by pestilences and climate change amongst other threats!

But, just as we 'learn to live with Covid', so we have to work out how to learn to help woodlands live with new tree diseases, if at all possible without losing any of our native species.

Although there are others queuing up to cause problems, the most obvious culprits with us already are Dutch Elm Disease and Chalara ash dieback. Both are heavily impacting their host species populations, although of course the elm disease has been with us for about 30 years longer.

In the early part of the elm outbreak in the late 1970s and 1980s it seemed possible that elms would largely disappear or at least that very few large elms would survive. Likewise early predictions have been very gloomy for ash as Chalara sweeps through the whole continent.

Wych elm


Photo: Ben Averis

Things have not been quite so bad as initially feared for our native Wych Elm, although of course the bark beetle that carries the offending fungus is still spreading its range and reaching north- western populations of tree hosts.

We have learnt that Wych Elm does remain as a sapling, understorey and lower canopy species in infected areas, albeit usually in smaller populations than before. And occasional mature trees survive too.

The bark beetle which carries the fungus can attack elm stems when they exceed about 10 cm diameter, although they quite often reach 20-30 cm or more unscathed in my experience. But Wych Elms start producing abundant seed at an early age, often before they are attacked, and so the species can keep spreading by natural regeneration. And it coppices well from the base of stems killed by the fungus.

When I walk in my local East Lothian woods, which are partly native of planted origin and dominated by planted Beech, Sycamore, and Lime, I can see a fair scattering of Wych Elm of both seedling and coppice origin, many fruiting and reaching into the lower or mid canopy.

Ash

Things currently don't look good for Ash, and massive infection and mortality seems inevitable. However it's still early days in the Chalara story and we just don't know how things might go. On the bright side, some studies suggest that a minority of Ash trees, perhaps as much as 20%, have some resistance to infection.

Ash can produce **large numbers of seedlings,** often several thousand per hectare, and their shade-tolerant seedlings and smaller saplings can survive for many years, normally under the canopy of other tree species, while waiting for the chance of release when a canopy gap appears. This should provide a large pool of individuals for natural selection for resistance to Chalara to evolve, provided we can avoid a wipe-out of whole populations of breeding-age trees.

Luckily Ash pollen and seeds can disperse quite widely, and small isolated Ash tree populations are known to contain a lot of genetic diversity, so that even scattered survivors could probably maintain natural regeneration and population genetic diversity. Pollen has been shown to travel long distances, allowing genetic mixing of isolated populations.

The role of Ash and Elm in our native woods

I am cautiously optimistic that we can keep both species in our native woods in some capacity. And this is so important for the ecology as well as the cultural history of our native woods.

It is unfortunate that Ash and Elm are both adapted to similar fertile sites so the combined effects of their loss and the many niches and species they support would be all the more severe.

Sometimes it is suggested that substitution with Sycamore or Maple could plug the gaps left by the loss of Elm and Ash quite well, in the canopy at least and to some extent in supporting some of the same species. Indeed Sycamore is often hard to stop from dominating on similar soils.

However each tree species is unique in its ecological role in the woodland ecosystem, and I think we should be trying to do all we can to at least keep Wych Elm and Ash in the mix.

The same no doubt can be said of all the minor tree and shrub species that have often been depleted by heavy browsing or past silviculture.

For an overview of the ecology of Wych Elm and Ash and their significance for woodland ecosystems, one could probably do no better than read the accounts for these species in the ***Biological Flora of the British Isles*** series published by the Journal of Ecology (open source; just Google!).

These are comprehensive reviews and I recommend interested readers should delve for themselves, but a few snippets here might illustrate the importance of each tree in the ecosystem.

Wych Elm, Ash and Sycamore have quite similar soil needs, all preferring less acid or neutral soils (ideally pH 6-8) with high soil nitrogen and moisture.

Elm is more demanding of high soil pH and nitrogen levels than either of the others. Ash and Sycamore overlap more closely, although Ash likes more moisture and is able to tolerate temporary flooding better than either of the others. Sycamore can outcompete Elm or Ash in dense understoreys. (But both Sycamore and Ash tend to regenerate better under each other's shade.)

Elm first, and then Ash second are also associated with a soil-improving effect when compared to other broadleaved species studied, with fast leaf decomposition, high nutrient turnover and high pH of their leaf litter, and high levels of bases such as calcium and more soil carbon and nitrogen stored in the soil below the organic layers, which may relate to high earthworm populations.

Wych Elm has particularly high levels of nitrogen in its leaves, almost twice as much per unit weight of leaves as other broadleaves studied, including Ash. Perhaps that explains its greater attraction as browse for wild mammals and traditional use as goat and cattle fodder.


Photo: Ben Averis

What's more, the nitrates in Elm leaves were more rapidly converted into other nitrogenous compounds, which plants in the field layer could readily take up and use, when compared to Oak, Sycamore or Beech in one study. And this in turn leads to lower rates of nitrogen leaching out of the soil below Elm compared to other species including Ash.


Photo: Ben Averis

Ash leaves are not much eaten by insects and also seem less preferred by mammals than Elm, and Ash seeds are not eaten much, perhaps due to their phenolic content.

