ABRDN and Kilrie Trees proposed new â??bothyâ?• at Far Ralia

Description

The existing Ralia estate hut within a small area of planted native woodland. 2022

At the beginning of April a planning application (see here) was submitted in the name of Abrdn Property Holdings Ltd to build a â??bothyâ?• on Far Ralia, the property bought be the Standard Life Investment and Property Trust before it merged with Aberdeen Asset Management. Abrdn Property Holdings Ltd was registered as a company in the tax haven of Guernsey in November last year (and is not to be muddled with Aberdeen Property Holdings Ltd registered in the Isle of Man in January this year!). Its beneficial owner is recorded as Abrdn Property Income Trust Ltd, also registered on Guernsey.

The introduction to the Design Statement accompanying the application states that â??Kilrie trees and Abrdn are implementing a native woodland project on 1400 hectares near Aviemoreâ?•. The Far Ralia estate is actually near Newtonmore, but this statement is telling. At the time the application was submitted Scottish Forestry hadnâ??t even consulted on the proposal from Abrdn to create a new native woodland plantation â?? the consultation closed at the beginning of June â?? but Kilrie Trees clearly expect to be given the go-ahead anyway and to receive large amounts of public funding whatever the responses to the consultation.

In planning terms, however, this application â?? like the Prior Notification for Abrdnâ??s new forestry road (see here) â?? should not have been considered until Scottish Forestry has formally approved the woodland creation scheme. As I stated in my response to this application:

â??Scottish Forestry has just consulted on the woodland creation scheme at Far Ralia but unless and until they have grant permission for the project to go ahead, Highland Council should not take a decision on this hut as its main purpose is connected to that scheme and to take a decision would be putting the cart before the horse.â?•

Kilrie trees, who state in the Design Statement they will be managing the woodland on behalf of Abrdn (more about that relationship soon), claim the new â??bothyâ?• will provide a meeting area while thousands of trees are being planted and will then will be made available for use by walkers. Given the very low numbers of walkers who visit Far Ralia at present, it is questionable how much demand there would be for such use.

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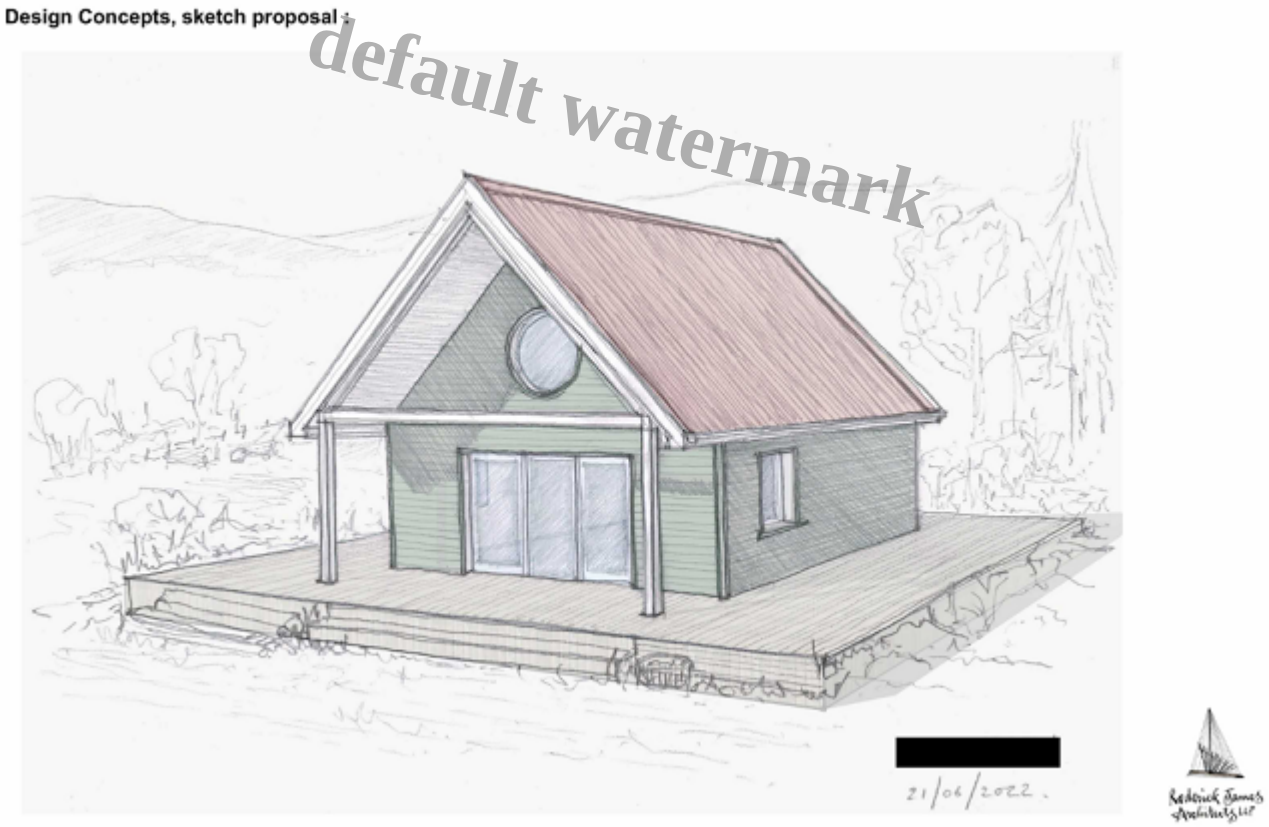
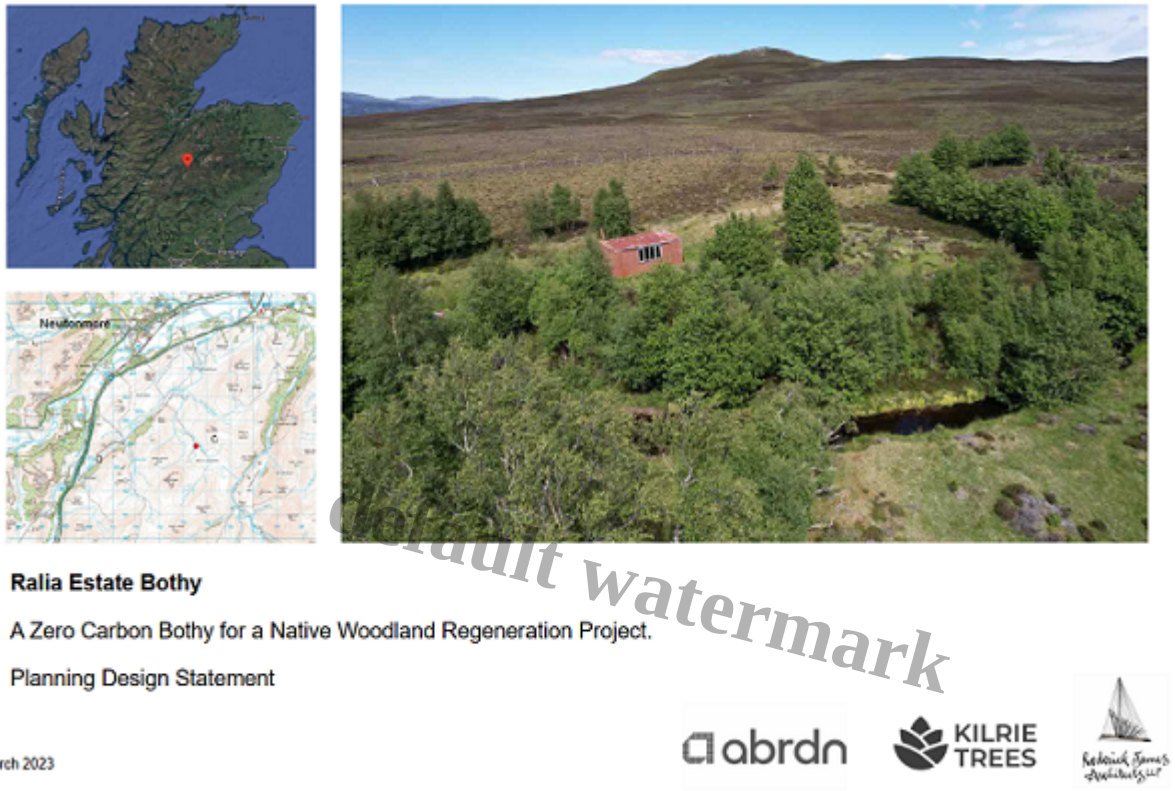


