

WHINLATTER FOREST DESIGN PLAN

Introduction

Whinlatter Forest is approximately 1226 hectares in size and lies 3 km south-west of Bassenthwaite Lake and 5km west of Keswick and lies wholly within the Lake District National Park. The landholding includes approximately 200 hectares of open fell and sits in a complex landscape of valleys and mountains which is centred on Whinlatter pass and includes the peaks of Grisedale Pike and Lords Seat. This Forest Design Plan revision includes the area at Darling How which was previously subject to an earlier plan.

The forest is entirely freehold and includes some of the very first land to be planted by the Forestry Commission in 1919. Further acquisitions were made and new planting continued until 1965. Recently, the size of the landholding has changed following landswap deals that have been negotiated with neighbouring landowners.

A variety of species is present from larch and Douglas fir on the lower slopes through to predominantly Sitka spruce at the higher elevations. The broadleaved component is low at 3%. Felling and restocking commenced in the 1960s and restocked ground now accounts for over 50% of the total afforested area.

The prime consideration in Whinlatter is the recreational interest. The first visitor centre opened in 1977 and extended 1992 so that the complex now includes a forest shop and a concessionary tea-room. Whinlatter was designated as a Forest Park in 1993 for its significant contribution to forest recreation. The Forest Park has recently been expanded to include Dodd wood.

Survey

Whinlatter is a highly productive forest with yield classes of 10 to 18 for Douglas fir, 6 to 14 for larch and 6 to 24 for spruce. Soils are mainly upland brown earths but at higher elevations soils are shallower and more skeletal in nature. Windthrow hazard classes are mostly below class 3 but can be as high as 5 in more exposed locations.

Terrain and particularly slope are severe. Whinlatter is a mountain forest with woodland extending, in places, up to the 500 metre contour. Much of the timber extraction must therefore employ cable crane systems. The road network is complete and provides satisfactory access to all parts of the afforested area. Recent use of walking excavators on the steeper slopes means that most sites can be cultivated prior to planting. Natural regeneration of Sitka spruce can be prolific.

The Forest Park occupies a particularly sensitive position in the landscape of the Northern Lake District. Key viewpoints have been identified and a photographic survey is presented as part of the plan along with computer generated perspectives showing the felling and restocking proposals. Intervisibility studies on three key areas – Seat How, Widow Hause and Drycliff Gill have been carried out as part of a detailed landscape appraisal.

Conservation interest is varied, and includes part of the Buttermere Fells SSSI which is also a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC), a European designation. The network of streams is important as they provide important spawning grounds for trout and feed into the nearby Bassenthwaite Lake (cSAC). Also to consider are the areas of upland fell with their heather and bilberry vegetation, the upland oakwoods and the semi-natural woodlands. There are a number of species of raptor present throughout Whinlatter.

Recreational activity is very important with approximately 250 000 day visitors per year. The visitor centre on Whinlatter pass provides the focus for a network of waymarked walks, orienteering and cycle trails. In addition, there are 3 satellite picnic areas and a number of car

parks. Public rights of way are limited in number but the network of forest roads and tracks provide opportunities for walking and routes out of the forest onto the surrounding fells. The education programme is of major importance.

Appraisal

Whinlatter is highly visible in the landscape. It is seen from the A66 trunk road corridor and is overlooked by many popular walkers' vantage points including Grisedale Pike and Skiddaw. The overall appearance of the forest and its external margins is therefore very important. The high numbers of visitors and the presence of the B5292 Whinlatter pass which divides the forest means that internal landscape is also an important consideration.

The original Forest design Plan identified some significant issues concerning the geometric nature of the external boundaries with those in Hobcarton and at Darling How being notorious. Much has been achieved over the last 5 years with significant areas in Hobcarton being felled and not restocked. Recent landswap negotiations with neighbouring landowners have provided the opportunity for some additional planting which will markedly improve the structure of the forest at Darling How.

The internal landscape will benefit from the opening up of the watercourses and encouraging a mixture of native broadleaved regeneration and open space. Where appropriate, and, especially around the visitor centre complex, scattered mature conifers from the first rotation will be retained to act as focal points. Some selected viewpoints will be managed so that they remain clear from trees.

The presumption will be to thin all the conifer crops where the site conditions permit. As well as improving the quality of the timber, this will also improve the aesthetic nature of the crop and promote long term stability. The areas of Continuous cover will be managed with the aim of developing mixed age and mixed species stands through natural regeneration. This will provide continuity in the landscape in these visually important lower elevations as well as contributing to the visual diversity of the internal landscape.

Natural regeneration of Sitka spruce will need to be monitored and will require removal if it threatens to dominate in areas where other species are preferred. Where regeneration densities are high, respacing will be required to promote stable, thinnable crops.

The SSSIs/cSACs will all be managed in accordance with management plans agreed with and approved by English Nature. The areas of upland oakwood will be managed in accordance with the Biodiversity Action Plan for the upland oakwoods in Lakes FD.

