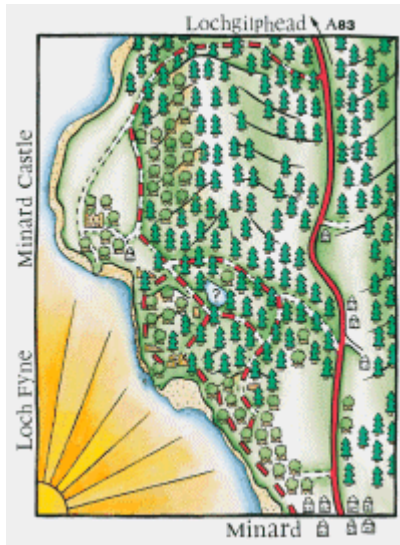


MINARD



Summary

- Minard Community Woodland is located on the west shore of Loch Fyne in Argyll
- It extends to 170 hectares, dominated by semi-mature conifers but with 25% broadleaves and open ground
- Management is likely to be in partnership with Forest Enterprise
- Minard Community Woodland Trust manages the project.
- The trust is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status
- The key aims are recreation, education, social and economic benefits.
- The project began in 1997

Why ? At a meeting of the West Loch Fyne Community Council in August 1997, the matter of the imminent proposed disposal of Minard Castle woodlands by Forest Enterprise was discussed for the first time. The community had been comfortable with public ownership and was suspicious that private ownership could throw up difficulties such as loss of access. The Community Council began to consider the advantages of community control.

A small steering group was set up to explore possibilities. Amongst its members was Bill Middlemiss, the current Company Secretary for the Minard Community Woodland Trust (MCWT). He, and the Argyll and Bute Countryside Trust, had been aware since 1992 of the possibility that the woodlands might be disposed of by Forest Enterprise and had looked into access agreements.

Who ? The project is mainly for the people of Minard and the surrounding area. About 240 people live in Minard, quite a number of these in the 17 houses located adjacent to the Minard Castle woodlands. The population has now got a good age structure with young and older families as well as older people. Many of the working adults work in Lochgilphead which is the regional administrative centre with

local government offices, a secondary school and a hospital. The local economy is described as 'leaky' with 95% of the income coming in from outside and 95% being spent outside the village. There is a village shop taken on recently by a young family, a primary school and a voluntary fire station. It is hoped that the community woodlands will help to support the local economy and keep these facilities open.

The West Loch Fyne Community Council covers both Minard and Lochgair to the south. It is fairly active and representative of the two communities. Its Woodland Sub-committee, referred to above, became formalised as the Minard Community Woodland Trust once it was time to begin the fundraising process. This is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. There are 56 members of the Trust, each of whom pays £1 for membership. The members elect the Trustees at the AGM. The Trustees are the driving force for the project.

What ? Minard Castle woodlands extend to 170 hectares and are located between the public road (A83) and the sea to the south of Minard village. The site was formerly estate policies planted largely with commercial conifers. The species breakdown is 50% Sitka spruce, 22% Norway spruce, 3% other conifers, 18% broadleaves (mainly birch, oak, beech & sycamore) and 7% other land. 28% of the trees were planted in the '80s, 72% in the '60s or earlier. The conifers are very productive with yield classes up to 22 cubic metres per hectare per year, mean annual increment.

There are other habitats within the woodland, mainly grassland and steep, rocky slopes. Several burns run through the wood and one low lying area lends itself to pond construction. The majority of the woodland is workable although the level of management in recent years has been very low. The District Valuer's (DV) valuation has been set at £315,000.

The objectives for the woodland, should it come into community ownership, have been established as:

1. Increase in the native woodland area to around 40%.
2. Retention and management of 75 ha of commercial forest.
3. Development of short rotation crops.
4. Removal of much of the rhododendron.
5. Creation and management of non-woodland habitats, such as a pond.
6. Development of associated businesses.

Vision ? The long term vision is for a sensitively managed hybrid forest, part commercial forest and part native woodland. The commercial forest would continue to be based on high yielding Sitka and Norway spruce and Western hemlock. The native woodland areas, which are located towards the Minard end and along the shore, lend themselves more readily to improved access trails, including the proposed Heritage Trail, and other forms of recreation. They would link into a potential Forest Habitat Network, rich in native woodlands, running along the Loch Fyne shoreline. A significant number of local jobs would be created through woodland operations, support activities and associated commercial developments. These jobs would help to safeguard the local economy.

The aims of the project are “to bring recreational, educational, social and economic benefits to the local community....Ownership of this woodland will provide a sustainable source of income, which can be used to manage the woodland and gradually bring these benefits to the community. The rich natural heritage and archaeological remains within this peaceful site provide opportunities to create and improve facilities for education and recreation, while maximising the potential of the land through re-zoning it for various uses, which will provide opportunities for commercial operations to create new jobs in this remote area.” As many as ten jobs could be generated through providing sites and services, making opportunities available for local businesses. Such businesses could include a tree nursery, a sawmill, a timber processing unit and holiday accommodation. It is hoped that an estate worker/ ranger might be directly employed and that any contractors would come from as close to the village as possible.

