

Transcription Abriachan Forest: A Fragile Correspondence

With thanks to Jim Barr, Sam Hesling, Hilda Hesling, Christine Matheson and Roni Smith. Music by Lauren MacColl – ‘Air Mullach Beinn Fhuathais’ and ‘Sproileag’ from the album ‘Landskein,’ recorded in Abriachan Hall 2020.

JB: “Yes, it was probably before 25 years ago when we understood as a community that this patch of forest was being sold off by the Forestry Commission as they were then, and they decided that these areas were not productive and not fitting in their portfolio anymore and wished to sell it off.”

SH: “It was being sold because it was quite unproductive, so not really a valid commercial forestry operation, which is understandable.”

JB: “Private forestry in the 1980s had a pretty bad name, because they came along, they shot everything that was there, they fenced it off and then they put big gates on it and private signs on it, so it had a really poor reputation for being friendly.”

HH: “What they didn’t want was for it to be sold to a forester or developer who would put up fences and then there would be no public access to it. We’d seen it happen in so many other places – that was obviously the danger – and people loved going for walks up the hill, because it’s beautiful.”

CM: “A lot of the people who lived here were people with a bit of a pioneering spirit.”

JB: “Yes, this was the first forestry buy-out, and we have to look at other examples before that, of Gigha, and places who helped us in deciding what the final outcome might be for Abriachan. So, it was a question finding out how we could stall the sale long enough to get some serious conversation. We got encouragement from other people who were progressing buy-outs, or attempting them, at the time.”

SH: “You know, after a lot of hard work by a few people here, it eventually – it kind of moved from that to community purchase, which at the time, was quite groundbreaking, pretty fresh, and pretty new, and there was certainly no blueprint.”

JB: “We had to make a case for why this patch of forestry would be better off in the community’s hands rather than elsewhere. For us it was about biodiversity, it was about

education, it was about amenity access and it was about local employment.”

CM: “Initially, the people who made up the Board of Trustees all had a very similar vision, and the community were more or less behind that vision. And we got the children of all the families, and they were involved in a lot of decision-making. We really wanted to develop the woodland in a way that would be good for the community.”

SH: “So, after the purchase there was clearly a bit of agency to go about changing a bit of the land management. There had been a big drive towards nature recovery; ‘rewilding’ I guess is a pretty recent term but a lot of it was just that, but it just wasn’t called that at the time. So, things like improving riparian corridors – always a good thing, a major benefit for wildlife. There has been a reduction in herbivore pressure, herbivore grazing, so that’s sheep and deer, which has led to a couple of things; it’s led to the successful replanting of barer areas to speed up recovery with native trees, and then just the recovery of native trees just in general just through natural regeneration.”

CM: “One of our aims was really to increase biodiversity and try to restore a bit of the old Caledonian Pine Forest. And also, to open up the wood. The programme of path building we undertook offered us so many possibilities for walking and recreation. And then the mountain bike paths followed, and that brought a lot of people into nature, to enjoy our woodland.”

JB: “Good, hearty, exhausting activity which was all to do with creating paths mostly, and tree planting. They were community events; the age range was from babies to old men, and there was a job for everyone. We’ve probably lost a bit of that; we have volunteer groups that come in now, but we need a renewal in that, the community work days.”

“I’d have to say we were pretty naive in the early days because we thought we’d be in to a pruning type of approach to what would happen, but the reality was that much of what we see is man-made. Because it was felled back in the – for both the World Wars there were trees taken out in great quantity – and as a consequence, we are looking at trees that are at best sixty years old.”

HH: “So they were planting continuously from what was it? 1919 it was set up, through the twenties and thirties, but not in Abriachan, not on the moor ground; it was the late fifties, I think, before they started to buy up the moor ground around here. There had been sheep and some of the crofters had grazing rights, including ourselves - grazing rights on the moor.”

“At the time I think, I suppose there was a kind of inevitability about it I think; they had just thought, well it was the way of progress. We were told that, after the war, Britain needed more trees, you know, if it spoiled our views or took away grazing, it was almost, “tough!” March of progress, yes.”

JB: “The trees mostly are those that were put in by the Forestry Commission – a mixture of lodgepole pine and Sitka in this area; but you’ll see, breaking through in the clearings that have been created, there are some examples of our native broadleaves – willow, little bit of ash, of course we’ve got some rowan and we’ve got a lot of birch.”

CM: “Hazel, alder, elder, aspen, a particular favourite of mine, wych elm, and rowan, oak, ash – but we have to accept that trees don’t grow here very quickly!”

SH: “A mixture of birch and rowan and juniper and there’ll be holly in there and Scots pine and a whole host of other things - well including a whole lot of non-native trees which are just self-seeding, but that’s just a kind of continual effort to try and keep on top of them, you know, as we try to reduce the number of non-natives and increase the number of natives.”

