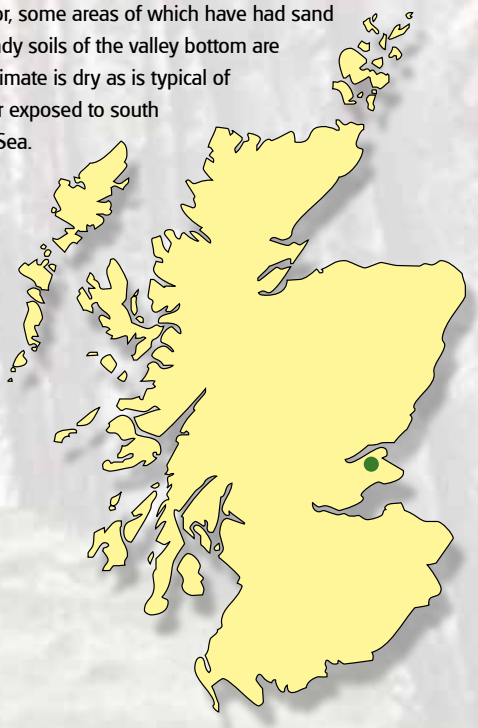
Farm woodland case studies

St Fort Wormit, Fife

Andrew Mylius

St Fort is a small estate of 513 ha. It has been in the hands of the family of the present owner, Andrew Mylius for over 200 years. When the present owner's forbears acquired the estate it was virtually treeless but between 1800 and 1850 substantial areas of poorer quality agricultural land were planted with mixed woodlands mostly broadleaved/conifer mixes, the majority of which, having gone through several production cycles, survive to this day.

None of the land is in the LFA. The exposed higher land up to about 350 feet faces the coast to the South east and is on thin soils with rocky outcrops of Whinstone. The lower slopes have deeper soils before giving way to sands and gravels on the valley floor, some areas of which have had sand and gravel extracted. The sandy soils of the valley bottom are prone to wind erosion. The climate is dry as is typical of east Fife and the site is rather exposed to south easterly winds off the North Sea.



Farming policy is driven by land character. Thinner soils are in permanent grass or wooded whereas intermediate and lower areas of land are in rotational arable with barley, wheat, oats, beans and oilseed rape grown.

The farm which comprises 177 ha arable in winter barley, winter wheat, oilseed rape and 147 ha of grassland. There is a 164 ha of old woodland on the estate in a number of blocks. Two tenanted farms were sold off to sitting tenants in the 1960s when the present owner inherited the land and, at the same time, the Andrew acquired another farm that came onto the market adjacent to a block of woodland about two miles distant from the main holding.

The estate prides itself on a beef suckler herd of c 120 cattle of which all stock are either sold fat or for breeding. Two breeds, Lincoln Reds and Aberdeen Angus comprise the nucleus herd, which is at present being expanded. The farm also carries a flock of North Country Cheviots.

Over time Andrew has sought to integrate farm and forest enterprises rather than treat them as two separate land uses. This was recognized in being awarded a prize for their woodlands from the Royal Highland Agricultural Society.

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Forestry Commission Scotland
Coimisean na Coilltearachd Alba

The Scottish Government




Making the woodland work for the farm

The planting of woodlands since the 1800s has been 'both aesthetic and practical'. Shelter for stock and protection of soils has been a primary consideration in recent years.

The mature woodlands have been around for over 100 years and were previously in a dedication scheme. These woodlands have been maintained both by grant aid and private replanting.

The farm has many trees along field boundaries and these and woodland margins do affect cereal ripening but it is tolerated because of the overall aesthetic benefit. They go back and harvest the less ripe crop a fortnight later.

The main area of recent planting has been 31 hectares of planting under Farm Woodland Schemes on Brackmont Farm purchased in the 1980s. This farm was almost completely treeless and had thin sandy soils which often suffered wind erosion.

Small difficult to work corners have been planted up both for stock shelter and environmental enhancement.

Species choice is very wide and based on what has proved itself. Andrew is very comfortable with sycamore which has proved itself and grows vigorously, but in parkland settings he will grow a wide variety of trees, including exotics.

How it all adds up: the costs and benefits of farm woodland

The economics of farm woodland need to be seen in the context of the overall aspiration for the land: to sustain a high quality and profitable mixed farm with excellent quality stock in an attractive landscape and living space with high environmental quality. Andrew does not try to put a monetary value on the woodlands, but he knows that he can keep stock outside for longer and reduce his feed costs; he knows that his stock need less food for maintaining body temperature because of the shelter the trees give. The woodland works for the farm in a highly synergistic way. Andrew has made extensive use of the various woodland grant schemes and, with advisory support, has been able to receive SFP under an agroforestry scheme which was used where woodland establishment had proved problematic on a dry area of the farm.

Some areas of woodland are important for amenity. He is prepared to pay a price to enhance the landscape quality and maintain the wooded parkland setting, but even in these areas the stock benefit greatly from shelter.

Looking forward: where do we go from here?

The latest stage in what has been a long journey of developing more integrated land management has been to cautiously open the woods up to grazing. The animals appear to benefit greatly from the shelter. The trees do not suffer. Andrew is learning about agroforestry on the hoof.

The Brackmont woodlands suffered high mortality after planting in two very dry years in the early 1990s. Even after replanting some gaps remained. The larger areas of open ground have been opened up to grazing and where trees are robust cattle graze under them. The better quality areas for timber production are fenced. In the longer-established woodland fences have been moved back into the woodland fringe and this gives better shelter for stock.

Andrew has benefited from help from the Forestry Commission Scotland. Getting round the regulatory hurdles of what could be grazed and what was woodland and what was field has been quite a challenge but what is emerging at St Fort Farm is a working model of silvopastoral synergy that delivers landscape benefits, soil protection and shelter and protection to high quality farm stock.

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