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Hello, darkness and old friends on a joint field visit



Left: Stop 2 featured a wooden shelter to reduce light and noise in order to better enjoy starry nights in the Dark Skies park. © Steve Brown

Crown Estate Scotland and Glenlivet Estate

1 October 2025

On a dull and damp morning, RSFS members were welcomed to Glenlivet estate in Tomintoul by our main organisers, Val and Graham Hamilton from Northern Region, for a joint North East and Northern field day. Graham introduced Nick Page, the Crown Estate's Forestry Manager, and his staff, who had put together a varied programme of outdoor visits that highlighted some of the work currently being carried out on the estate.

Stop 1

The Conglass Woodland Creation Scheme is part of the Spey Catchment Initiative (SPI) designed to create a sustainable, climate-resilient and thriving natural environment for wildlife and the community. Phil Whitfield, the SPI's Nature Restoration Officer, led the discussion and explained the complexities of setting up the woodland. The main objective of planting trees was to provide a habitat for plants and animals and to shade and cool the water, thereby allowing salmon and trout to breed and remain healthy.

Stop 2

On the edge of Tomintoul lies the Cairngorms Dark Skies car park and bird hide. This site includes a circular, seated, wooden shelter designed to reduce light and noise from the

nearby road and village, as well as a locally managed wildflower meadow and a bird hide which overlooks an area of managed wetland habitat suitable for wading birds such as curlew, lapwing, snipe and oystercatcher. Tomintoul was chosen for the Dark Skies project because the area, which has three dark skies sites, has little light pollution, easy access and wonderful views of the night sky.

Stop 3

Glenlivet Estate is made up of 3,500ha of mostly commercial conifer woodland. Approximately 10% of the forest area has been clear-felled in order to diversify age classes. Restocking aims for a species balance of 80% conifer and 20% native broadleaves. Management objectives are timber production, shelter for stock, game shooting, recreation and amenity.

Nick Page explained that forestry operations such as felling and fencing can come into conflict with management of the bike trails. Deer fencing rather than deer culling is favoured and – to avoid crossing trails – smaller individual restocking coupes are fenced, which does increase fencing costs.

Stop 4

After lunch at the excellent bike trail café, with its good coffee and large car park, our group set off for a restocking site deep in the main forest. We stopped at a site that had been felled between October 2023 and

September 2024. Increasingly in Scotland, spruce trees are significantly threatened by the large pine weevil *Hylobius abietis*, which feeds on the bark of young trees, causing reduced growth and often death. This damage is most severe on newly planted trees following a large felling. The weevils lay eggs in the stumps of trees, allowing a new generation to emerge and feed on transplants. Infestations vary in intensity, and it can be difficult to predict the direction. It is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to establish a restock site without taking precautions, such as leaving the site fallow for at least a couple of years, and/or use of insecticides. Much research is going into alternative approaches, and integrated forest management practices such as continuous cover forestry can reduce instances of damage. Nick told us the estate had taken a risk in 'hot planting' without any fallow period, and without any insecticide. Unfortunately, the area was hit by a particularly large infection and large losses occurred, resulting in a probable replant. However, the site looked eminently suitable for spruce and, once established, should quickly grow on to form an excellent timber crop.

Stop 5

We then left the main forest as we climbed higher in elevation towards the top of Blairfindy hill. We were led by Head Ranger Mark Johnston, who explained that Glenlivet Estate, working with partners such as the Wilderness Foundation and the Cairngorms National Park Authority, have large peatland restoration projects on the estate.

This concluded a very interesting and thought-provoking day on the Crown Estate. RSFS would like to heartily thank all members of staff at Glenlivet who gave up their time. They include Forester Laura Steer, Estate Maintenance Ranger Rob Cochran, Countryside Business Manager Karen Smith and of course Nick Page and Mark Johnstone, who led the talks on site.

