

Green lairds, old lairds and go-betweens – Abrdn, Ralia and Akre/Kilrie Trees’ “forestry” road to Far Ralia

Description



Quarry/borrow pit with section of track behind. From the appearance of the peat, most if not all of the quarry appears to be of recent creation. The name on the digger is “Taiga Upland”, a firm which has also been involved in BrewDog’s planting at Kinrara. Photo credit Dave Morris.

Following my most recent post on the Ralia hill road ([see here](#)), I was sent further photos which support my argument that the road upgrade work should have required full planning permission. The Construction Method Statement accompanying the Prior Notification, which was produced by Taiga Upland in conjunction with Kilrie Trees and approved by Highland Council, stated:

“4.1 Where additional material is required to build up the road surface, this will be imported from a local quarry site. No material will be won from localised small borrow pits.”

I can find no local quarry site from maps for the location depicted in the photo. It also looks new, with freshly stripped turves and exposed piles of peaty soil but, whatever the truth about this particular borrow pit/quarry, it is not the only one!



Photo credit Dave Morris

The claim in the Construction Method Statement that material would be imported from “a local quarry” was clearly wrong. The size of the quarries also provides proof, if more is needed, that the recent work on the road constitutes far more than repairs and should therefore, as clearly stated to the applicants by Highland Council, have required planning permission.

A further photo from Dave illustrates how the material from these quarries has been used to widen the existing track, again contrary to what Highland Council approved.



The width of the repaired road is clearly significantly greater than the existing road

I sent some of these photos to the Cairngorms National Park Authority and Highland Council and am pleased to report that CNPA staff have been out to visit and that the two public authorities appear to be working closely on this. We will see what happens but I am very grateful to all the readers who have sent photos, without them it might have taken the CNPA much longer to act.

The relationships between Abrdn, Akre/Kilrie trees and Ralia

Renwick Drysdale from Akre Ltd, also known as Kilrie Trees – whose name is on the Construction Method Statement – has commented on a previous post on Abrdn and Ralia on this blog ([see here](#)). He is also on record ([see here](#)) as claiming to have:

“helped to advise the high-profile Abrdn acquisition of 1500 hectares of the Cairngorm National Park.....where they will grow the majority of trees in the future.”

What he doesn't appear to have explained, in this and other publicity about the purchase, is his family connection to the Ralia estate. I was first tipped off about this by a local resident.

Andy Wightman's Who Owns Scotland website records the ownership of the Ralia and North Drumochter Estate which sold "Far Ralia" to Abrdn:

COUNTY : INV

PROPERTY : Drumochter & Ralia Estate

OWNER : Alasdair Findlay & Trustees of Eira Drysdale

ADDRESS :
Ralia Lodge
NEWTONMORE
PH20 1BD

SASINES : 6177

LAND_REGISTER : n/a

NOTES : 1470ha of land to south of Newtonmore were sold in 2021 to Standard Life Investments Property Holdings Ltd. Land registration is not yet complete.

CURRENCY : 2023-05-09

WEBSITE : www.raliaestate.com

HECTARES : 8109

ACRES : 20037

Information credit Who Owns Scotland

Note the names, "Findlay" – who is often referred to as the laird ([see here](#)) – and "Drysdale".

There is little information publicly available about the Eira Drysdale Trust. Data from Opencorp ([see here](#)) shows an "Eira Drysdale Ralia Trust" which is registered at Kilrie Farm, the same address as Kilrie Trees/Akre Ltd but unless the difference in name is a mistake this appears to be another trust with a different function. As part of its compulsory purchases for the dualling on the A9 in September 2021, however, Transport Scotland published information ([see here](#)) which showed (under 2) that there were three trustees of the Eira Drysdale Trust:

<p>103</p>	<p>60,605 square metres or thereby of track, the bed and banks of the Allt Coire Chuirn, the bed and banks of the Allt Coire Bhotie and the bed and banks of nine unnamed watercourses lying to the east of the A9.</p> <p>CPO Sheet 1 of 7</p>	<p>1. James Anthony Findlay 50 Chelsea Square London SW3 6LH</p> <p>2. James Gavin Morton Chiene & Tait 61 Dublin Street Edinburgh EH3 6NL</p> <p>and</p> <p>John Macdonald Drysdale Kilrie Farm Kirkaldy KY2 5UW</p> <p>and</p> <p>Allan William Macpherson-Fletcher Croftcarnoch Kingussie Inverness-shire PH21 1LU</p> <p>as trustees acting under Deed of Trust by Eira Drysdale.</p>	<p>1. Owners</p> <p>2. Tenant R&S Slimon & Breakachy Far Laggan Newtonmore Inverness-shire PH20 1BT</p> <p>3. Occupied by S Company No: Inveralmond H 200 Dunkeld R Perth PH1 3AQ</p> <p>and</p> <p>SSE Generatio Company No: No. 1 Forbury 43 Forbury Ro Reading RG1 3JH</p>
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The second named Trustee, John MacDonald Drysdale, appears to be the father of Renwick Drysdale. He is also listed on Companies House as being a Director of Akre Trees, with the address of both being given as Kilrie Farm:

DRYSDALE, John Macdonald

Correspondence address

Kilrie Farm, Kilrie, Kirkcaldy, Scotland, KY2 5UW

Role **ACTIVE**

Director

Date of birth

September 1956

Appointed on

11 December 2020

Nationality

British

Country of residence

Scotland

Occupation

Farmer

DRYSDALE, Renwick Antony Jeffrey

Correspondence address

Kilrie Farm, Kilrie, Kirkcaldy, Scotland, KY2 5UW

Role **ACTIVE**

Director

Date of birth

November 1990

Appointed on

11 December 2020

Nationality

British

Country of residence

Scotland

Occupation

Businessman

Establishing the exact nature of the connections between the families is difficult but other sources show there was an Eira Findlay who later married a Drysdale. What is clear is that there are strong and ongoing family connections between the Findlays and Drysdales, the Ralia Estate and Kilrie Farm.

Any advice that Renwick Drysdale gave Abrdn about the purchase of Far Ralia, therefore, was hardly independent, even if his father stepped down as a Trustee of the Eira Drysdale Trust between 1st July 2021, the date of the Transport Scotland compulsory order, and September 2021 when SLIPIT (now Abrdn) bought the land. This raises questions about whether Abrdn were aware of the relationships and potential conflicts of interest and, if so, how they managed them?

Abrdn out of their depth?

Scottish Forestry has released communications with Abrdn prior to their purchase of Far Ralia as a result of a Freedom of Information request.

The emails reveal that Abrdn had little idea about land-management, was in receipt of conflicting advice and did not know who to believe. For example:

From: [REDACTED]@abrdn.com>
Sent: 10 July 2021 18:02
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Native Woodland Expansion - Cairngorms

Dear [REDACTED]

I hope you are well. Your details have been provided by one of our consultants and we wonder if you can help.

We are currently under offer on a large site in the south west of the Cairngorms NP for the purpose of native woodland expansion and peatland restoration. This shall assist with our net zero transitioning and biodiversity enhancement objectives.

We do not have internal forestry expertise and are heavily reliant on the advice provided by forestry consultants. We are finding a large degree of variance in views on net planting area, and therefore carbon sequestration under the WCC calculator. This is becoming increasingly frustrating for us, at a time when we are trying to invest at scale to really shift the dial for all the right reasons...

A day later another email elucidated:

"We are advised that up to 950 hectares can be planted. However we have received a second opinion from a larger firm to provide a market appraisal and view on the planting plan and they are suggesting that far more conservatism should be applied to areas above 400 and 450m i.e. "marginal areas". Their initial view is a net planting area as low as 703 hectares"

It then went on to say:

"The 26% differential in opinion thus far is hugely concerning when we are being asked to pay a substantial sum for the land in question."

A further email, dated 14th July, suggests Abrdn had no appreciation at that time of the importance of

peat for carbon sequestration and that they were solely interested in planting trees:

“Does policy support planting on peat depth of up to 30cm? Hinge mounding and inverted mounding will be the ground prep methods. Out of interest what happens where peat depth is 40cm?”

Given ABRDN’s understanding, it would appear that the more trees that could be planted at Far Ralia, the more that they might be prepared to pay for the land. That takes us back to the family connection between the Findlays and Drysdales, Ralia Estate and Kilrie Trees and whether it was Renwick Drysdale/Kilrie trees who was advising ABRDN 950 hectares could be planted? In the event the Woodland Grant Scheme application, which is still under consideration by Scottish Forestry, is for an area of 842.54 hectares.

The emails from Scottish Forestry reveal that ABRDN was interested in “potential grant funding to offset some of the cost”. By the time the WGS application was submitted, however, ABRDN was aware that they could also make carbon offsetting claims under the Peatland Carbon Code, which might compensate for any reduction in the area planted with trees, and had no doubt been informed that the Cairngorms National Park Authority had plenty of money to pay for peatland restoration which would help offset other costs.