By contrast the copious crop of Elm seeds in early summer is a favourite food of small rodents especially woodmice on the ground, whilst a wide range of finches have been observed to eat them on the tree, including greenfinch, goldfinch, chaffinch, linnet and siskin. No doubt squirrels and woodpigeons will also have a go.

Each tree species has a different suite of associated insects, other invertebrates and lower plants which use them, and some depend entirely on them. With their alkaline bark, Elm, Ash and Sycamore are all important for lichens and bryophytes. Ash bark

can support 536 lichens in the UK, including 84 threatened species, and is particularly important now that Elm has declined so much.

They are more variable and distinctive in the suites of animal and fungal species which use their leaves, litter or wood, both dead and alive.

And it seems comparatively little is known yet about the fungal communities below ground which each tree species can encourage or rely on as mycorrhizal associates.

I am sure some readers of this newsletter have devoured some of the fascinating literature that has emerged recently on the amazing world of fungi and how they interact with trees and other plants – for example the book 'Entangled Life' by the gloriously-named Merlin Sheldrake.

I think that all these facts above help show that Wych Elm and Ash play related but distinctive and important roles in how our native woodlands function, and that we should look to keep them wherever we can, for the overall richness and health of the ecosystem as well as for their interest and usefulness to us.

If we succeed they will both continue to have an important functional role, probably more significant than their percentage share of the canopy, in maintaining the long term biodiversity, nutrient cycling and soil fertility of woodlands, including storing soil carbon.

How to keep ash and elm in our native woods?

Much work is underway and will be needed especially with respect to Ash and Chalara, and no-one yet knows all the answers. But it seems to me we should think about both species with a long-term ecological perspective, as well as a silvicultural one, which can focus more on potential wood production. Aim to keep both going as a component and take chances to improve their lot.

So perhaps encourage **Wych Elm** by protecting against over-browsing and thinning to favour it, especially, aiming at encouraging good early seed crops and regeneration. Accept that it will only rarely be an upper canopy species, but increase its presence in the underwood and lower canopy and at edges and gaps to get the benefits for soils and biodiversity.

Plant it into suitable sites in new native woods, in places where good browsing control is possible (think of it as a browsing indicator species!). Add it to existing woods where it has been depleted perhaps. One can readily grow Wych Elm from local seed.

If Ash is lost to a large degree for a while due to dieback, then even a modest cover of medium sized Elms could support some of the epiphytes of base-rich bark and drive similar soil processes.

For **Ash**, this is no doubt being tried out in various ways now, but I would think about thinning or cutting gaps to encourage regeneration from healthy mature and pole stage trees before they become afflicted, and also to help to release the 'bank' of Ash saplings which often exists under other trees such as Sycamore and Beech. Both Elm and Ash seedlings and saplings in shade could benefit from this, and some of the Ash could prove Chalara resistant.

Planting Ash in new native woods may be thought a waste of money, but seeking to establish new native woods to form habitat networks close to existing native woodlands, which is a good idea for many reasons anyway, should increase the chances of Ash seedlings spreading into the wood in future from survivors nearby.

And meantime, there is all the more reason for Elm to be planted/encouraged in suitable areas of these new woods to help fill the ecological roles that the species share.

It would be great to hear from others about experiences with these species and ideas for their future.


Photo: Ben Averis

CALDER WOOD – AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

From Jane Begg *(Tree & Woodland Officer, West Lothian Council):*

Calder Wood, nestled and protected between the Murieston and Linhouse Waters close to Mid Calder in West Lothian, is a remarkably biodiverse site and well worth exploring at this time of year when the Bluebells (Wild Hyacinth) and Wild Garlic carpet the woodland floor. Despite being located very close to a large urban population in Livingston it is an oasis of nature.

The majority of the site is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its semi-natural woodland and also for an area of fen. It is one of the major woodland SSSI sites in Lothian, and one of the very few relatively level ancient woodland sites in south-east Scotland.

The central plateau woodland is almost exclusively mature/semi-mature broadleaved woodland largely dominated in the south by Oak and in the northern/central areas by Birch. There is also an area of the plateau which was grazed by cattle within living memory. This and the north-east-facing slopes contain a number of large mature Beech trees, with some Scots Pine and Horse Chestnut trees, thought to have been planted to complement the landscape plantings around Calder House which overlooks this area.

In the past decades there have been discussions with officers from NatureScot and their predecessor organisations regarding the appropriate management of these veteran Beech trees. The felling and 'monolithing' of some of these a number of years ago was met with horror by local people who value them greatly. As was discussed on a Royal Scottish Forestry Society study tour a few years ago, there is now greater appreciation of the specialist flora and fauna associated with these slowly crumbling veterans of any species, as well as their landscape value, and the SSSI management guidelines have been changed to allow these to remain.

In 2016/17 local artist Tansy Lee Moir was Artist in Residence for West Lothian Council, taking Calder Wood as her subject. I visited her exhibition at the Howden Centre in Livingston and was moved by her depictions of the old friendly giants at Calder Wood. She now has another exhibition currently running in the Burgh Halls, Linlithgow, and I went down to meet her one lunchtime a week or two ago. We discovered that we are both members of the NWDG and thought other members might be interested to see some of her work inspired by this special site in an unexpected location.

From Tansy Lee Moir:

Despite working around West Lothian for 20 years, I didn't discover Calder Wood until I began searching for ancient woodland sites on old maps in preparation for my artist residency.

