

Cashing in on Cashel – the £4m sale of the Forest for a Thousand Years

Description



View over Inchlonaig to Cashel Forest from Mid Hill above Luss. The gash of the Cashel burn with conifers on either side runs through the middle of the property but is owned by someone else. Photo 2023

Last Friday the Cashel Forest Trust, set up by the Royal Scottish Forestry Society (RSFS), announced they had put their property at Cashel on the eastern shore of Loch Lomond on the market at offers over £4,085,000 for the whole or as five separate lots.

Goldcrest's brochure ([see here](#)) claims this is an "opportunity to purchase a stunning, wild Estate of international importance". The facts are the 3069 acre estate is far from wild, having been planted with trees and more recently have had part of its degraded peatland "restored" by diggers. As for its importance, it has not to date been deemed worthy of any of Scotland's designations designed to protect nature, although it is part of the Loch Lomond National Scenic Area which is internationally important for its landscape.

Cashel Forest is more accurately described as “one of the largest, and oldest, of the ‘new’ native woodlands in Scotland” as the Herald did in an article about the sale last week ([see here](#)). This post takes a look at why the Cashel Trust is now trying to dispose of what they once called a Forest for a Thousand Years and the issues this raises.

Background

In the 1990s public interest and awareness about Scotland’s native woodland really started to take off. It is within that context that in September 1995 the RSFS set up a charitable Trust Company with a view to buying Cashel Farm, on the east shore of Loch Lomond and turning it into the Forest for a Thousand Years. The original aims of the project, as recorded in the Memorandum and Articles of Association and the accounts of the trust, were far reaching and ambitious:

3. The object for which the Company is established is to conserve, regenerate and promote the restoration of Scotland’s native woodlands as an important part of Scotland’s natural environment for the benefit of the public, and achieving this object the Company shall have the following powers:-
 - 3.1.1 To establish, maintain, preserve and manage, in accordance with good silvicultural and ecological principles, forest land of principally Scottish native species and all indigenous flora and fauna;
 - 3.1.2 To engage in all kinds of forestry work and to act as timber growers and to buy, sell, plant, grow, fell, prepare and deal in timber and wood of all kinds and to buy, clear, plant and work forest land;

- 3.1.3 To service tourist and leisure requirements, whether through the provision of forest trails, outdoor pursuits and sports, recreational activities, forest tours or in any other way;
- 3.1.4 To promote the education of members of the public in forestry, nature and native woodland in Scotland;
- 3.1.5 To promote public interest in and knowledge and appreciation of forest land so that members of the public may gain or increase their understanding, enjoyment and use of forest land in Scotland;
- 3.1.6 (a) to acquire land for the establishment and maintenance of a public forest;
- (b) to establish, preserve and maintain for the public benefit forestry on such land and to facilitate and encourage public access and use of the forest land;

Extracts from original memorandum

In short the Cashel Forest project aimed to demonstrate that “good quality timber can be produced” from native woodland which is at the same time managed to benefit the landscape, wildlife, outdoor recreation etc. These aims were to be achieved by planting native trees on Cashel Farm, by converting the farm buildings into a forest study centre and creating a new path network for the public to access the new woodland.

With grant aid from the Millenium Forest for Scotland, a project created with lottery funding to celebrate the new millenium, RSFS bought Cashel farm for £800k in 1996 and proceeded to implement its plans with further grant support, mainly from public bodies. The accounts, available on Companies House ([see here](#)), record those early grants:

2. Grants	31 December 1997	31 Mar
	9 months	
	£	
Millenium Forest for Scotland Trust	-	
Forestry Authority	52,625	
Forth Valley Enterprise	-	
Scottish National Heritage	6,000	
Scottish Forestry Trust	-	
Scottish Office - European Structural Funds	56,048	
	<u>114,673</u>	

2. Grants	31 December	31 D
	1998	
	£	
Forestry Authority	107,312	
Scottish National Heritage	6,000	
Scottish Office - European Structural Funds	15,576	
	<u>128,888</u>	

2. Grants	1999	
	£	
Forestry Authority	21,823	
Scottish National Heritage	10,580	
Scottish Office - European Structural Funds	39,532	
	<u>71,935</u>	

3 Other income

2. Grants

		2000	199
		£	
Forestry Authority		56,713	21,8
Scottish National Heritage		539	10,5
Scottish Office - European Structural Funds	20,676	39,532	
Bank of Scotland		5,000	
		<u>82,928</u>	<u>71,9</u>

The accounts also show that after the initial planting, renovation of the farm steading, creation of paths etc were completed around the year 2000, grant income started to reduce considerably. While money was available for capital projects, even then revenue funding was problematic.