Recreation will continue to be of prime importance in Whinlatter with the visitor centre and associated walks and trails remaining the main focus. There are proposals to further develop and improve the facilities at the visitor centre to keep pace with visitor pressures and expectations. Access for walkers to the surrounding fells remains an important consideration.

The diverse age structure of the crops in Whinlatter and the previous clearfelling means that future felling proposals comply with the United Kingdom Woodland Assurance Scheme recommendations with no more than 25% of the forest area being felled within a single 5 year period (UKWAS 3.4.2).

Similarly, the range of species, both existing and proposed complies with the UKWAS requirements (UKWAS 3.3.2) with no more than 65% of area consisting of a single species. Spruce is pre-dominant, especially at the higher elevations where it can withstand the conditions. At lower levels and on better soils, a mixture of larch, Douglas fir and native broadleaves can be incorporated.

Objectives for the next five years of the Plan

1. Complete all work in accordance with the UKWAS, the English Forestry Strategy and Lakes Forest District Strategic Plan.
2. Continue to provide high quality recreational and educational facilities with the aim of promoting quiet, informal enjoyment and understanding of the forest for all ages and abilities.
3. Manage forest operations in sympathy with the surrounding landscape. Promote visual diversity in the internal landscape by retaining selected overmature conifers and keeping some viewpoints clear of trees.
4. Manage Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other statutory designations in accordance with plans agreed with English Nature.
5. Improve watercourse habitat by felling conifer crops and encouraging a diverse mix of native broadleaf regeneration and open space.
6. Seek to protect and enhance the conservation value of the upland oakwood areas through the implementation of the Biodiversity Action Plan.
7. Bring to the market all the parcels of timber identified in the felling plan with the aim of maximising the financial return. Maximise all opportunities for thinning in conjunction with the District strategy for thinning.

STATEMENT OF RECREATION

Current Use

The area covered by this Forest Design Plan represents the main area of Whinlatter Forest Park. Designated in 1993 for its significant contribution to forest recreation, the forest park was extended in 1999 to include Dodd Wood which falls outwith this plan. Whilst the emphasis is on quiet enjoyment of the forest in accordance with its location within the Lake District National Park, there are honeypot areas within the forest providing for a range of formal and informal recreational activities. The Visitor Centre and associated facilities provide a focus for visitor activity and an introduction to the “forest experience”. Visitor surveys suggest approximately 150,000 day visitors p.a. Whinlatter therefore represents a major visitor destination within the national park.

Present Facilities

- Visitor Centre, Forest Shop & Tearoom
- Forest Classroom
- 5 Car Parks
- 4 Picnic Areas
- Permanent Orienteering & Trail-orienteering courses
- 2 Junior wayfaring trails – Rabbit Run & Foxtrot
- 5 Way-marked Trails
 - Comb Forest
 - Comb Gill
 - Revelin Moss
 - Noble Knott – Primrose Path
 - Noble Knott – Snowdrop Walk
- Adventure play area
- 2 cycling trails

The forest trails provide a range of routes aimed primarily at the casual walker between 1 and 2 miles. Longer routes are suggested in the Forest Park Guide Map with the summits of Lords Seat, Barf, Seat How and Grisedale Pike being popular destinations for the more serious walker. The significant area of open fell above the treeline is an attraction to serious walkers and day visitors alike and the views afforded by these areas are a popular feature of the Whinlatter landscape. The extensive forest road network allows a traffic-free environment for walkers and cyclists, with competitive motor racing events being restricted to two or three events per year. Access to local expertise & facilities have made Whinlatter a popular venue for management training and team-building events.

An education programme caters for groups of all ages with an estimated 500 schools & colleges visiting each year.

Future Use

The Forest Park will continue to be a significant attraction to visitors to the Lake District. The priority must be to provide a facility accordant with the visitor’s expectations of such a high profile site. Whilst the scope for providing more trails and way-marked routes exists, the emphasis should be upon enhancing the existing facilities to keep pace with visitor pressure and expectations. Developments within the Visitor Centre are planned to match these demands and ongoing programme of review and upgrading will keep the existing trail network ahead of the demands placed upon it.

Opportunities exist for linking the Forest Park with surrounding areas using the existing PRoW network and potential permissive routes, and linking to public transport provision.

Where this type of use can be accommodated within the needs of other users, potential exists to increase Whinlatter’s use for promotional & PR events.

Whinlatter will continue to offer an education & guided walks programme through its own specialist staff and appropriate third parties.

The objective of the recreation & education provision will be to promote quiet enjoyment and understanding of the forest for all ages and abilities.

STATEMENT OF CONSERVATION

Whinlatter is a very diverse forest in terms of the range of species present, the age class distribution and the site conditions which reflect the range in altitude from 140m asl to over 500m asl. At lower levels site fertility is high and the vegetation reflects this but higher up skeletal soils with heather moorland pre-dominates.