On my first visit I immediately felt like I'd entered a rare island of wildness in an otherwise urban, industrialised landscape. Crossing the bridge where the two waters

meet at the northern end of the wood, I was struck by its richness and variety – this was clearly ancient woodland. However, I was to learn that its story is complex: it has been a gathering place for drovers passing through and a former shale mining area, Beeches were planted to enhance the views, Oaks felled in war-time and there are banks and cuts suggesting more intensive human interaction at some point. The local knowledge of West Lothian Council Ranger Kirsty Morrison helped me to understand some of these layers of history evident in the landscape.

Over the course of a year I made repeated trips to explore, sketch and photograph, following the many paths and animal tracks that criss-cross the woodland to explore all its corners. I found a wide variety of habitats and some outstanding trees, including one with the oldest arborglyph I've seen yet.

Calder Wood's veteran Beeches became my focus for the residency, with their decaying bulk providing a poignant contrast to the vibrant natural regeneration around them. I made a series of charcoal works of these old trees, using strong contrasts of light and dark combined with delicate details to highlight their beautiful decline. The resulting drawings have led to similar works in oils showing currently at Linlithgow Burgh Halls.

I was a frequent visitor to the woodland in 2020, when I began documenting some of the many phoenix trees I found there (mostly Birch) in sanguine and conté. Their capacity to adjust to sudden and catastrophic change was an inspiration to me at the time, plus they made exciting subjects for *plein air* drawing. It's so unusual to find a woodland full of trees apparently 'doing their own thing' and I still discover something new and remarkable on every visit.

Tufted phoenix Birch south, at Calder Wood (drawing by Tansy Lee Moir)

Charcoal drawings by Tansy Lee Moir

Bundled Beech *

Collapsed Beech

Hollow-hearted Beech

Shell Beech

** A larger reproduction of this picture is shown on the last page of this newsletter*

Tansy's solo exhibition, 'Turning Towards the Light' is showing at Linlithgow Burgh Halls until 26th June. It's open every day, free to visit and no booking is needed. If members might be interested in a group trip to the exhibition and a wander around the wood this could be arranged.

Links:

Exhibition page:

https://www.tansyleemoir.co.uk/about/exhibitions/turning-towards-the-light-exhibition/

Burgh Halls page:

https://www.linlithgowburghhalls.co.uk/article/72064/Turning-Towards-The-Light--Tansy-Lee-Moir

Online artist talk (free 19th May 7.30 – 8.30pm):

https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/turning-towards-the-light-artist-talk-tickets-327956766517

Hot off the press - This gem of an ancient woodland has just been selected as one of 70 ancient woodlands dedicated by the Queen's Green Canopy to celebrate Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee. The purpose of these dedications is to raise public awareness of the special qualities of ancient woodland and encourage their protection. Most NWDG members are already very aware of this but might be interested to peruse the lists of Ancient Woods and Ancient Trees chosen from those nominated across the UK. Online link:

70 Ancient Woodlands and 70 Ancient Trees - The Queen's Green Canopy (queensgreencanopy.org)

Calder Wood, West Lothian (photo: Tansy Lee Moir)

Calder Wood, West Lothian (photos: Tansy Lee Moir)

Calder Wood, West Lothian (photos: Tansy Lee Moir)

ALLT RHYD Y GROES NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE, RE-VISITED IN APRIL 2022

Keith Kirby

I first visited this wood in mid-Wales in 1980 but had not been back since 1997. Two things stuck in my mind particularly from that first visit: it was in the heart of red kite country when the British population was only a few tens of birds, and the dense rowan regeneration below the oak in a sheep-fenced exclosure. Now kites are commoner than buzzards across much of the country, but how had the wood fared?

The wood lies on steep slopes in a narrow valley, accessed by a dead-end road. The approach was made more dramatic by the dark crag opposite, showing the remnants of a recent hill fire. The main block is an oakwood but there were several blocks of slope alderwood which I now see as a common component of British uplands: perhaps the expansion of alder in prehistory seen in the pollen record also involved alder spread away from the riversides with which it is more usually associated.

I don't remember exactly where the 1980 exclosure was, but fortunately there are now other sheep fences around most of the main block. These are not completely free of sheep – perhaps they are not meant to be, in that low levels of grazing may help to maintain the mossy appearance of the wood and stop the bramble becoming rampant. That just sheep-fencing made and still makes quite a difference is an indication that deer are still scarce here, although I had noticed one or two casualties on the drive along the roads through south Wales. It is not really a fair comparison but a bit of grazed woodland below the track on the way in showed the impact of very heavy grazing.

There were, as there nearly always are, some young 'seedlings' amongst the vegetation, though these did not look as bitten back as might be expected in a grazed wood. Holly was the most noticeable at this time of year. However, it was the 1-2 m high saplings, mainly of birch, that were particularly encouraging to see.

There were a few mature oak trees that had blown over in this last winter's storms, but also a lot of old-fallen oaks from, I guessed, about 30 years ago. Distinct clumps of birch were often associated with these blowdown gaps. Checking my slides when I got home revealed that those from 1997 showed relatively recently blown trees, so the Burns' Night storm of 1990 was probably responsible for the past major windthrow.