Since the millennium the trust has attempted to create new income streams to fund the management of the project, most notably the hydro scheme but also a host of smaller initiatives from car parking charges to trees planted in memoriam.

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5. Charitable activities 2022

Grazing income	500		500
Sporting rights	2,333		2,333
Event and other income	5,589		5,589
License fees	9,000		9,000
Hydro Lease fees	32,258		32,258
Parking charges	6,072		6,072
NatureScot Grant	-	24,025	24,025
	<u>55,752</u>	<u>24,025</u>	<u>79,777</u>

Charitable activities 2021

Grazing income	1,280	-	1,280
Sporting rights	2,500	-	2,500
Event income	895	-	895
License fees	9,000	-	9,000
Lease fees	23,691	-	23,691
Parking charges	1,609	-	1,609
NatureScot Grant		62,230	62,230
	<u>38,975</u>	<u>62,230</u>	<u>101,205</u>

NB the revenue from the hydro scheme is limited to the lease of the powerhouse with the other income generated going to the owners of the land where the intake and pipeline are located.

Setting aside the temporary funding from the NatureScot “Better Places” scheme for footpath work and a seasonal ranger, in the years 2021 and 2022 (the last for which accounts have been published) the amount of income available to the Cashel Trust to meet its objectives was extremely limited. That is reflected in the account of expenditure for 2022:

	Unrestricted Funds £	Restricted Funds £	Total £
8 Expenditure on charitable activities 2022			
<i>Operations</i>			
Site management	11,599	1,509	13,108
Forestry management	7,546	3,026	10,572
Conservation activity	1,380	9,350	10,730
Staff costs	1,666	29,859	31,525
Training	-	514	514
Meeting costs	602	-	602
<i>Maintenance</i>			
General maintenance	1,107	6,877	7,984
Paths, fencing and car park	-	-	-
Buildings	80	-	80
<i>General office costs</i>			
Cleaning and hygiene	51	-	51
Print, post and stationery	187	-	187
Marketing and advertising	437	-	437
Subscriptions and licenses	40	-	40
<i>Utilities</i>			
Heat & light	5,584	-	5,584
Insurance	211	-	211
Recharged under License to Occupy	(1,894)	-	(1,894)
<i>Financial costs</i>			
Bank and card charges	155	-	155
Parking machine	1,022	-	1,022
Insurance	3,653	-	3,653
Recharged under License to Occupy	(455)	-	(455)
Irrecoverable VAT & write offs	263	-	263
Depreciation	95	36,438	36,533
<i>Technology costs</i>			
IT software	246	-	246
IT consumables	137	-	137
<i>Professional fees</i>			
Managing agent	2,304	-	2,304
Finance agent	1,310	-	1,310
Consultant and project fees	15,616	-	15,616
	52,942	87,573	140,515

NatureScot's funding of the ranger post listed under "Restricted Funds"

The accounts also reveal that the only person apart from the Ranger who was based on site was the "warden" who received free accommodation in return for limited duties. The Cashel Trust had no money to employ permanent staff, no forester to manage the woodland, no research staff to show what the project was achieving – in short no resource to deliver its original objectives. Almost all the work that was done was undertaken or overseen by volunteers.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that after 20 years of struggling with finances the trustees are exhausted. That would explain the statement in the Herald that “they are looking for a new steward for the land, which they feel they have ‘taken as far as they can’”.

While this account may help readers understand why Cashel has been put up for sale, it does not excuse it.

Public v private interests at Cashel

There is no indication in the 2022 accounts that the directors of the Cashel Forest Trust did not view it as a going concern. Moreover, the first that members of the RSFS, the parent body, heard about the sale was by an email the day before the sale was announced publicly:

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From: RSFS @rsfs.org.uk>
To:
Sent: Thursday 27 June 2024
Subject: Cashel update

Dear Member,

I am writing to you to advise you that sales particulars for Cashel will be published on Friday of this week. The primary objectives for Cashel have been successfully met and the trustees have spent much time over the past two years considering where the future might lie.