Initially,

whatever the issues with the public paying companies like Abrdn to plant trees, it appeared that Abrdn might usher in a new style of land management at Far Ralia that did not involve field sports. The bothy proposal suggests that it now time for Abrdn to clarify their intentions publicly and that both Highland Council and Scottish Forestry should consider those intentions in relation to the woodland creation proposal. The creation of another pheasant and partridge shoot on Speyside would undermine further

the statutory conservation objectives of the Cairngorms National Park and both Highland Council and Scottish Forestry have a duty to ensure that is not the case.



Last year I went to look at the small patch of planted native woodland in which the current hut â?? described as a â??shedâ?• in the planning application â?? is located. It is in a sorry state. As is so often the case with such schemes, the previous owners failed to maintain the fencing, the deer got in and only those trees that had got above browsing height have survived leaving no woodland understorey. This is probably not an accident. The real purpose of many tree planting exercises on moorland, often funded through the Woodland Grant Scheme, was never to create woodland but create shelter for deer in winter. The aerial photo in the Design Statement helps illustrate that. Another reason for Scottish Forestry to ask Abrdn to confirm in writing whether they intend to use their proposed woodland scheme for shooting or not.

The Design Statement presents the bothy as an example of sustainable development and they will:

â??Re-use all existing products if possible. Create an Inventory of Parts.

Bothies date back hundreds of years to times when building materials were scare and difficult to produce. People used what they had, and re-used everything they could. We now live in a singleuse, throwaway culture where materials and commodities have a limited life span and are often discarded or sent to landfill whilst still perfectly useable. With the climate emergency and increased focus on embodied carbon, comes a return to circular economy principles where items remain in use through recycling for as long as possible. This concept can be applied in microcosm with this Bothy project : Make use of what is already there. Inspect the existing building in detail and ascertain how much of it can be kept and re-used in its current form. If the underlying structure is sound, keep it and work with it.

If the cladding and glazing can be kept, then keep them. It may be that we need insulation, a new roof, a larger space, additional accommodation and facilities. These can easily be added to what is already there. If the existing building cannot be rescued we can consider which of the individual elements can be incorporated into the new building. The best and lowest impact way of achieving a zero carbon outcome is by working with the existing buildingâ?•.

So why have the architects and Kilrie Trees not created â??an inventory of partsâ?• before submitting the planning application and set out for Highland Council what could and could not be re-used? I only took a cursory look at the bothy on my visit â?? I was more interested in the failed woodland â?? but from what I have seen I doubt any of the materials from the existing shed can be re-used. I would be happy to be proved wrong.

Highland Council should take a very critical look at all the documentation accompanying this application, much of which appears to be spin, before making any decision. It is time too the Cairngorms National Park Authority asked Abrdn to produce and consult on a whole estate plan setting out how it proposes to manage its land Far Ralia.

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