**A Field Guide to the Archaeology of a Forest**

Note this guide is not about the built structures that may be found in a forest, but is about the archaeology of the forest itself. What do the wooded remains in the forest tell us about its history? Can we learn to “read” a forest?

What follows is taken from a chapter in Oliver Rackham’s classic book on woodland history: [*Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Woodland-British-Landscape-Oliver-Rackham/dp/1842124692)*.* Although it focuses mainly on England, it still contains much that is relevant to Scotland. It would be good to develop what’s written below for a more Scottish setting. The guide provides a systematic method of approaching any forest in an attempt to describe its story.

**The Name of the Forest**

* Are there names and derivations associated with the woodland? Or places nearby.
* Are these Gaelic, Norse or Scots?
* For example, Spital Wood outside Muir has three possible derivations for *spittal,* all intriguing:
  + lands the revenues of which supported a [hospital](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hospital) or the site of a hospital
  + a house or place of [refuge](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/refuge) for the sick, especially one for patients with [contagious](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/contagious) diseases
  + a shelter built along roads in 16th and 17th century Scotland as a shelter from wolf attacks
* The Gaelic words for wood are: *coille, fiudhaidh, iuch*

**A Review of any Accessible Maps**

* Are there any known estate maps that include this forest?
* Maps available on the National Library of Scotland – eg Blaeu’s 1654 map, Roy’s maps 1747-52, the Ordnance Survey series.
* If the woodland was present on Roy or the 1st edition OS map it would by definition be listed on the [Ancient Woodland Inventory](https://data.gov.uk/dataset/ancient-woodland-inventory-scotland1) maintained by SNH.
* How has the wood outline or map characteristics changed over time?
* Are there definite boundaries that have either been preserved or superceded?

**The Siting of the Forest**

* Valley bottom, or hill top?
* Associated roads, tracks, settlements, towns, waterways, etc?

**The Shape of the Forest**

* There is a general understanding that the more sinuous and irregular the boundary, the older the forest is likely to be
* Has the shape of the forest changed over time? Been added to? Or reduced?
* Now is the time to finish the desk-based assessment of the forest, leave the armchair, put some boots on, and get out to see it!
* Walk the boundary, or boundaries plural, if you have identified change over time.

**Boundary Earthworks**

* Woodland in the past was valuable and therefore worth protecting. Palisades and fences may not have survived, banks and ditches may have done. These took considerable effort to make, and correspondingly would take considerable effort to un-make. Therefore they are often still visible.
* The bank would usually be inside the ditch.
* What is the shape and size of both bank and ditch? Does it vary in different parts of the boundary?

**Internal Woodbanks**

* Are there internal divisions within the forest?
* Do these correspond to the changes over time that you may have noticed on a succession of maps?
* Do these correspond to different trees, particularly if the forest is a plantation?
* What is the size and shape of these internal woodbanks?

**Ponds and Pits**

* If lochs or standing water are found within the forest, are they natural or artificial? Artificial lochs or ponds would tend to have straighter edges and a sharper profile at the periphery.
* Are there associated mounds of soil, associated with the water, ie were they dug out?

**Other Features**

* Any internal burns or watercourses? If so, are they sinuous, or straight? If the latter, they would be likely to be artificial. What were they for? A laid?
* Are there platforms, recessed or otherwise in the forest? Sawpits tend to be rectangular. Charcoal burning platforms tend to be circular, or elliptical if recessed.
* Any built structures, ie proper archaeology? This could be an extensive list. Forests could have been built around pre-existing archaeology, ie shieling huts, settlements, enclosures, duns, etc.
* Any evidence of previous land use, eg rig (difficult to distinguish from forestry ploughing in a plantation), strip lynchets, etc.
* What is the vegetation like? Although no one species of underscrub is indicative of ancient woodland, there are a collection of plants that together are suggestive. These include dog’s mercury, wood anemone, wood sorrel, herb Robert, creeping lady’s tresses, and……. many more. A fuller description of indicator species is [here](http://www.carollcrawford.com/media/d92322d0c68f9a67ffff832cd4355564.pdf).

**The Trees Themselves**

* Identify the trees themselves. Native Scottish woodland includes oak, pine, hazel, juniper, holly and birch. Which of these predominates in a natural woodland depends on a number of factors, the main one being previous woodland management
* Plantations can produce monoculture species, often of exotic trees like firs, larches, etc. Sometimes amongst these there are remnants of a previous mixed woodland, including deciduous trees. What are these species? How have they been managed?
* Is there coppicing? The medieval woodland usually consisted of a mix of standard tall trees, and a rich underwood of coppiced oak, hazel and aspen.
* Can you determine the pattern of management and/or planting in the forest?

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