Following extensive discussion, the trustees have concluded that the future management of the property may be effectively carried out by a new, better resourced custodian more capable of providing the investment required to build on the achievements of the last quarter century.

Background to Cashel

Evolving forestry policy through the late 1980's and 90's recognised the importance of protecting and expanding our native woodland cover. The result was the widening of grant support for the establishment of new native woodlands; at the time a relatively novel concept. In the late 1990s the RSFS applied for, and was awarded, a grant from the Millennium Forest for Scotland Trust to purchase Cashel farm, a tick and bracken covered sheep farm on the east side of Loch Lomond. The aim was to demonstrate how a typical land holding might be re-afforested with native species.

However, this acquisition represented a major departure from the Society's long-established role in the delivery of lifelong learning about woodlands and their management. The scale of the investment and accompanying obligations saw the formation of the RSFS Forest Trust Company (renamed Cashel Forest Trust in 2017) to derisk the project from an RSFS perspective.

Enormous achievement

Some 25 years on the evidence of successfully rising to the challenge of establishing a major new native woodland at Cashel is there for all to see. Cashel's native woodland has been delivered thanks to the hard work of countless volunteers, funders and trustees, for which the Trust is deeply grateful. Cashel estate now boasts some 300ha of native woodland, one of the largest and oldest of the 'new' native woodlands in Scotland.

Public access has been encouraged with a visitor centre and the creation of five walking trails of which three are accessible by wheelchair. More recently a Jubilee Orchard, commemorating the late Queen's 70 years as monarch, has been established in the policies, a wildlife dipping pond rebuilt and a red squirrel viewing hide installed. As responsible land managers the Trust has initiated peatland restoration and the removal from the open hill of a large number of self-seeded non-native conifers.

The way forward

The disposal of Cashel has been carefully considered and detailed expert advice taken. Based on current plans, we anticipate the sale of all or a substantial part of Cashel will be concluded by the end of 2024. We will keep everyone updated, in due course, through the fortnightly eNews.