How ? The project started with the perceived threat of a FE disposal which soon came to be seen as a tremendous opportunity. Since the formation of the Woodland Sub-committee in August '97, the following **milestones** have been passed:

1. Discussions with interested groups such as the Argyll Green Woodworkers, Woodland Trust, Mid Argyll Natural History and Antiquarian Society, Rural Forum and SNH culminating in a site meeting in March '98.
2. FE formally notified the Community Council of the disposal in May '98. This triggered efforts to obtain sponsorship from the Scottish Office ie the Scottish Office (eventually) declared that it was in the public interest for FE to sell the property to MCWT at the DV valuation, off the open market, within a fixed timescale.
3. An initial valuation of the woodlands was carried out by Scottish Woodlands in June 1998.
4. A feasibility study by Scottish Woodlands and Bill Middlemiss was completed in December '98.
5. A meeting of the Woodlands Group in July '98 was attended by Lorna Campbell of the HIE Community Land Unit, who offered support to the project.
6. A well attended Open Meeting was held in the Village Hall in August '98. There was a display at which options were outlined, discussions, a questionnaire and a petition. There was 100% support for acquiring the woodlands and 72 signatures on the petition supporting the setting up of the Trust.
7. The DV valuation was announced in December '98.
8. The Minard Community Woodland Trust came into being in January '99.
9. A preliminary meeting was held with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in February '99.
10. Lord Sewell supported the application for Sponsorship in March '99.
11. The Scottish Office stated that it 'was minded to' grant sponsorship in April '99.
12. Application to HLF supported by a Business Plan was submitted in May '99.
13. Application was rejected in September '99.
14. Trustees met in October '99 to discuss whether the project is still viable.
15. Forest Enterprise offered a partnership agreement based on its new guidelines on working with communities and removed the woodlands from the disposals list.

The biggest **challenges** have been:

- The rejection by NHLF which may prove to be terminal to the project.

- In addition, the Scottish Office caused a great deal of difficulty by being unable to react positively or quickly on the issue of Sponsorship. It may have been caught by surprise and future applications by other groups may proceed more smoothly.
- The time required to develop the project has almost all been unpaid.
- The lack of an office open to local people.

Greatest achievements ? “Getting as far as this.” Building a team together, getting local support and working through the complexities of Sponsorship and fundraising with changing timescales have been the greatest challenges and the greatest achievements.

Sources of help and advice ? The community has been fortunate with the range of skills present amongst the Trustees. These are listed as:

project management,	public relations,	natural resource management,
volunteer management,	administration,	fundraising,
interpretation,	access management,	community business,
training management,	estate management,	farming,
VAT administration,	footpath construction,	public sector liaison,
company secretary.		

The skills which had to be brought in from outside were legal, accounting and commercial woodland management & valuation.

Forest Enterprise has been supportive of the project and shown flexibility in adjusting to the changing timescales forced upon the project by Scottish Office and NHLF. The Community Land Unit has been supportive and come up with some funding for project development costs and a second valuation.

Fundraising has been the sticking point for the project. The bid to the Heritage Lotteries Fund for £255,000 (75% of the initial project costs, including purchase) has been unsuccessful. The applications to other potential funders (HIE, SNH, various charitable trusts will depend upon whether the project can be repackaged. Early success with fundraising included £1000 from the Rural Initiatives Fund for the first Feasibility Study and support from the Community Land Unit. The Millennium Forest for Scotland Trust was deliberately avoided as it was believed that it wouldn't be flexible enough to deal with the changing timescales or the fact that the principal species are non-native.

The only training to date has been in footpath construction. One of the Trustees is currently enjoying (!) a six month training programme near Achnashellach.

Future activities ? Assuming that the project goes forward in some form, the initial activity will be to publicise the project locally. A leaflet will be produced. The Heritage Trail is a priority providing improved access from the village to the woodland via archaeological sites such as the fascinating Solar Alignment and areas high in biodiversity. Habitat and species surveys will commence soon after access to the site to gather baseline data. The bird interest is already well recorded.

Within the first six months, woodland management planning will commence with the sale of timber providing funds both for restocking and the implementation of

community projects within the woodland and in the village (such as supporting the Village Hall).

There are other innovative plans to interpret the woodland and these will be developed once the project is secured.

There is no **end point** to the project. Once started, it is expected to last as long as the village itself. The **optimal level** of involvement will vary over the years depending upon the individual people within the community. The woodland will be there and local people will decide how heavily they wish to be involved. **Continuity** of active group members will occur through involvement. New people will surface and get involved gradually. It is the responsibility of the Trustees to provide different kinds of opportunities so that all ages and groups can enjoy a range of activities in the woodland. The Trust structure ensures that new Trustees are sought on an annual basis.

Lessons for others ? There are several lessons which the group would like to share with others:

- Different people have different visions which need to be blended together. This is easier if the group vision isn't too clearly defined.
- The group has to accept all the responsibilities which go with the project.
- There must be cover for the key people developing the project.
- It all can take a lot of time.

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