Towards the bottom of the slope, where there were some larger bracken glades, there were a few oaks. The glade was only about 20 m across and the trees were just under the edge of the canopy, perhaps where the shade reduced the competition from the bracken. Further along, the understorey consisted largely of rowans of about 5-10 cm diameter – perhaps the site of the exclosure seen in 1980.

The lower slopes where I walked would be expected to be more grassy, as there is deeper and probably richer soil than further up the slope, but at least in places the moss carpets were still present and there were microsites such as damp rock faces with good bryophyte cover by streams. An indication that some regular grazing is still occurring comes from the much better growth of bilberry, ivy and honeysuckle on the top of large boulders which act as refugia (and the odd trespassing sheep!).

On the whole, I think the wood has fared pretty well.

Rowan understorey at Allt Rhyd y Groes (photo: Keith Kirby)

Birch regeneration in a canopy gap at Allt Rhyd y Groes (photo: Keith Kirby)

SUGGESTIONS, PLEASE, FOR ONE-DAY EVENTS IN 2023

Alison Averis

It's time to start thinking about our programme of one-day events for 2023 – would you like to be involved?

Do you own, or manage, or have any professional or personal interest in a local wood? Is there something about what happens or has happened in that wood that you would like to share with other NWDG members? Or would you welcome some advice or suggestions for what might happen in it?

The one-day events programme for 2022 is proving extremely popular. We've still to advertise the last of the six events, and already we've got more people involved than would typically attend a single three-day excursion. This is very encouraging, because the logistics of the residential excursions have been increasingly challenging in recent years: it's no longer easy to find an area with enough native woodland activity to fill two and a half days' worth of varied and enticing visits, together with affordable local accommodation for around 40 people; and the rising costs of accommodation and transport have meant that these events have run at a loss since 2015. **But if we have one wood where there is something worth discussing, one person to lead the visit, and enough car-parking space nearby**, **we have enough to hold a one-day event.** This means we can go to places where we have never had a traditional excursion, such as the Central Belt, Fife, the north-east lowlands, Moray, the Angus glens … and see and discuss previously-unexplored aspects of woodland ecology, management and history. Here are a few ideas to consider:

- Small-scale woodland restoration – you don't have to be working at the scale of Glen Feshie or Carrifran to be making a difference to local biodiversity.
- Are you doing any interesting or experimental conservation management?
- Food from the woods – foraging for fruits or fungi, tapping birch trees for sap, beekeeping, rearing wild boar?
- Timber extraction and use – hand axes and horse logging? Portable sawmill or water-powered machinery? Latest high-tech approach to felling and timber preparation? Building houses or making furniture? Beams or baskets?
- What about other woodland products? Seed collection? Charcoal-making?
- Woodland history and archaeology – is this a wood with a long history? Is there any evidence of that history? Was it once part of an Iron Age village? A mediaeval farm? A monastic rabbit warren? An 18th- century deer park? If it was harvested for timber, where did that timber go, and is it still there? If it's in a building close to the wood, could that be visited as part of the event? Or what about the remains of industrial timber extraction and use such as charcoal furnaces, bobbin mills or sawmills?
- What about wood pasture? Ancient policy woodlands with veteran trees?
- Is the wood somewhere unexpected – anything from a former raised bog to a former industrial site? How has that affected its ecology?

- How old are the trees? Would you like to find out? We have dendrochronologists …
- What about woodland education and how the local community uses the woodland – forest schools and peaceful dog-walkers, or fly-tipping, drinking dens and raves? Is it valued? Is it seen as an asset for practical reasons such as flood control?
- Is there an issue with invasive non-native species – not just *Rhododendron*?
- Could there be a focus on woodland animals – badgers, beavers, wild boar – possibly with an extension into the evening to watch them?

Or maybe there's an interesting way of visiting or being in a wood that wouldn't work with a large group, but would be practicable for the smaller numbers attending a one-day event. What about a boat trip to a wooded island, or round a wooded swamp? Spending a night camping/in a bothy to facilitate getting to a really remote bit of woodland or scrub the next day? Abseiling into montane scrub on cliff ledges? OK, the last one is maybe a bit ambitious and I doubt our insurers would be impressed, but the point is that these events don't have to be limited to approaches that would have worked on a traditional excursion – they can quite literally cover new ground.


Photo: Alison Averis

These are just a few ideas, and we would welcome any suggestions. But do think about how many people could potentially attend. How much car-parking space is there – either at the site or close enough to leave some of the cars and get into a smaller number for the last bit of the journey? Is there enough space in the wood for people to gather for discussion, or is everyone going to be strung out along a narrow path? Can you cover the ground in a day, given that the group will take three or four times as long to get from A to B as it takes you to do it on your own? By the end of this year we'll have a better idea of the numbers to expect at any one event, but experience so far suggests that you could very easily get 20 bookings – more for something a bit more novel or exciting. Conversely, it's probably best not to choose

the local showcase woodland, as many of your potential audience will have been there already.