Whatever the exact explanation, SLIPIT/ABRDN paid significantly more per acre for Far Ralia than other land sales at the time ([see here](#)), advised on his own admission by Renwick Drysdale who had a family interest in the land which was sold, his father being or having been a trustee of the Eira Drysdale Trust.

It may be the case, however, that from ABRDN’s perspective, it really didn’t matter whether they received consistent advice so long as those they engaged managed to Hoover up government grants.

What was the agreement between ABRDN and Ralia?

Almost two years after SLIPIT/ABRDN’s purchase of Far Ralia, the details have still not been published on the Registers of Scotland or made public so the public do not know what conditions were agreed as part of the sale..

It is almost certain, however, that they will include a servitude of access across part of the road network on the Ralia Estate to enable vehicles to get from the A9 to the land bought by ABRDN, Far Ralia as it is now known. It would also be fairly standard that as part of such a servitude, any upgrade to these roads required to enable work at Far Ralia would be the responsibility of ABRDN. Hence why the two Prior Notifications to upgrade the Old Military Road ([see here](#)) and build a new bridge ([see here](#)) were submitted in the name of ABRDN, not the Ralia Estate.

What that doesn’t explain, however, is why the paperwork for the two Prior Notifications for the track at Ralia claimed only minor repairs were required to the hill track above on Far Ralia when that section of road is in far poorer condition. While it is possible that ABRDN agreed to upgrade the main road on Ralia as part of the sale deal, it appears that the Prior Notification may also have been submitted as a Trojan horse submitted in the knowledge that the CNPA had a policy presumption against new hill roads (and significant upgrades) because of the impact on the landscape.

There is also, however, the question of whether Ralia retained any sporting rights in respect of Far Ralia? I observed in an earlier post that Kilrie Trees application on behalf of Abrdn for a new bothy ([see here](#)) looked remarkably like a shooting hut. Moreover, the Woodland Grant Scheme is now used by many sporting estates to provide new habitat for pheasant shooting and there appears to be nothing in the conditions of grant to prevent this. From a sporting perspective that would make sense at Far Ralia where deer numbers appear to have plummeted due to Wildland Ltd's culls in Glen Tromie and where there is limited scope for grouse shooting.

Until the facts are known, this is speculative, but it appears possible the owners of Ralia may pulled off a remarkable deal in which they managed to raise a significant amount of capital, retained their sporting rights, extended the potential to develop pheasant shooting and created a business opportunity for Akre and Renwick Drysdale (whose plans for the land I will consider in a further post) all of which has been marketed by Abrdn as a pioneering carbon offsetting initiative ([see here](#) for recent video about Ralia).

Contrast what is claimed in that video with the recent investigation by the Ferret ([see here](#)), which was also published by the Sunday Herald yesterday, which revealed Abrdn huge investments and profit making out of fossil fuel production. Abrdn was quoted as claiming it is:

“committed to driving the change” required to meet climate targets and currently manages “£37bn in sustainable assets”. A spokesperson added the company could “mitigate exposure to coal and fossil fuels” if requested by specific clients.

It looks like Abrdn may intend to use Far Ralia to sell carbon credits to clients who are concerned about the 4.8 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) their investments with Abrdn into the atmosphere in 2022. Those investors should take a look at the photos of what Abrdn is doing currently and be aware that there is much worse to come.

What needs to happen

In none of what I have described in this post is there any suggestion that anything unlawful has taken place (the work on the hill road is another matter), nor is there anything unusual about the connections between the Findlays and Drysdals. Families often help each other. Meanwhile both wealthy families and businesses tend to exploit the system to extract what they can in terms of grants while minimising what they pay in tax (Abrdn's subsidiary that owns Far Ralia is owned in Guernsey).

What is happening at Far Ralia, however, is not in the public interest and indeed in my view is not consistent with the objectives of the National Park. The problem is our current laws and grant systems allow this to happen. It reinforces arguments I have made previously that all sales of significant land-holdings in the National Park should be vetted by the CNPA and all prospective owners should have to produce a comprehensive plan of how they manage the land (which would help prevent the planning system being abused as it is at Far/Ralia).

Ultimate responsibility for addressing these problems lies with the Scottish Government. It is they that have the power to reform land ownership, the planning system and design a rural grants system that would help protect nature and reduce carbon emissions. They continue to twiddle their fingers while

the world burns and floods despite all the evidence about the failures of the current system.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. Abrdn
2. CNPA
3. hill tracks
4. landed estates
5. planning
6. scottish forestry

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