Kind regards

Raymond Henderson



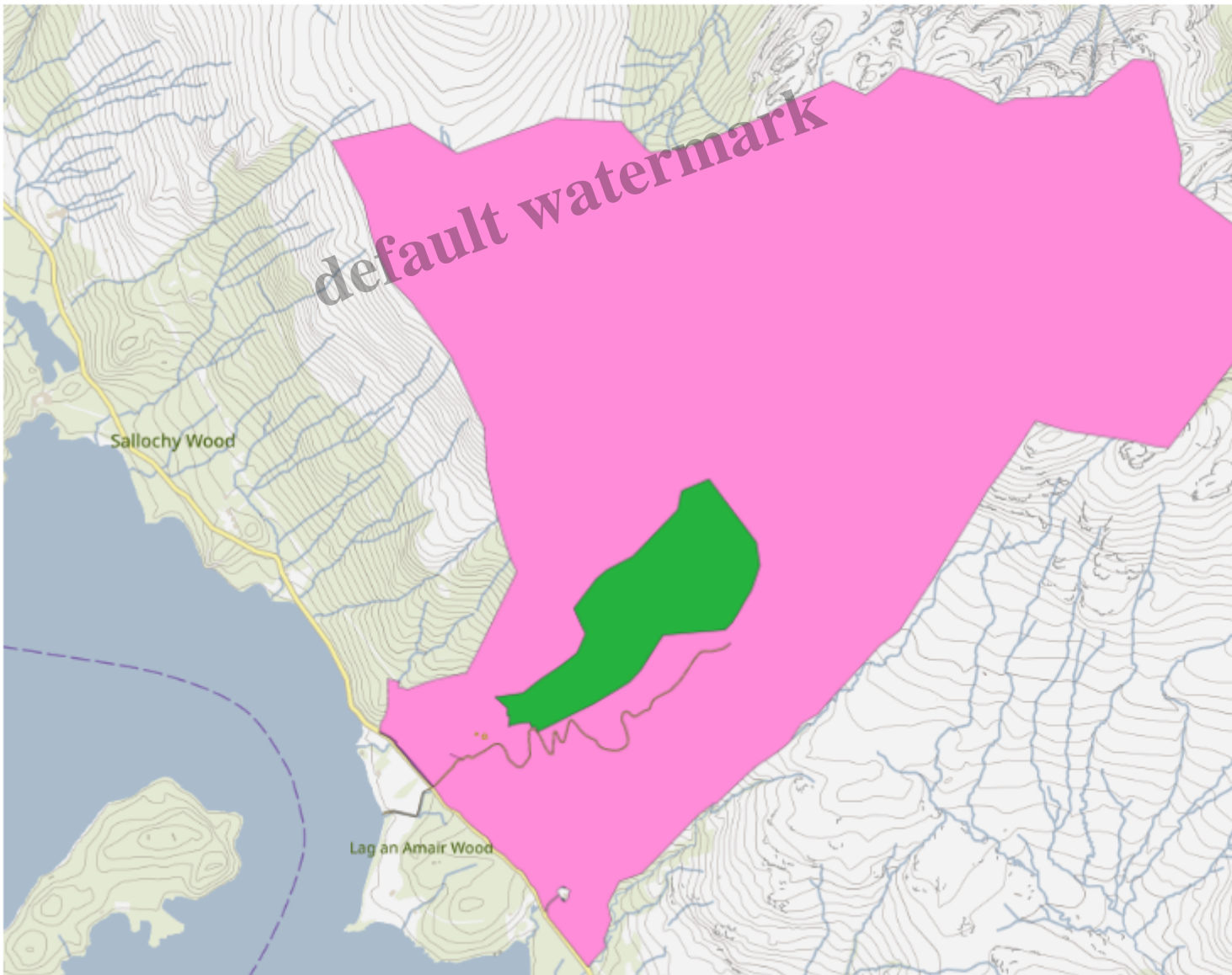
Raymond Henderson
Vice President

While the letter correctly identifies the need for investment, the suggestion that the project had been successfully completed is in my view dishonest. Despite all the voluntary effort the Cashel Trust has clearly failed to deliver its original objectives. Rather than consulting ordinary members of the RSFS about this – there has been plenty of time to do in the two years they have spent “much time” considering what to do – it appears the trustees have taken it upon themselves to sell the property. Nor

have the trustees or the officers of the RSFS provided any explanation to the membership of what they will do with the £4m if the estate is sold.

The Cashel Estate was meant to be a public forest and indeed the land was once in public ownership. According to the Registers of Scotland, however, it was sold by the Secretary of State for Scotland in 1983 to the trustees of the firm of J Maxwell. They then in 1984 sold the part of the land along the Cashel burn to Diana Jean Huntingford (in green on the map below). That explains why there is a hole in the middle of the estate and why the Cashel Trust was not able to fully cash in on the hydro scheme when it was constructed 10 years ago. J Maxwell then sold the remainder of the land (in pink) to RSFS:

Purchase date	Purchase price
20 June 1996	£800,000



In short, the RSFS bought back what had been public land with more money from the public, in the

form of the funding from the National Lottery. That funding was conditional on RSFS not selling the property for twenty years, a condition which was secured by a standard security which expired in January 2018. That has enabled the trustees to sell the forest without penalty.

As the extracts from the accounts above demonstrate, the RSFS has received a significant amount of public funding from other sources (along with some other funding from private bodies such as that from the Imperial Society of Knights Bachelor to establish the Jubilee Orchard Gardens to commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee). Effectively what was supposed to be a public forest at Cashel was rightly bought and developed with public and charitable money but is now up for sale to private interests without any explanation of how the sale proceeds will be used. That is scandalous and threatens to bring the RSFS and its membership into disrepute.