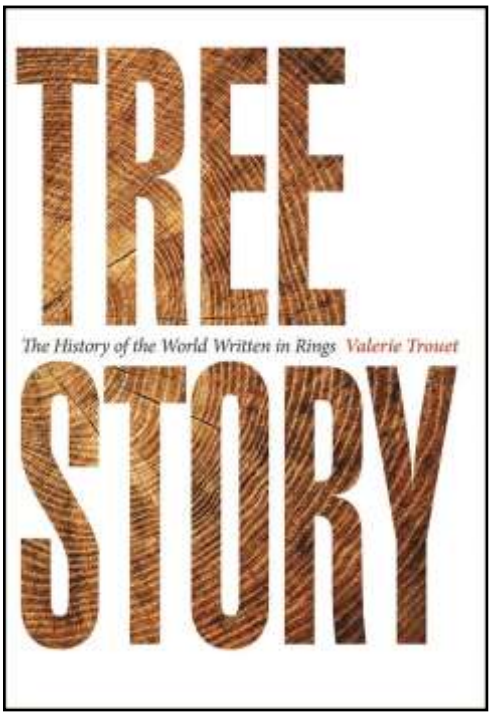
Each annual programme will include a wide geographical spread of events, so that as many members as possible have the opportunity to attend somewhere reasonably local. There's nothing to stop people travelling further afield to attend an event, though if any one is massively oversubscribed we do reserve the right to give priority to those who live closer. Experience so far suggests that people are willing to travel up to a couple of hours at each end of the day.

Here's a map of the geographical distribution of our members, based on postcode. You'll see that there are parts of the country where it would be a challenge to get 20 local members and others where it would seem easy, so please bear this in mind when making suggestions.

We will work with you to organise the day, with a committee contact to help with everything that needs to be done and a clear outline of what we need and when. You don't have to be the visit leader yourself, as long as there is someone who can do it. We will cover expenses, and also the cost of laying on refreshments if at all practicable: this can be anything from tea and cake to a full-on venison feast.

Please get in touch with any committee member if you'd like to be involved in the programme for 2023. You will be greeted with joy and offered all the help and encouragement you could desire.

TREE STORY: THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD WRITTEN IN RINGS BY VALERIE TROUET



ISBN: 978142143774. John Hopkins University Press, 2020. Hardback, 246pp, £20 (Paperback edition due June 2022).

Review by Coralie Mills

This review first appeared in *Scottish Forestry* Spring 2022 edition, the journal of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society which is sent to all RSFS members. You can join the Society at https://www.rsfs.org.uk/index.php/become-a-member.

The author, Valerie Trouet, is unusual in at least three ways: she is a dendrochronologist, and we dendrochronologists are a small and specialised profession; she is a female professor of dendrochronology, an even rarer phenomenon; and perhaps most importantly, she is a gifted science communicator and storyteller. From Brussels originally, her passion for tree-ring science has taken her to work in woods and labs in many countries across the world, and she is now Professor in the 'mothership' of dendrochronology, where it all started a century ago, the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research at the University of Arizona.

The reader is drawn into the world of dendrochronology through biographical notes, disarmingly funny, but leading in every chapter to an illustration of how the study of tree-rings has revealed hugely significant discoveries in so many inter-connected fields of human, climate and environmental history. The book reflects so wonderfully how dendrochronology, apparently such a tiny, specialised field of science, is able to work holistically, deploying microscopic detail to comprehend the workings of global systems.

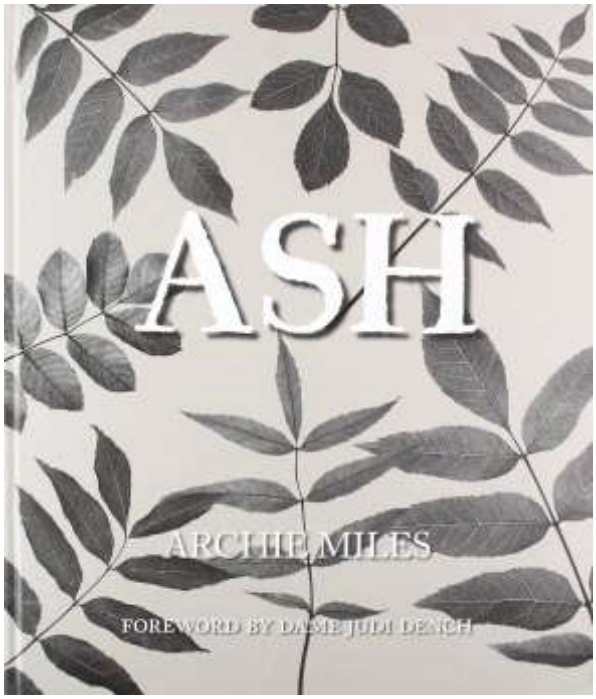
The principles in dendrochronology are introduced in an accessible and engaging manner, such that the reader will soon appreciate how the apparently simple concepts of tree-ring counts and cross-dating are the start points to the increasingly sophisticated and diverse science of dendrochronology. We come to appreciate how remarkably valuable trees are for revealing earth's history, their slow heartbeats providing long annually-resolved time series more reliably and more extensively than any other natural register. The ubiquity of trees across much of the earth's surface, the way trees record so many different phenomena within their rings, and the precision with which an event recorded in those rings can be dated all add to the power of dendrochronology to understand our past and to inform the best approaches to healing our shared future.

