

Jerah

The planning and the planting

Jerah extends from Menstrie to Sheriffmuir in the western Ochil Hills. It was purchased from a sheep farmer in May 2013 by a Tilhill Forestry client. It comprised of 1,005ha of improved and rough grazing.

Upon purchase, the site was surveyed in detail and a productive woodland creation scheme was designed across 583ha. This made it one of the largest productive conifer woodlands planted in the UK over the last 25 years. Preparation of an Environmental Statement, per the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (Forestry) (Scotland) 1999 then followed.

The site is fertile for tree growth comprising freely draining Brown Earths and Peaty Podzols. Excluded from the plans were areas of deep peat (>50cm depth), steep and exposed ground, riparian zones along watercourses, remnant native broadleaved woodland, and areas of locally rare vegetation.

Archaeology

In addition, Menstrie Glen includes archaeological remains comprising fifteen 18th Century agricultural

small holdings, of which three lie within Jerah. These features were recorded in detail by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS, 1999) and were retained in a network of open ground and access paths. Mitigation includes funding of further research into historic agricultural cultivation by Stirling University and provision of future site interpretation.

Involving the public

As the site was already well used by walkers from Menstrie and so extensive that it fell within the wards of three Community Councils, extensive public consultation was

conducted during the design process, involving presentations, site and open meetings. The feedback generated allowed the design to be amended to accommodate all public users, including walkers, fell runners and paragliders. A total of 11.8km of tracks and 13.5km of paths are now available for visitors to utilise, which will ultimately allow off-road access between Menstrie and Dunblane – when proposed connecting path routes are installed on a neighbouring property.

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Flooding

Considerable attention was also paid to the flood risk posed to Menstrie village (which flooded in 2004 and 2012). The Ochil Hills are prone to flash floods and, as Jerah already had 96km of historic drainage ditches and a west facing aspect that tended to exacerbate rain events, both SEPA and the local authority flood risk management officer had concerns about the risk posed by cultivation of the site for woodland establishment.

The provision of additional woody debris within the Menstrie Burn catchment would normally be a welcome component for Natural Flood Management. However, in this case the low bridges within Menstrie were deemed prone to blockage by woody debris.

After protracted discussion, it was agreed to amend the woodland design to deter additional woody debris entering the Menstrie Burn and to use trees of small stature along watercourse margins in this part of the property. Whilst woodland planting will ultimately eliminate the risk of flooding once canopy closure is established, there is a perceived risk that surface run-off will still pose a threat until this is achieved.

Following collaboration between Clackmannanshire Council, Tilhill Forestry, SEPA, Forest Research and Heriot-Watt University, a PhD project has been established to examine the risk of run-off from different types of cultivation and to record movement of woody debris within the Menstrie Burn catchment. This will ultimately generate additional guidance to the forest industry on appropriate soil cultivation practices and the contribution of woody debris to natural flood management in a flood-prone catchment.

The go-ahead to plant

After two years preparing, drafting, consulting and then agreeing the EIA, approval was granted in December 2014 and site works commenced in January 2015.



This entailed installing a new bridge to give access from Sheriffmuir, installing 7km of new forest road and repairing 4.8km of existing track. Meanwhile, 17.2km of repairs and new rabbit/deer/stock fencing were completed and 409.7ha of ground cultivation and drainage to plant a total of 1.3 million trees.

Species comprised 69% productive conifers (19% full family Sitka spruce, 42% half-sibling Sitka spruce, 5% Douglas fir, 2% half-sibling Norway spruce and 1% Scots pine), 21% native broadleaves and amenity species (11 species), the balance comprising designed open ground.

1.3 million trees later

After 22 weeks of intense activity involving up to 80 contractor personnel, planting was completed in June 2015. Soon after, Jerah was used as a training site to host SEPA and Scottish Water, to familiarise staff with modern woodland creation cultivation and diffuse pollution prevention practices.



In summary

The aim was to create a sustainable, productive timber resource that protected and enhanced key habitats and promoted other benefits such as public access, landscape, interpretation of cultural heritage and perhaps, most pertinently, to mitigate the potential flood risk to Menstrie village.

The Jerah site has gone through its first growing season and despite recent record breaking rainfall, there has been no adverse impact on downstream flood risk, which will ultimately reduce as the forest establishes.

Tilhill Forestry staff are now working to maintain and protect the young trees over the next two to three years and, over time, the benefits of the site to the local community and visitors will be secured.