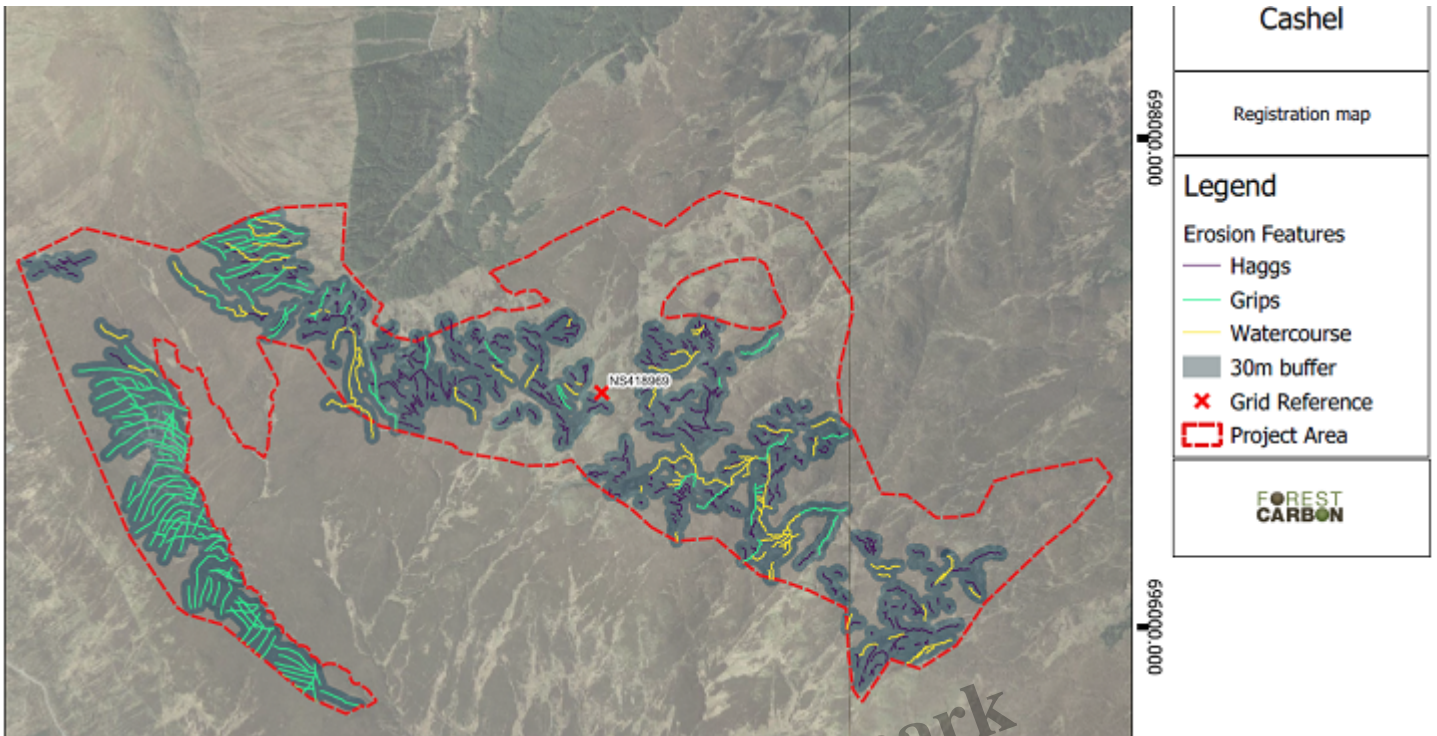
To make matters even worse, the decision to market the estate in lots in order to maximise the potential proceeds is likely to prevent any other public or charitable body buying the land. For example, the farmhouse and steading are likely to be extremely attractive to people seeking a house near the shore of Loch Lomond; if that is sold off separately so will the unfulfilled potential to demonstrate the benefits of native woodland planting and management to the public. Moreover, by marketing the hydro powerhouse separately, the trustees have removed the one reliable source of income that might have been available to new owners of the forest.

The marketing of Lot 3, the 16 acre field at Blair, is revealing: "It is believed that the land might have future potential for change of use subject to gaining the necessary planning approval". This suggests the trust has had a word with the planners at the LLTNPA who have not said no to another tourist development on the east shore of Loch Lomond. That is likely to preclude the heavily grazed and improved field being turned into a conservation meadow.....

The scandal, however, goes deeper than this and illustrates the failure of Scottish Government policy when it comes to investing in the land and conservation.

Cashel and the new markets in "natural capital"

In April the Cashel Trust completed stage 1 of its peatland restoration scheme funded by Peatland Action via the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority. It has registered that land for carbon offsetting purposes under the Peatland Code ([see here](#)):



That same land, restored at yet more public expense, comprises the largest part of the estate (2597 acres) and is being marketed under Lot 4, “Beinn Bhreac”, for offers over £2,250,000. The sales brochure states “there is potential for a total of 28,000 Pending Issuance Units (PIUs) which are expected to be issued later in 2024”. (A PIU is effectively a promise to deliver a carbon unit in future based on predicted sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere).

The 349.45 acres of woodland planting in Lot 2, Tom An Eagail Woods, is much smaller and is being marketed for offers over £750k but, unlike many other native woodland planting schemes, has not been registered under the woodland carbon code. I am still trying to understand why not.