Steve Brown

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Murder mystery, a mighty mill and the royal touch

Ardwell Estate and Logan Botanical Gardens

10 July 2025

Ardwell Estate is over 4,000ha; mostly in agriculture (17 tenanted farms) and let housing (50 residences). It has around 100ha of typical mixed woodlands – commercial, amenity and policy, amongst which there was a lot of wind damage from Storm Eoghan in January.

After being greeted by owners Chris and Aileen Brewis at Ardwell House, we visited the Bones Wood – mostly 30-year-old Sitka with quite a lot of windblow damage – followed by Glen Hie Wood, which was mixed larch and spruce, of which some was cleared in 2015, but the Douglas fir restock has been disappointing, probably due to deer damage.

Murder Plantation is named after the Murder Stone, where a McCulloch of Cardoness killed the Laird of Clanyard around 1550. This is mostly amenity policy woodland of Scots pine, larch and sycamore; some windblown Sitka is used for firewood.

We then travelled to nearby Logan Gardens, an outpost of the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh. Logan is nearly at the southernmost point in Scotland and enjoys a mild climate, thanks to the Gulf Stream. We were hosted by curator Richard Baines, for a fascinating tour. We saw lots of southern hemisphere plants and trees – eucalyptus, tree ferns, palms, monkey puzzles, *Nothofagus*, etc., including several champion trees.

George Moore

Dumfries House and EGGER Barony

27 August 2025

Melissa Simpson, Head of Gardens, gave our group an introduction to Dumfries House Estate, which is 2,000 acres, of which 600 are designed landscape, gardens and mixed woodland and forestry. The remainder is farmed, of which 400 acres is tenanted and the rest organically managed by the King's Foundation, which purchased the estate in 2007 from the seventh Marquess of Bute.

The foundation's work is inspired by the King's philosophy that by understanding the balance, order and relationships between ourselves



and the natural world, we can create a more sustainable future. The foundation's impact can be seen in restored doocots and bridges built by apprenticeship schemes, renovation of the walled garden, opened by Queen Elizabeth in 2014, and the arboretum, which struggled to establish but is now starting to flourish. There are works afoot to recreate some of the original landscape features.

His Majesty's influence may be seen in some interesting species choices, and in vegetation management – in some cases neatness perhaps compromising tree management. However, techniques such as using chipboard as mulch mats – rather than bark or plastic – seems to be less environmentally damaging and allows weed control without herbicide use.

The foundation aims to be a prime example of heritage-led regeneration, and has an expanding range of educational programmes in areas such as rural skills and hospitality. It will be interesting to see where these lead in years to come.

In the afternoon, Max McLaughlan, Director of Forestry and Head of Wood Processing at EGGER UK, and his colleagues showed us the company's impressive chipboard mill at Barony, near Auchinleck.

Established in the late 1990s, the mill has recently benefited from further investment of £65 million to allow it to laminate its chipboard – internal funding that seemingly became available following cancellation of a project in Russia. Members heard about the scale of



Above left: Members learn about the EGGER UK chipboard mill. © Simon Stuart
Above: Rendering of a eucalyptus at Logan, by RSFS member Eleanor Harris. © Eleanor Harris

the EGGER Group's operations in Europe and elsewhere, and about the synergies between its two chipboard manufacturing sites in the UK, namely Hexham and Barony.

Barony produces around 450,000m³ per year, securing raw material from sawmill co-products, recycled wood and small roundwood (much of which comes from forests managed by EGGER Forestry). This is in a neat ratio of one third from each source. Its products are sold to the kitchen unit, furniture, interior design and building sectors, and a new London showroom is aimed at designers and architects.

EGGER Barony is one of East Ayrshire's largest manufacturing employers, providing over 150 jobs in a former coal mining area. Advanced technology includes robotic machines for packaging the end product. Throughout, the mill clearly operates to the highest standards of production efficiency, health and safety, sustainability and community relations. Many of the company's locally employed apprentices have moved on to increasingly important roles within the factory, and it organises well-attended open days for visitors, reminding us of the importance of showcasing the achievements of Scotland's wood processing industries.