Professor Trouet is a dendroclimatologist, and many of her chapters revolve around climate studies, for example in 'The Hockey Stick Poster Child' exploring how tree-ring data provided the evidence for anthropogenically-induced rapid global warming in the 20th century and the political shenanigans that followed publication of that evidence. In 'Will the Wind Ever Remember', for example, she shows how comparing long data sets from around the globe has allowed much better understanding of related changes in the Jet Steam and the North Atlantic Oscillation, including crucial data from Scotland.

The thrill of the unexpected discovery, the rigours of fieldwork, the puzzle-solving mentality of dendrochronologists and the collaborative nature of our science are represented wittily and without any unnecessary exaggeration. Professor Trouet's holistic outlook shows how dendrochronology at its best is an inter-twined whole, where human history, climate change, trees and wooded environments are related facets of our past and present. Towards the end of the book, in considering the future, she discusses very ably both the advantages and risks of relying on extensive tree-planting as a nature-based solution to capturing carbon and mitigating those human impacts on climate.

This beautifully-written book has won several awards, including the World Wildlife Fund's Jan Wolkers Prize, and it was one of *Science News*'s 'Favourite Books of 2020'. If you only ever read one book about dendrochronology, I suggest you make it this one. You won't regret it.

ASH BY ARCHIE MILES



ISBN: 9781527222960. Published by Pearson Bark Books. 2018. Hardback. 216 pages. £20.

Review by Mick Drury

Ash, the 'Venus of the Woods', the 'Tree of Life', is as much entwined with our culture and the rural economy as the oak. From folklore to fodder, firewood to furniture, its rich and valued association with our lives is evidenced by its praise in song, poetry and art, and by the extent of ash-related place names throughout the land.

As a teenager Archie Miles witnessed the demise of the elm, with just Wilkinson (1978) thinking to record its passing. Given the onward spread of dieback, Miles wanted to record the ash in all its glory before it's too late, and this book is the result, a celebration rather than an epitaph. It's a large-format hardback, printed on quality paper, as short chapters with colour photos on almost every page. A coffee table book

to dip into, to relish, to return to. It's a timely achievement given that the windborne spread of the fungus is moving faster than the elm beetle did.

Chapters include a botanical overview, the place of ash in the landscape, ash woods, place names, its uses, mythology, remarkable trees, associated species and, of course, dieback. Miles has a relevant track record, having previously written 'Silva' and 'The British Oak'. 'Ash' is equally well researched, with an impressive range of historical references and quotes. Thus, for instance, we learn that it was the Rev. W. Gilpin, one of the originators of the idea of the picturesque, who coined the 'Venus' epithet in the late 18th century. Other sources include John Evelyn, William Cobbett, Henry Elwes and Arthur Tansley.

The woodlands he celebrates are mainly those on the limestone – the Derbyshire Dales, the Mendips, and limestone pavement in north Yorkshire. Some impressive wood pasture and old coppice sites are covered, including the famed Hayley and Bradfield Woods, the latter where Rackham thought the ash stools could be up to a thousand years old. He travels to the Rassal Ashwood, known as the most northerly in Britain; I must clean my boots and head off there before the inevitable comes to pass. As an enthusiast I'd have liked to see a wider selection of woodland types featured where ash is prominent, e.g. the rich riparian/wet flush alder woods, which he does mention in passing; however, the ecological range of ash would justify a book in itself.

Ash at Chapelton Farm, Forres, Moray (photo: Mick Drury)

Given its resilience and rapid growth, and the wood being unique for its combination of strength and elasticity, suppleness and shock absorbency, ash was a valuable resource until recent times. Known as the husbandman's tree, pollarded or coppiced poles were used for turnery, rake-making, chair-making, coopering, tool handles, the rims of cart wheels… a wealth of traditional uses, not to mention its fame as firewood.

Miles tracks down some of the remaining craftspeople keeping these skills alive, including Rob Penn, who has produced or commissioned a total of 45 items from one felled butt: cricket stumps, a hurley stick, turned bowls, spoons, tent pegs… you'll have to buy the book. If you know of anyone with an old Morris Traveller lying about, its renaissance as a classic car has come.

Was it the ash that was revered as the Norse Tree of Life? Miles debates the evidence pointing to the yew as being more likely. Nevertheless, the tree has many associations with healing, good fortune and protection from evil. Did you know that it's believed to have provided protection against snakes and snakebite since the time of Pliny? And the curious ritual of passing a child suffering from rupture or weak limbs through a split ash trunk lived on until the late 19th century. 'Save the NHS!' I'd say, although there is some modern use of ash by herbalists, including the seeds, these also appreciated by Evelyn as an alternative to capers.

Landscape trees are featured, from parkland, tree-lined roads, wood pasture to hedgerow. Another chapter describes notable champions and ashes of historical significance, again well researched. As someone who attempts to photograph trees with mixed results, I think he and the other photographers do well to portray these in different seasons. One in Glen Lyon is reputedly the largest in Scotland, with a girth of 6.4 metres. Again in Scotland, the curious choice of ash as dool trees (gibbets) and jougs (stocks) is explored. I was prompted to knock on the door of a Victorian house here in Forres, where a veteran ash resides in the back garden, pollarded in recent years. I spotted it some years ago from the roadside and have often thought to visit. The newish residents were very happy to show me their tree, which probably predates the house, a great hulk, some 1.54 m dbh, with rot pockets and cavities, and new shoots arising.