JB: “And regeneration can be helped. On the open hill the regeneration that you see now is not entirely natural; it has been landscaped in with great care to make it look natural.

CM: “Yes it’s amazing what you can learn from looking at Gaelic place names in maps. You learn what the biodiversity was like in the area many years ago. Looking at these maps has informed our decision about various restoration projects – like, at the little burn that feeds into Loch Laide, we saw from the Gaelic place names that bird cherries used to grow there. So, we have planted a lot of bird cherries, and so have the children from the nursery and schools, just along that little stream, *Allt Lòna na Fiodhaige*.

Roni Smith: “We’re constantly trying to improve the biodiversity. In the past - I don’t know, I’d say the last three or four years - you’re just noticing the broadleaves are just starting to own their space, it’s lovely. They’re just – you know – you walk round and “oh look, oak tree!” There’s more rowans, there’s more birches. It’s lovely, it’s really nice - compared to what it was, just one monoculture and acidic soil. It has changed, and that’s with a lot of effort from a very small amount of people, how they’ve improved it, it’s amazing.”

CM: “When I came to Abriachan, you would just see a very very dense conifer plantation that had been neglected for many years. There had been no brashing or anything like that. It was very dense and dark and you could walk up the road and never hear a bird.”

“We did quite a lot of thinning; just that initial change in the amount of light really brought flowers that had been dormant - the seeds were dormant for years – and suddenly they appeared.”

“We have valerian, meadowsweet, lots of marsh marigolds, devil’s bit scabious, ragged robin. We had quite a lot of birdsfoot trefoil, some nettles, and then we had lady’s smock which is a food plant for the orange tip butterflies. And then we started getting rarities; we got pearl-bordered fritillaries and the green hairstreaks.”

“But I have to say that I think the crofters in the area, through their good stewardship, had quite a bit of biodiversity in their crofts.”

“Crofting, really, it was just managing their little bit of land and being sort of self-sufficient. They didn’t exploit any particular resource in the environment, they just lived in quite a sustainable way.”

SH: “Whilst there has been a big effort here to re-establish native woodland and generally make it a more nature-friendly place, there has also been a major social push as well, to get all sorts of groups of people out to enjoy where we are, which is actually quite good because it’s quite accessible.”

RS: “There’s such a vast variety of people that use the Trust in different ways. And we don’t advertise, people just come across and enjoy it for what it is I think – that’s how it feels anyway.”

SH: “There’s a huge network of trails have been constructed here, it’s just wonderful, for whole variety of abilities as well, which is great, so it caters for a whole different age range – from flat walks, flat mountain bike trails, where you can take a walk down to the lochside, sit in a bird hide, admire the view, go out on the boardwalk, and take the kids out to the treehouse, right the way through to being able to climb up and over the top of the mountain. And there’s lots of lefts and rights and the opportunity to get lost and explore a little bit, and there’s a few kind of hidden gems and surprises along the way, which are great, you know – great to take people out on and show them when they’re coming to visit, great places for the kids to go and play as well.”

HH: “It’s different everyday; the views are different every single day, the quality of the light is different, the weather is different. Sometimes the top of that hill is shrouded in mist, or like today, when you can see every tree and bush that’s growing up there. And the views over the loch that way, and then the views across to Strathfarrar – they’re different too.”

RS: “Every group that we work with feels like it’s ‘their Abriachan’ and it’s lovely, they have that real – different sites we go to are their site, they planted trees there – and it’s lovely when you see people, like you might have been out with a school group, and a few months later, you’ll see that little person out with their mum and dad or granny, bringing them back to see where they planted their tree. So, it’s all that connection as well, that’s when your heart goes, it’s lovely; it’s nice to see that, and that brings more people into the Trust.”

“Every site has different little things that people make or leave or do or build; it could be just small things, like making some windbreaks, it could be big things like making shelters, it could be tree planting, it could be helping with the ditches. You also want to get the balance that there’s some enjoyment there and there’s also some – not completion, but they want to see a beginning, middle and end. Tree planting is a massive investment, improving the paths – this is all big projects, but if we can do a little bit, then they can see that, they can see that they’ve helped, and they feel ownership, which is lovely, and a connection.”

“And they all find their place, they all find something that they enjoy, or something that they connect with, which is nice.”

SH: “There’s a lot of discourse, discussion and debate around ‘rewilding’ just now and a lot of the focus is on charismatic creatures, you know – be they beavers or lynx or wolves or a whole raft of things – which are all obviously really important and the ecosystems in which they function and thrive are all really important, they should all be healthy and stuff like that, but the great think about the forest nursery here and the children that go it is that they are essentially being rewilded themselves, and that, to me, is probably the most important thing.”

CM: “It’s just such a nurturing environment for young children; it’s just lovely to see how one they are with nature, and how their resilience builds up with the challenges that face them.”