There are 3 Sites of Special Scientific Interest which affect the Forestry Commission landholding, 2 of which have 5 year management plans agreed with English Nature and one of which has recently been submitted. There is also one SSSI on immediately adjacent land, Barf and Thornthwaite SSSI which has been designated for geological interest. Brief descriptions are given below and the management plans are contained as appendices to the Design Plan.

Buttermere Fells SSSI is the largest (6704 hectares in total) with 177 hectares on FC land. The special interest is the range of upland montane and sub-montane vegetation types represented. The site supports the largest known area of bilberry in the Lake District and the second largest area of heather. The section of open fell in Hobcarton that has a stockproof fence and is ungrazed contains some of the dwarf shrub communities in their best condition in the northern part of this SSSI. Other sections on FC land are grazed under a grazing licence and have been brought within the ESA provisions. There is a commitment to monitoring and clearing natural regeneration where it is impacting on the vegetation.

Scaw Gill and Blaze Beck SSSI is of geological interest and contains a series of rock exposures associated with a disused quarry and a stream gorge. Little maintenance is required but the site will need to be kept clear of any encroaching vegetation.

The River Derwent and its tributaries SSSI extends up into Whinlatter along Aiken Beck as far as Spout Force. Management requirements are again few with forest operations being covered by the Forest and Water guidelines.

There are proposals to designate 2 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in Whinlatter in recognition of the European importance of some the species or habitats referred to above. The Lake District High Fells cSAC (candidate SAC) includes the Buttermere Fells SSSI as one of its components for its contribution to European dry heaths. The River Derwent & Bassenthwaite cSAC has a variety of species and habitats associated with its ecosystem.

The watercourses and stream systems in Whinlatter are important with the Eastern half of the forest draining towards Bassenthwaite Lake. This is designated as a National Nature Reserve and the Bassenthwaite Lake Forum meets once a year to discuss aspects which may affect the Lake and its associated habitats. This is organised by the LDNPA who publish an annual report and circulate it to neighbouring landowners and partners etc.

Many of the other watercourses such as Aiken Beck and Hobcarton Gill are important spawning streams and forest operations must be managed in accordance with the Forest and Water guidelines to protect their status. Improvements can be made at restocking by increasing the amount of open space associated with the streams and incorporating a scattering of native broadleaves through natural regeneration.

Whinlatter contains 3 areas of upland oakwood (Masmill/Noble Knott and Comb Gill) and management prescriptions for these areas are contained within the Biodiversity Action Plan for Upland Oakwood within Lakes FD. Most of the work required is to protect and enhance the conservation status of these areas by the felling and removal of non-native conifer species from amongst the oaks. In the longer term, regeneration of these areas will need to be encouraged although some areas will be suited to non-intervention strategies.

As well as the designated SSSI areas, Whinlatter has other expanses of heather fell which because they are stock fenced and not grazed provide good heather habitat. This is especially the case in the Ullister Hill and Lords Seat area which supports a population of grouse. The commitment is to maintain this as open fell and where appropriate integrate into surrounding areas at time of restocking. It is unlikely that there will be significant gains in terms of expansion or improvement of the heather area by the felling of the overmature conifer crops in the area between Seat How and Ullister Hill. The status of this crop will, however, need to be kept under review. As a long term aim, and through natural succession, scattered upland birch woodland with heather understorey would provide a diversity of habitat appropriate to this upland location.

Landscape considerations have an impact on the conservation interests in Whinlatter and the recently signed agreement with Lord Inglewood transferred approximately 98 hectares of agricultural and open fell land over to the Estate, with the FC acquiring approximately 43 hectares. This has gone a long way in addressing landscape issues in the Darling How area by making improvements to the forest margins by additional planting. The restocking proposals contain areas of open space in which the heather habitat will improve now that the stock is excluded. In other locations such as Hobcarton, the feathering effect of reduced stocking at the upper margins of the tree crop still allows the heather to develop underneath the conifer crop.

Whinlatter supports a healthy population of red squirrels and has been proposed as one of the refuge areas in an attempt to hold the decline in the species population.

The varied age structure and range of species provides ideal habitat for Roe deer, and as a result, Whinlatter has a high deer population. There are occasional sightings of Red deer but no established herds. Sensitive conifer species such as Douglas Fir and planted areas of broadleaves have suffered damage and been difficult to establish. Tree shelters have been used in the past and a temporary deer fence has recently been erected in an attempt to achieve establishment.

STATEMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY

There are no scheduled ancient monuments within Whinlatter and archaeological interests are generally few. There is a disused dam at Comb Beck that was associated with a nearby wool carding mill and with the mine workings further up the valley. There are several disused pits and shafts in the Thornthwaite area that have been fenced off for safety reasons. Two of the mine entrances at Ladstock Level and Rachel Wood Mine consist of horizontal shafts that can be accessed on foot and lead to extensive mine workings. Locked metal grills have been erected at the entrances for safety reasons and access to these workings is restricted to local cave survey groups only.