Pollarded veteran ash and its owners in Forres, Moray (photo: Mick Drury)

Mitchell *et al* (2014) found that 1058 species are associated with ash, of which 106 are highly dependent including 44 obligates. The chapter on these focuses on some of the lichens, bryophytes and fungi, again with good photos, but it's inevitably a brief overview and a shame he omits the invertebrates, apart from mites; I guess this again would be a book in itself.

And so to dieback. As he says, "ash is an opportunist and a survivor, but its greatest test is unfolding". What does the future hold? The disease is not so prevalent here in Moray as yet. However, on a recent trip south it's all too evident, including watching arborists dismantling affected trees above a popular woodland path in the Porter Valley, Sheffield. On the positive side, he quotes research suggesting there is much greater genetic diversity amongst British ashes compared to those in Europe. And he speculates that missing mycorrhizae could be part of the reason that young ash plantings have been so prone to dieback; indeed, recent research, some of this at the renowned Lady Park Wood, suggests that there is resistance amongst established trees in the population. With the emerald ash borer getting ever closer, he pleads that now is the time to strengthen our border biosecurity; Monbiot (2019) subsequently takes this up, but I don't know if anything has changed, apart from a growing list of threats. And he asks: will the sycamore now come into its own? A potential challenge to public perceptions.

Finally the 'inspirational ash'. Lying in the centre of David Nash's living sculpture '*Ash Grove*', hidden away in woodland in north Wales, he's "consumed by an overwhelming sense of tranquility". And he observes the artists Ackroyd and Harvey at work on a commissioned piece '*Ash to Ash*', based in part on yet another important historical use of the wood: the arrow; think Agincourt; the ailing tree's response to dieback, producing lots of epicormic shoots, struck them as the tree's attempt to arm itself. See the finished pieces installed at https://www.ackroydandharvey.com/ash-to-ash/

Well done to the Woodland Trust and The Ash Project who sponsored this book, available from the WT for £20 currently, good value I believe. For a preview, see Miles' illustrated talk at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pd0npmhWvA4. As Judi Dench says in the foreword, '... this book will stand for many years to come as the definitive record of one of our most valuable, admired and beloved native trees'. Time to get out and about and celebrate the ashes in your area!

