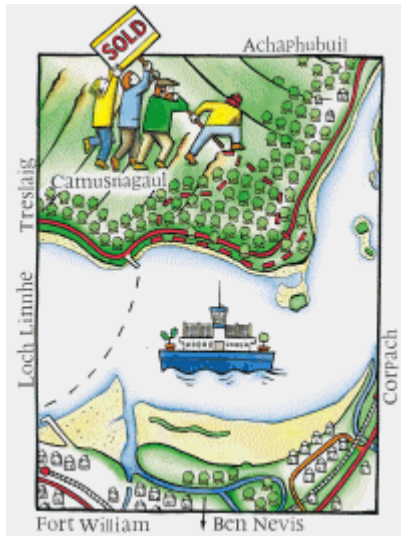


## TRESLAIG



### Summary

- Camusnagaul and Achaphubuil Woods are situated across Loch Linnhe from Fort William
- They occupy 66 hectares, are predominantly broadleaved in character and are listed in the Ancient Woodland Inventory
- They are owned by the local community
- Treslaig and Achaphubuil Crofters Woodland Trust (TACWT) runs the project
- TACWT is a company limited by shares
- The key aims are to improve the ecological value of the woodlands and to increase their potential for local employment opportunities
- The idea germinated in 1989 and came to fruition with purchase in 1994

**Why ?** The government announced in 1989 that the Forestry Commission would be required to dispose of some 100,000 hectares of land over a 10 year period. A Highland Councillor, Dr Michael Foxley, acting on behalf of a group of crofters living near Fort William, tried to register an interest in any FC plantations or land around their community which came up for disposal. He was treated 'with disdain'. This only made the community more determined to safeguard its interests and eventually it was successful in purchasing the woodlands.

**Who ?** The project is for the benefit of the two crofting townships of Treslaig and Achaphubuil which are located opposite Corpach and Fort William across Loch Linnhe and connected to Fort William by a small ferry. There are eleven crofts at Treslaig and two at Achaphubuil. The Forestry Commission land abutted directly onto the Treslaig common grazings and the Achaphubuil crofts and grazings.

Of the thirteen crofts, nine crofts (eight crofters) support the project, two crofters were very elderly widows and one crofter was an absentee.

After taking legal advice from Simon Fraser, who advised the Assynt crofters and Eigg islanders, a company limited by shares, known as the Treslaig and Achaphubuil Crofters (Woodland) Trust (TACWT) was established. This structure allows the shares to be sub-divided or amalgamated as the crofts pass on down the generations. There is a clause which requires 75% agreement to a share transfer. This is to ensure that the group remains as an effective co-operative. If somebody wishes to leave and the person to whom they wish to transfer their shares is not acceptable, then the company buys out that shareholding. The valuation is contained within the company structure so that it is a value placed upon a part share of the woodland and not the precise pro rata economic value of the shares. Another important point is that the company operates by one person/ one vote regardless of the extent of the holding.

**What ?** The woodland is in two blocks known as Camusnagaul Wood (31.4 ha) and Achaphubuil Wood (34.2ha). Both are recorded on the Ancient Semi-natural Woodland Inventory. They have a north-easterly aspect and lie behind and between the two crofting townships. They form a significant part of the outlook from Fort William and the surrounding area.

The two woodlands have been surveyed and a management plan prepared. Taking Camusnagaul Wood, for example, the most common National Vegetation Classification (NVC) types are:

- W4b Downy Birch/ Purple Moor Grass woodland (15ha)
- W17c Sessile Oak/ Downy Birch/ Dicranum moss woodland (8ha)
- W11b Sessile Oak/ Downy Birch/ Wood Sorrel woodland (4ha)
- W7 Alder/ Ash/ Yellow Pimpernel woodland (3ha)

Most parts of the woodlands have the range of species associated with each of the NVC types although the woods have been managed in the past and had other species introduced. The southern section of Camusnagaul Wood is the most artificial in species composition with large numbers of beech and sycamore. Most of the trees throughout are over-mature and natural regeneration is limited. This is due to the woodlands being grazed by sheep and small numbers of red and roe deer.

The history of the woodlands is interesting. There are signs of woodland dykes, thrown up in the past to protect stands from grazing during a regeneration period. These dykes were, probably, surmounted by woven hazel hurdles which lasted for the 5 or 6 years necessary for a pulse of natural regeneration to take place in the absence of grazing pressure. Pulses of regeneration of birch and mixed species have taken place at certain times in the past and can be seen. Oak stumps may be seen in some of the clearings and many of the oaks appear to have been coppiced in the past. The 'platform' areas may have been used for charcoal production or may be the sites of old croft houses. The woodland was managed by the MacLeans of Ardgour who owned the land up until 1833. From information arising from Loch Shiel and Loch Sunart side, these woodlands would have been actively worked by coppicing and selective felling.

The area has extensive archaeological remains including dykes, lazy beds and hut circles. These have been surveyed.