Simon Stuart and David Henderson-Howat

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Cider with Roger: a fascinating day of agroforestry in Fife

Parkhill Farm, Fife

5 June 2025

A sunny, early summer's morning in June found Central Region members gathered at Parkhill Farm for a guided tour with the owner, Roger Howieson.

Parkhill is a host farm in the Integrating Trees Network, a farmer-led initiative to encourage more agriculturalists to plant trees to benefit their businesses. While foresters don't need any encouragement to plant trees, agroforestry is a concept slightly outside of our day-to-day forestry roles, and the wide range of attendees on this visit highlighted the interest in the subject from across the forestry sector.

Parkhill is situated on the south bank of the River Tay, by Newburgh, and comprises 537 acres, of which roughly 300 are arable and 200 hill and pasture. Roger took over the family farm in 2011 and began both to diversify the business by running events (including mountain biking), and to improve biodiversity by linking up the 12 acres of scattered woodlands through planting native trees.

Roger also wanted to help sustain the rich heritage of fruit trees in Tayside – started nearly a millennium ago by Tironensian monks who founded the neighbouring Lindores Abbey and planted extensive orchards in the area. Roger estimates that there are still 1,000 veteran fruit trees in private gardens in Newburgh, plus a number of surviving orchards in the wider landscape, though many have been lost through the intensification of agriculture in the 20th century.

These three aims of business health, biodiversity and orchard heritage inspired the planting of 750 apple trees and the creation of 'Aipple', a small-batch cider made with Parkhill apples (pictured below).

Establishing an orchard on an arable farm hasn't been without challenges,

and Roger explained his cautious, experimental approach. His farm is split between fertile, drained fields next to the Tay which grow barley, peas and potatoes on rotation, and a higher, slightly less productive, sloping field. The upper field was



Above: The group learns about Parkhill's agroforestry methods. © Simon Stuart

initially chosen for apples, planted with 750 traditional cider apple varieties, with funding from the Woodland Trust. They followed the alley cropping method, where trees grow in the middle of a row 3m wide, buffered by undisturbed grasses and wildflowers. The alleys between rows are 24m wide and allow the passage of a tractor and implements.

This structure greatly reduces the amount of pesticide required, as the natural air flow reduces build-up of fungus and disease. The soils around the trees remain undisturbed for their lifespan, helping to store carbon, while the roots themselves bring up nutrients from a greater depth, which improves the growth of the neighbouring crop.

The rows are orientated north-south for maximum sunlight, with Roger using the landmark of the church tower at Errol, across the Tay, to help lay out the lines. However, the topography means the rows are parallel to the contours, and the tractor now has to plough across the hill rather than up and down. This created problems with soil erosion, which Roger solved by switching to a minimum-till method of cultivation. This change has had the added benefit of reducing herbicide inputs, as there is less exposed soil, which in turn generates fewer weeds. At the time of our tour, the orchard field had been in a grass rotation for five years, and Roger was mulling over trying an arable crop; if successful, he may expand his apple trees to the lower fields.

Though still a fairly young orchard, Parkhill

produces around two tonnes of apples annually, which combine with seven tonnes of apples from other Newburgh orchards and trees that are sent to Cairn o' Mohr winery for processing. The resulting cider, Aipple, is sold in local shops and delicatessens.

Catherine Walker

Correction: In the Summer 2025 edition, the Central Region report on the Windymains sawmill visit incorrectly quoted the sawmill's production capacity as 70,000 m³/yr, an out-of-date figure given on the company's website. Actual production capacity is now 130,000 m³/yr following significant upgrades and investments in the plant.

Central events in 2026

2026 is shaping up to be an interesting and varied programme. Visits are likely to include a day in Cowal with a focus on deer management and rainforest restoration, a tour of a traditionally managed Stirlingshire estate, as well as a steep-ground machinery demonstration and a look at some CCF sites managed by FLS. Check the RSFS e-News and the calendar at bit.ly/rsfs-events for booking going live.