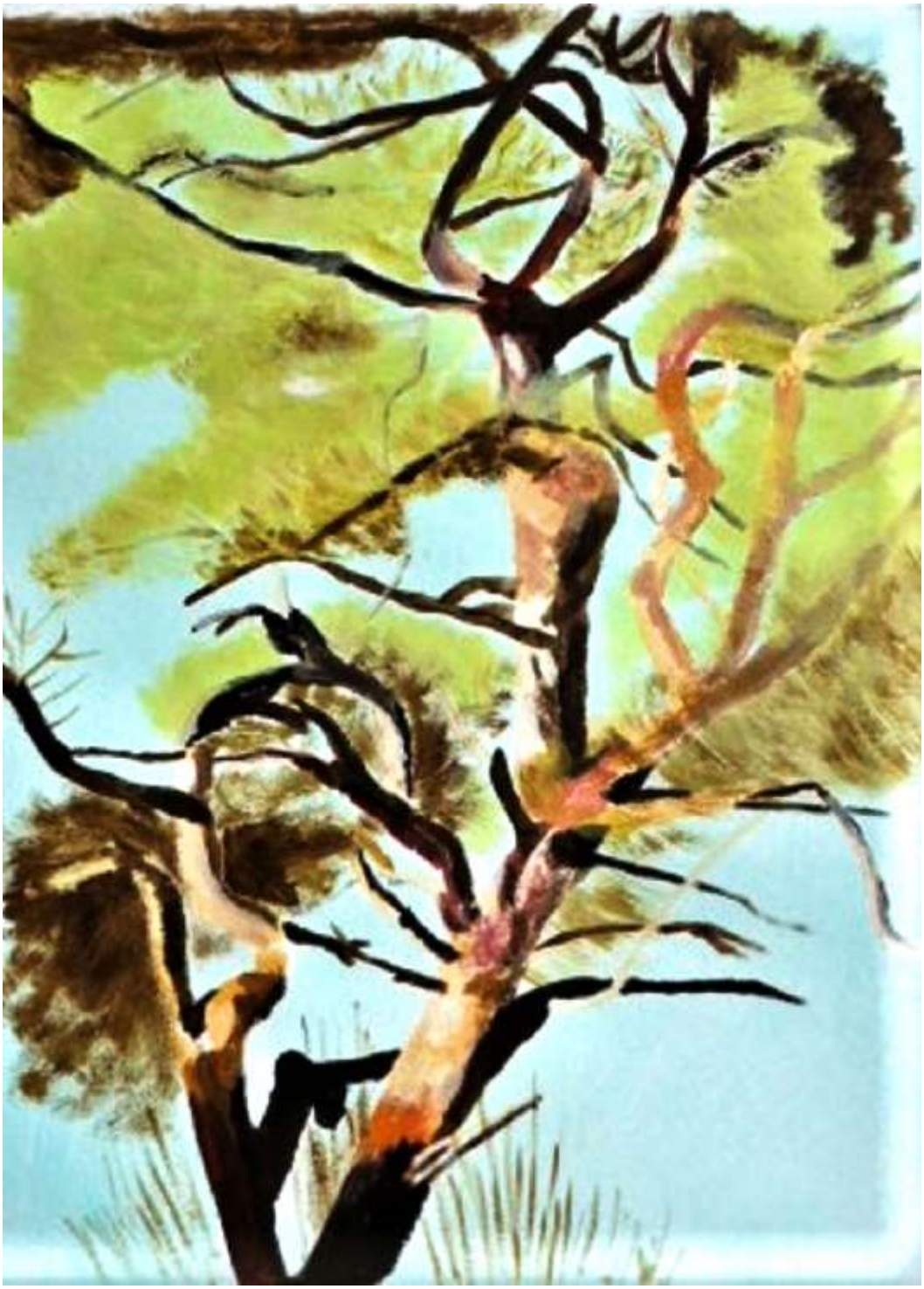
References

Mitchell et al. 2014. The potential ecological impact of ash dieback in the UK. *JNCC Report No. 483.*

Monbiot, G. 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/15/ash-dieback-killer-plagues-britain-trees

Wilkinson, G. 1978. Epitaph for the Elm. Hutchinson.

A FEW PAGES OF ARTWORK AND PHOTOS



Veteran Scots Pine at Drum Old Wood, Banchory. Artwork by Gavin Johnston

Above: Sorbus berries (stone lithograph and screenprint by Gavin Johnston; 21x15 cm)
Below: fence panel (stone lithograph and linocut by Gavin Johnston; 21x21 cm)

Around Kaimes Hill, Dalmahoy, just W of Edinburgh, in March 2022 (photos: Gavin Johnston)

Currie Wood, Midlothian, in May 2022 (photo: Ben Averis)

West Loch Tarbert Sculpture Park? No – biochar kilns on display at the NWDG meeting at Ferry Wood, Argyll, on 20th April 2022. Photos: Alison Averis.

NATIVE WOODLANDS DISCUSSION GROUP CONSTITUTION

Name: The organisation shall be the Native Woodlands Discussion Group.

Aims and objectives: To encourage interest in native woods, their ecology, management and history.

Activities:

- Organise at least one Field Meeting with related discussion each year.
- Organise Workshops on subjects suggested by members.
- Organise Conferences, Seminars or other Events as approved by the membership.
- Issue Newsletters with an emphasis on members' contributions.
- Maintain contact with like-minded organisations through the membership.
- Undertake any other activities deemed appropriate by the membership.

Membership: Open to any interested individual. No corporate membership. Subscriptions shall be set by the committee, with approval of the membership, according to the following categories: (a) Individual, (b) Family (1.5 x full rate) or (c) Concessionary (0.6 x full rate). Membership will cease 18 months after payment of an annual subscription. The committee will advise the Field Meetings organiser for the year of the fee for attendance of non-members at the Field Meeting.

Officers/committee:

a. The group elects a committee. The committee shall co-opt or appoint such officers as are considered necessary. Officers will be eligible to vote at committee meetings.
b Committee members shall serve for three years, but shall be eligible for re-election.
c. Chairperson nominated by the committee and endorsed by the Annual General Meeting.
d. All members are free to attend committee meetings.

Accounts:

a. The financial year shall be the calendar year.
b. The treasurer will keep accounts and present a financial report by 15th March each year. The accounts shall be independently audited by a competent person before presentation.

Annual General Meeting: To be held on a date determined by the committee. Notification of that meeting shall appear in the Newsletter at least one month prior to the AGM. Business at the AGM shall be determined by a simple majority (except changes to constitution which shall require a two-thirds majority of those members present). Family membership entitles up to two votes if both are present. The chairperson and the treasurer will each submit a report at the AGM.

Meetings: The committee shall organise or authorise any member to organise such meetings as considered desirable.

Publications: The committee shall approve such publications as are considered desirable, and which carry the group's endorsement.

Current subscription rates: Ordinary individual: £20 per year (£18 if paid by Standing Order). **Family:** £30 per year (£28 if paid by Standing Order). **Under-25s:** £12 per year (£10 if paid by Standing Order). For 2021, for all subscription rates please add £10 per year if you want Newsletters in printed form. **Subscriptions should be sent to:** the Membership Secretary (Alison Averis, 6A Castle Moffat Cottages, Garvald, Haddington, East Lothian, EH41 4LW; tel: 01620 830 670 / 07387 970 667; email: alisonaveris@gmail.com). There is a £2 annual discount for those paying by Standing Order (shown in the above figures): please ask for a form.

CURRENT NWDG COMMITTEE CONTACT DETAILS

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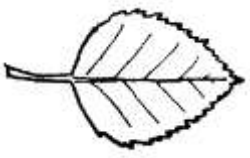
MEMBER	**Alan McDonnell**	Email: alanm@treesforlife.org.uk	



** Admin = Treasurer + Membership Secretary + Website Editor*

NWDG WEBSITE: www.nwdg.org.uk

Facebook: **https://www.facebook.com/groups/NativeWoodlandsDiscussionGroup/**
or search on 'Native Woodlands Discussion Group'

Twitter: NWDG **@TheNWDG**

www.nwdg.org.uk

Picture: bundled Beech at Calder Wood, West Lothian (charcoal drawing by Tansy Lee Moir)