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Integrating Trees Network

Tips on growing trees from the Imrie Family of Hillhead Farm, Near Glasgow

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Tips on growing trees from the Imrie Family of Hillhead Farm

- **Future benefits –** protect the next generation and safeguard the future of the business.
- **Environment –** you have to work with what's on the ground, not work against it.
- **Economic –** take the pressure off the farm by diversifying and spreading the risk.
- **Social –** involve the local community in planning and defuse potential issues.

Farming for the Future

The Imries have farmed at Hillhead for four generations. It's a family farm with all members involved, including parents Antoinette and John and children Naomi, Matthew, Jessica, Ben, Tabitha and Keziah.

Ben works with John to look after the farm's 450 breeding ewes and 80 suckler cows, while Keziah has her own enterprise rearing pigs. The farm comprises 162 ha owned, plus 40 ha rented and has an altitude of 40m down, running up to 218m above sea level at the highest point.

Tree planting – how it began

The Imries became interested in growing trees in 2019 when they took up the offer of a free Farm Woodland Assessment from Scottish Forestry. This provided them with initial designs and budget for woodland creation on an area of unproductive land.

Fast forward to 2021 and they have now fenced, cultivated and planted over 27 Ha of diverse conifer and native broadleaves, with funding from the Forestry Grant Scheme. This created a number of benefits for the farm, not least as an asset for the future.

For the Imries, planting trees is all about the future as Antoinette explained: **"Hillhead is very much a family run farm and we want to secure it for future generations.** John and I would like to think that the children will always have a part in it by developing their own enterprises."

John said: "I've been working at Hillhead since I left school and my main aim was always to secure the farm, which we did in 2015. Since we stopped retailing milk, we have been looking for an extra income to bring in more capital and Matthew's suggestion of forestry ticked this box. **The area where we have planted trees is poor land that we have been struggling to graze and make productive for about 20 years."**

Why tree planting is a good long-term investment

Matthew continued: **"With six children in our family, succession planning was a key factor when deciding how to diversify. The tax benefits, as well as the harvestable crop at the end of the cycle, will ensure that the family is looked after while the farm remains in one piece.** Once the crop is harvested, the site will be replanted to benefit many future generations of the family."

Forestry is a long-term investment. The initial grant and the five-year maintenance payments on this scheme cover the initial start-up costs. Looking further into the future, there is potential to gain an income in around 20 years. This is when thinning out the woodland is undertaken. In time, this will also help provide a quality end product when the trees are eventually clear felled.

Working with Nature

The environmental benefits of woodland creation are just as important to the Imries as the economic benefits.

Matthew said: "We did look into renewables, but wind turbines weren't suitable because we are on the Glasgow Airport flightpath, and we couldn't sacrifice enough land for solar panels. **Trees just worked for us!**

"We liked the idea of doing **something environmentally friendly, something that supported the ecosystem, reduced our carbon footprint, and added something to the already beautiful landscape we live in.**

"We didn't want to plant the Blairskaith Muir site with just conifers as it would have taken away from its natural beauty and the habitats that rely so much on it. Instead **we wanted to plant a mix of both productive conifers and mixed native broadleaves around the most sensitive areas in order to produce a much more sustainable product.**

"Blairskaith Muir is a particularly sensitive site and required surveys to be undertaken (archaeological, breeding bird, habitat and deep peat) in order to support the application.

"Although the survey results had a huge influence on how much, what and where we could plant - with a lot of areas marked as unplantable - **what they did ensure is that what we did plant was entirely sustainable. We did not disrupt any important habitats or the public's access, but rather we enhanced both, while adding much needed capital to the business."**

Challenges

Financing is a big challenge but worth it says Matthew: **"One of the big challenges is making the project work financially and ensuring that your spending keeps up with the timing of the capital payments."** Scottish Forestry - Small Woodland Loan Scheme – is designed to help with cash flow for Forestry Grant Scheme Woodland creation.

Communicating your plans with neighbours

Juggling the requirements of all the stakeholders is another big part of the process and it's **vital that you anticipate any potential stumbling blocks and communicate your plans quickly and concisely.** Matthew added: "It's important to keep your plan agile and address what's actually on the ground as the results of surveys will inevitably dictate what you can and can't achieve.

The family sees the woodland creation project as a chance to connect with and involve the local community, and point to the benefits of doing this early on, in order to pre-empt any concerns or misunderstandings that may arise. They have had the students and staff from the local primary school out on the farm. Forty eight young people helped to plant trees, experiencing the land for themselves and maybe being inspired to consider farming and forestry as possible career paths. Another reminder that planting trees is all about the future.

Farm details

Hillhead Farm, Torrance, Near Glasgow.
Mixed livestock farm.

Woodland creation/Forestry Grant Options

Planting of Blairskaith Muir was funded through the Forestry Grant scheme.

Diverse Conifer Option: 14.93 Ha of Norway spruce, Scots pine and Silver birch.

Native Broadleaves Option: 12.60 Ha of Oak, Rowan, Alder, Aspen and Downy birch.

Total mixed planting area: 27.53 Ha

Planting is within the Central Scotland Green Network (CSGN) Outer Core, and therefore eligible for additional payments.

Previous land use

Sheep grazing on marginal land (Land Capability for Agriculture primarily 6.2, some at the south of the site is 4.2).

Objectives

1. The establishment of a productive woodland to expand and diversify the farm business.
2. Enhancement of the landscape of Blairskaith Muir through the creation of a sensitively designed woodland reflecting the local topography.
3. The protection and enhancement of biodiversity values, primarily through the expansion and diversification of the forest habitat networks, and the retention of areas of conservation value as open ground.
4. Maintaining and enhancing public access to the Blairskaith Muir trig point.

Protection for new woodland

A mixture of new and upgraded deer fencing protects the scheme due to high numbers of deer in the local area. Vole guards are used on the most palatable species.

Soil

Deep peat is present on the farm and guidance on this has been adhered to. Deep peat was mapped, buffered and removed from the planting area. Buffers of native planting have been incorporated into the design around deep peat areas to minimise drying effects. Ground preparation across the site has been chosen to minimise soil disturbance through the use of hinge mounding and direct planting.

Forestry best practice

The species diversity in the design reduces future tree health risks. The woodland has been designed to incorporate an extensive proportion of native planting, allowing for both habitat protection and connectivity. The areas of productive conifer have been appropriately sited for access, and in consideration of site sensitivities.

Biodiversity

A breeding bird survey and Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey were undertaken. The scheme design was amended in line with the survey results and specialist advice. This ensured protection of the sensitive habitats and species which included butterfly orchid and great crested newt. Open ground and native planting have been incorporated into the design to mitigate against detrimental impact on these sensitivities, and provide greater habitat connectivity.

Climate Change

The areas of productive conifer have been sited towards the southern edge of the site, where soil conditions are suited to strong growth and less likely to be affected by future changes to climate. A wide range of suitable native broadleaf species have also been used to provide future diversity and increased resilience to climate change.

Applying for grants

You can apply for forestry grants all year round.

Let us help you. For more information visit:

Integrating Trees Network

Scottish Forestry - Woodland Creation

Scottish Forestry - Local Offices

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