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Contagious curiosity on an unconventional forest site

Belsyde

10 June 2025

Despite not having a traditional forestry background, the team at Belsyde is challenging assumptions on how successful new woodland creations should look. Their approach is intuitive, experimental and rooted in long-term stewardship, and they benefit from the nimbleness of being a small, empowered group making quick decisions and avoiding bureaucratic inertia. The team is Hester Robertson, Richard Hope and Chris Smithard, who kindly hosted us at their 35ha site, roughly a quarter of which is mature broadleaf woodland, with the remainder being fields.

They embarked on their odyssey in winter 2022–23. A broad range of species was planted in different intimate and group mixes, according to soil conditions and topography. Mixes were informed by their knowledge of and care for the site, by plenty of research (including the Forest Development Types) and by advice from many foresters, particularly TreeStory and AM Silviculture. They designed the woodland to fit the character of the surrounding landscape, and it was noted on the day how well the design promotes a sense of cohesion with the wider area. The entire site was deer-fenced prior to planting, using rock-hard *Robinia* posts – presumably they had a good porridge sponsor for the fencing crew.

One promising area of new planting required wading through some high and dense bracken where the oak has responded particularly well, with some saplings reaching head height. The team has begun to reassess bracken as a potential ally – allowing it to ‘chase’ trees upward, leveraging shade as a silvicultural tool. Though Kerb has been employed to control grass, they’ve also had success with trampling, which was effective in both long grass and bracken – despite the contractors’ misgivings. Sweet chestnut is performing well on higher ground and even within a former quarry, showing the benefits of surveying and adjusting species selection to the diverse soil types across a site.



Left: Members walk through the site at Belsyde on a beautiful June day. © Simon Stuart

The existing woodland has been only lightly managed; tubes and rubbish have been collected, naturally regenerating saplings protected, and some deer control carried out. A18 traps are used to manage grey squirrels, although no red squirrels have been detected in the area. The mature woodland is thick with regeneration and undergrowth, including plentiful honeysuckle.

The experience underscores the gap between the resources available to trained foresters, and the practical needs of committed, self-taught landowners who want to do this type of stewardship themselves. It highlights the importance of inviting a broad range of people and landowners to such events and knowledge-sharing networks. There’s much to gain from bridging the divide between the professional forester and the enthusiastic landowner – especially when unconventional approaches, informed by such contagious curiosity and commitment, can deliver meaningful results!

Stefan Rijnbeek

RFS College Valley

20 June 2025

The Royal Forestry Society kindly invited RSFS on its visit to College Valley in Northumberland. The 5,200ha estate is owned by the John Nott Trust and the visit was led by Estate Manager Stephen Crees, with trustees and current and former forestry consultants in attendance.

The main theme of the day was amenity planting. Since 2016 woodland cover has increased from 775ha to 1,100ha, with native woodland constituting 50% of the afforested area.

While one trustee had been inspired by multi-use forestry on a trip to Germany, the broadleaves here were not expected to have economic value. This prompted questions about the forest’s financial sustainability, and it is hoped that, as the woodlands mature, some commercial value might be found for the broadleaves – especially as, from a distance, a few of us suspected *Dendroctonus* damage in the spruce plantations.

Open ground has been left for bird species such as curlew and birds of prey – and an unexpected hen harrier flew past while we talked. There is also hope that golden eagles might spread south.

Storm Arwen has left some difficult areas to restock; natural regeneration or even rewilding was hoped for, but bracken has come in and control methods are limited.

Collared cattle were discussed, but this is likely to be impractical due to a lack of water in the area where they’re needed. Watching the estate’s herd of belted Galloways picking their way across a cattle grid certainly highlighted the question of how best to control livestock – along with their Mangalica pigs, which seem to spend their entire time devising ways to escape.

It will be interesting to revisit in a few years’ time to see what happens next.

Simon Stuart