

Day 2: Woodland Heritage Field Weekend 2022: Ennerdale and Thornthwaite Forests

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Figure 1: Oak planted in small groups, at 1.2m spacing, protected by 1.2m high tree shelters

DAY 2

Thu 23 June

Hosted by
Gareth Browning,
Area Forester
(Ennerdale and
Thorntwaite),
Forestry England

James Walmsley

A healthy number of members and friends gathered, shaded from the hot summer sun by canopies of beech and sycamore surrounding the Pell Wyke offices of Forestry England. Guy Corbett-Marshall introduced Gareth Browning, our host for the day. As with all professionally organised forest site visits, we first followed biosecurity protocols and were then given an overview of key health and safety. The highest risks of the day? Lyme diseases contracted from tick bites (1 – 2% of ticks found in Forestry England managed forests were reported to carry the disease). And snake bites – adders are found in the forests in this part of the world: hospitals in Carlisle and Kendal have anti-venom!

A huge range of topics were covered during the day, far too much for this article. Hence, an attempt is made here to organise the visit into themes and key learning highlights, so that those unable to attend might gain a scrap

or two of the wisdom, knowledge and enthusiasm so generously shared by Gareth. Any errors are those of the author.

Scale

Gareth is responsible for eight forests in the North England Forest District, including Ennerdale, Wythop, Dodd and Whinlatter – all are found within the famous Lake District National Park. Alongside another Area Forester, they manage a total of 7,500 ha (made up of 16 forests in total), including extensive areas of mountain, grassland and river habitats. The land-holding includes farms, sheep and cattle and significant areas which are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW).

A typical year yields 45,000 tonnes of timber, 20,000 tonnes of which is derived from thinnings. Between 50-100 ha is restocked per year and

Figure 2: Oak planted without tree shelters, protected instead by a deer fence surrounding the group



approximately 15,000 m of fence lines need repairing.

Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF)

A consistent theme of the day was how Gareth had come up with solutions to commonly held 'barriers' which prevent wider adoption of CCF: 35% of the forest area is managed according to CCF principles. As with much of the public forest estate in Great Britain, created over the past 100 years predominantly through the planting of non-native, fast growing conifers, Gareth and his team have inherited stands which often have little in the way of species and age structure. Hence, a significant amount of effort is expended on breaking up this age structure with the aim of ensuring that these forests will be more resilient in future.

Although desirable in theory, natural regeneration cannot always be relied upon to provide the tree species desired (for example, native broadleaf beneath coniferous canopy), at the spacing and quality required. Browsing by herbivores such as deer and sheep can also make reliance on natural regeneration problematic. We saw the results of planting of Oak in small groups, at 1.2m spacing, protected by 1.2m high tree shelters (see Figure 1). Gareth contrasted these with a second area where Oak had been planted without tree shelters, protected instead by a deer fence surrounding the group (Figure 2). Survival and growth rates in both areas were impressive. The benefits of tree shelters were discussed, one of which is the ease at which seedlings can be relocated when growing amongst dense vegetation, compared to those planted without shelters. Gareth reported that bracken was a particular problem in the area

without tree shelters: he had set up a contract to pay contractors to stamp on the bracken, instead of using a sickle or brush cutter, both of which come with the risk of damaging young trees.

We were also introduced to the concept of Whole Forest Thinning. Gareth takes the view that once you have the equipment and personnel on site, you may as well make the most of them, so he tries to make arrangements to thin entire areas all at once, regardless of age / species. Gareth acknowledged that undertaking such tasks is far from easy and he described a long-term (10-year) single bid tender, a duration that enables high quality working practices to be established with a single contractor that ensures the overall quality of the forests increases over time. Gareth emphasised just how important long-term relationships with high quality contractors are when implementing CCF.



Figure 3 (left): Douglas Firs at 40m

Figure 4 (right): Oak 'nest' surrounded by Hornbeam and abundant Birch



We were given an overview of Wythop Forest, which comprises some 280 ha, 176 ha of which is managed as CCF. Brown earth soils and sheltered slopes have provided ideal conditions for some fine Douglas fir, with some exceptional specimens well in excess of 40m in height (see figure 3). Reportedly, felling is highly skilled yet not problematic in itself, but minimising felling damage to precious young trees growing 40-50 m away from the stump certainly is. North-facing slopes which remain cold and damp in spring prevent Douglas fir from regenerating naturally, hence it is underplanted here at a spacing of 50-100 cm, in groups of 25-30 trees. This makes precision felling of large Douglas fir even more critical.

Naturally regenerated sycamore is used as a tool for forest management in Wythop, because it shades out other vegetation and thereby helps in the creation

/ maintenance of the forest microclimate, and it can easily be felled as a firewood crop at around 20 years, once desired tree species have established and / or leaving weed-free areas to (under-)plant into.

Innovations in re-stocking In the afternoon Gareth took us to How Gill, where we were privileged to witness innovations in restocking in the form of 'nests': a significant area of conifer had been clearfelled, all of which designated as ASNW. Gareth had hence planted Oak in groups of 4m x 5m, each protected by a tree guard (16-25 Oak per 'nest'). The Oak 'nests' are surrounded by a perimeter of Hornbeam (which is preferred by grey squirrels to Oak), with abundant naturally regenerated Birch growing in the 'matrix' between the 'nests'. Early results were very promising, with high survival rates and vigorous growth (Figure 4). The plan is for all the Birch to be removed

In 60-70 years, leaving lots of space for the crowns of the chosen 'winner' from each Oak nest to fully develop, giving future generations a fantastic Oak forest to enjoy and do with as they choose.

Gareth is a fantastic forester – one of the very best. If you ever have the chance to attend one of his forest visits, seize it with both hands!