“In the summer, they spend quite a lot of time guddling in the burn and meeting all the invertebrates and little fish that inhabit the burn. Learning to respect nature; you know, they feel like this is a part of their lives, nature is a part of them.”

RS: “It’s about respect and it’s about looking after it and it’s about getting that balance of where we are in nature; you know, we’re not the top, we’re level, we’re part of nature. And a lot of children have more of an understanding, I think, of our place in nature, which is quite nice, and that’s quite important, that we expect – you’ve got to look after it, if you don’t look after it, it won’t look after us.”

SH: “I think a lot of that care comes – it’s just because they really love where they are, you know; they’re just kind of immersed in it as well, which is wonderful.”

CM: “Learning to live with nature and not exploit it and take care of the habitats of all the animals that live there, starting at the very bottom of the food chain.”

“We have healthy populations of mammals here which seem to be very scarce elsewhere, you know, like, the pine marten, we’ve got a massive badger set, we’ve got otters, a fairly robust population of red squirrels, and bats; we do have some bats which are not doing terribly well in Britain. But again, they need water, they need insects, they need flowers, so we have created a reasonably good environment to encourage their growth.”

“Oh we’ve got owls - there’s quite a healthy population of voles and mice here. We see quite a few kites here as well, and buzzards, and we sometimes get a visit from the Osprey which nests at Dochfour. On the loch, we have swans, long-tailed ducks, things like that. Blue tits, long-tailed tits, chaffinches, crossbills – Scottish crossbills, you know, that’s pretty wonderful.”

SH: “There is still a commercial element to the Forest Trust. So, the ground which has grown the best commercial tree species has actually been retained for that, and that’s generally so that we don’t run out of money in forty years’ time, that there’s still an income stream. We’ve got to be kind of wary of sustainability and longevity. And it’s really just focused on the areas which produce the best timber, because there are a couple of areas that actually do produce really high-quality commercial timber. Mainly sitka spruce, but there is a whole range of tree species here. Originally, the plantation was predominantly lodgepole pine, sitka spruce, Scots pine and larch. It was all single age; it was all one age class – it’s now five different age classes, so it’s been completely

restructured.”

“It's kind of our job to listen to professional advice and then incorporate that into the plans, both the current and future plans.”

JB: “We were conscious that far and away the best income stream you'll get from planting trees in this area and in this climate is sitka spruce, because they are suited to that area, and the harvesting costs are going to be economical in that area. And then, in the other areas, we're trying to get more Scots pine and more native species and broadleaves in.”

“Out of the 534 hectares, 134 hectares are roughly the area we've marked for generally commercial horticulture. Now, don't get me wrong, other plantings that go in - the Scots pine, the regeneration of lodge-pole which is inevitable, all of that has a use.”

RS: “They've become our trademark! It's amazing how the birds have given us our own identity. These birds were made out of offcuts that was to add value to our timber and to sell, for our Christmas fair, we started making them – and we've been making them for I don't know how many years! Again, it's all windblow, so the whole ethos is to add value to our timber, so they're then milled, cut out, sanded and then volunteers get involved in painting them, designing them, whichever designs they want to put on them.”

“The forest has changed. We do have a forest management plan where we're looking at planting and there is a commercial side, but we also have the recreation. And sometimes they cross over. But there's areas where – like, there's one of the bike trails; you used to come in and it was this dark wood, and it was lovely, but some of the children were a bit scared of it, but it was lovely – and then you'd get them past it, and you'd explain it, and then they came in and felled the trees. And you had to do a sort of double take: ‘am I in the same place?’ Because it changed so much, and then you get used to it again, and the replanting. The woods do change.”

CM: “Well just listen to the birdsong here, you know; as I was saying, when I came here first, you wouldn't hear a thing.”

HH: “The directions in which the Forest Trust will go in the future will depend on the people in the forest in Abriachan and the Forest Trust, and their passions and enthusiasms and how they translate into action. So there are all sorts of possibilities, because you see it now all over the Highlands now, don't you – communities taking charge according to what they need.”

JB: “You need to work at it. It’s not a given that everyone buys into community ownership. You may have been brought up with the buzzwords that have gone on in parliament and much sold by the politicians, but they have still not crossed the hurdle of what access rights really mean. There’s a lot of people still believe in this concept of ‘private road.’ You just wonder, have you not been reading the papers?! Have you not read what the law is telling you now, that you have to make your areas accessible to people.”

SH: “It would be great to see something which has been successful for twenty-five years continue, not for another twenty-five years, but, you know, in perpetuity ideally.”

RS: “I hope it to be sustainable, that’s the main thing; to keep the Trust there for the next twenty-five years so people can experience it and develop it in whichever way the next stewards want to develop it. And again, keeping in the core values, that would be good. If it’s here in another fifty years, that would be fantastic! No, hundreds of years! Keep going and keep going...”

CM: “What I think is rather wonderful is that some of the children that are coming are actually members of the youth group that really were so involved in the forest at the beginning.”