The overall management objective is to maintain the woods at their present extent and ecological value. This is regarded as a minimal target and other objectives have been added:

- encourage tree and shrub regeneration
- extend the woods by regeneration or planting
- encourage native species
- discourage non-native species
- increase habitat diversity
- encourage, by habitat modification, threatened species such as the Chequered Skipper butterfly
- monitor habitat changes and target species

These objectives are stated and developed in the management plan prepared in 1997.

**Vision ?** The long term vision is to ensure that the woodlands are safeguarded for future generations. The woodlands are in a fragile state in places with few oaks younger than 100 years.

By improving public access to the woodlands and encouraging people to travel over from Fort William to walk in the woods, the local ferry and other local enterprises will be supported.

Project management objectives, in addition to the woodland management objectives, are listed in the management plan as follows:

- encourage the potential of these woods for local employment opportunities
- encourage benign and sustainable exploitation of woodland products at a local scale
- integrate agricultural production and stock management as far as possible into management regimes developed to achieve the above objectives
- improve the woods for red deer in the long term
- encourage use in education and for public and community recreation
- preserve and protect from damage the archaeological and historical features of the site
- demonstrate to other landowners and land managers, the management and harnessing of the environmental, economic and other potentials of these woodlands

It is argued that jobs and training will develop in nature conservation management operations as well as through harvesting and processing the timber at an appropriate scale and timescale. A financial return to the local community is the best way to ensure that the woodland is conserved. It is further hoped that stock grazing can be used as a valuable management tool.

**How ?** After the initial rebuttal by the Forestry Commission Land Agent, the group explored the possibility of Sponsorship with the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC). They were told that the group had to have a well established record of land management and nature conservation and that as a group of crofters, they didn't qualify. NGOs such as the RSPB and Scottish Wildlife Trust were held up as the

sort of groups which could qualify for sponsorship. In fact, FC approached the Woodland Trust in 1991 to see if that organisation would be interested in purchasing the woodlands. Neither organisation consulted with the crofters or informed them that these discussions were going on. When the Woodland Trust inquired about local funding, it was told politely that any local funds would be available for the local community and not for an outside conservation interest.

In 1992, the Forestry Commission informed the community that it was going to offer the woodlands back to the son of the original owner under the 'Crichel Down' arrangements despite the land having been freely sold in 1961. After intense political lobbying, a compromise was reached whereby the hill ground was offered back and the woodlands sold on the open market. Issues such as access, shooting rights and the valuation were clarified, TACWT was set up and the woodlands were finally bought by the community, sponsored by SNH, in 1994 for £15000.

On the night of the entry date, Michael Foxley and the chairman of the group, Jimmy Morrison, drank a dram of whiskey to the memory of the chairman's great aunt who had been fined 2/6p for collecting firewood within the woodland.

The greatest **challenges** had been overcome. These were the arrogance or indifference displayed by the agencies to a local community. Little did they realise how the community would get stuck in or how the political atmosphere would change to support community initiatives, especially their 'right to buy'.

**Greatest achievements ?** The greatest achievement has been succeeding in buying the woodlands. The most challenging part has been dealing with the negative attitudes of the FC land agents at that time.

**Sources of help and advice ?** The group of crofters displayed enthusiasm and determination. They were supported by key individuals associated with land reform in the Highlands, including Jim Hunter, Duncan Grant, Bill Ritchie and Simon Fraser. Donald Kennedy of Organic Trees, surveyed the woodlands, produced the management plan and has given considerable advice to the group over several years. An MSc student from Edinburgh University, John Bryant, prepared an Interpretation Plan, developed the walking trails and produced a trail leaflet.

Jeff Watson and George Hogg of SNH advised the group and helped to develop the Sponsorship of the sale. SNH contributed 50% of the purchase price. Highland Regional Council and Lochaber LEADER were the other major contributors. An application has been made for landfill tax funding. Being a company limited by shares, the group isn't eligible for charitable status.

There has been no training to date.

**Future activities ?** A WGS Woodland Improvement Grant (WIG) has been applied for and approved. This will help to pay for fencing and other operations. The planned management activities are:

1. The woodlands are to be fenced against deer and stock.

2. Within the fence, stock will be introduced in small numbers at selected times to increase biodiversity and to respace the birch regeneration, which is expected to explode.
3. The effects of the stock will be closely monitored.
4. There will be limited new planting, especially of less common species such as holly.
5. There will be selective thinning of the birch and selective felling of introduced species such as sycamore, beech and Sitka spruce.
6. The finest of the mature beech trees will be retained for their landscape/ amenity value.
7. Bracken will be controlled over large areas by spraying and cutting.
8. Habitat management will benefit the rare butterflies found in the woodland.
9. The footpath system will be extended and made accessible to visitors.

The structure of the group with the possibility of passing shares down the generations or to like-minded individuals is expected to keep the project active and ensure continuity. The aim is to include future tenants of any of the crofts, if they wish to become involved.

**Lessons for others ?** ‘You have to fight and fight very very hard to establish community ownership against an established system of land ownership and management which has prevailed for centuries. Use every means possible and every potential ally to achieve your end.’

### **Contact**

Dr Michael Foxley  
Secretary  
TACWT  
2 Achaphubuil,  
Fort William  
PH33 7AL

Phone: 01397 772775

Fax: 01397 700655