Scottish Government policy in relation to mitigating the climate and nature emergencies is now to a great extent focussed on trying to attract private capital to invest in “natural capital” in order to “save the planet” (and humans as a species). The basic idea behind the carbon markets is if a financial value can be attached to woodland and peatland that will bring in a new source of income which in turn will fund conservation management, such as the RSFS wanted to demonstrate at Cashel Forest.

It is remarkable therefore that among the current Directors of the Cashel Trust is Dr Peter Metcalfe Phillips who was appointed in May 2020. Dr Phillips, who is described as a civil servant on the companies house website, is Head of Natural Capital Land Management Policy at the Scottish Government and includes the following statement on Linked In ([see here](#)): “CAREER GOAL: (1) SAVE THE PLANET; (2) ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO DO LIKEWISE; AND (3) HAVE SUSTAINABLE ADVENTURES WHILST DOING SO”.

The fact that the current head of Natural Capital Land Management Policy at the Scottish Government appears to have been unable to bring in new income streams for Cashel based on selling carbon

credits should tell the public something. The carbon credit system is extremely unlikely ever to produce the income streams that would make conservation management possible. The idea, promulgated by the Scottish Government, that private finance is going to restore nature and climate appears completely and utterly bankrupt. That is not Dr Philips fault, although one might hope he has used his experience at Cashel to urge the Scottish Government to have a rethink.

What has been achieved by the Scottish Government through its support for the carbon credits system is new financial speculation in land, which puts land ownership out of the reach of ordinary people, local communities and the voluntary sector. It is extremely sad that the RSFS, a once venerable voluntary body, is helping fuel that problem and give credence to the whole rotten system by selling off its estate at Cashel Estate without any consultation with local communities or the wider public.

The consequences for the Cashel Estate are fairly predictable, some business is likely to buy up the peatland and woodland areas as a financial investment and all the original idealistic objectives behind the Forest of a Thousand Years will be lost.

What should have happened and needs to happen

It is important to stress that the Cashel Forest Trust has never, after the initial burst of funding, had the money to achieve its objectives at Cashel. That did not mean, however, that the only option open to the trustees was to sell off the land and to try and maximise the proceeds for its own purposes.

The most recent accounts show that the volunteers for the trust have, despite having very little income, managed its assets reasonably well (even if the buildings are now once again in a dilapidated state):

Cashel Forest Trust

Balance Sheet

for the year ended 31 December 2022

Company Number: SC160412	Note	2022 £	
Fixed assets			
Tangible assets	10	999,935	
Current assets			
Debtors	11	50,755	3,99
Cash at bank and in hand		70,515	61,28
		<u>121,270</u>	<u>65,27</u>
Creditors – amounts falling due within one year	12	(29,059)	(5,26)
Net current assets		92,221	
Net assets		<u>1,092,156</u>	
Funds			
Unrestricted funds	14	66,049	
Restricted funds	14	1,026,107	
Total charitable funds		<u>1,092,156</u>	

The main asset is the land, purchased with public grant support, and which has never been revalued so it still shows as £800k in the accounts:

10	Tangible fixed assets	Heritable Land £	Visitor Centre £	Footpaths £	Equipment £	Fixtures & Fittings £
<i>Cost</i>						
	At 31 st December 2021	800,000	206,867	161,502	483	452
	Additions	-	-	-	-	-
	Disposals	-	-	-	-	-
	At 31 st December 2022	<u>800,000</u>	<u>206,867</u>	<u>161,502</u>	<u>483</u>	<u>452</u>
<i>Depreciation</i>						
	At 31 st December 2021	-	70,332	61,664	388	452
	Charge for the year	-	4,138	32,300	95	-
	Disposals	-	-	-	-	-
	At 31 st December 2022	<u>-</u>	<u>74,470</u>	<u>93,964</u>	<u>483</u>	<u>452</u>
	At 31 st December 2022	<u>800,000</u>	<u>132,397</u>	<u>67,538</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>-</u>
	At 31 st December 2021	<u>800,000</u>	<u>136,535</u>	<u>99,838</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>-</u>

The important point to take from this is that the RSFS is not out of pocket and there is no reason why it should not have decided to hand over the land to another public or charitable body who would continue to manage it as a public forest in the public interest.

The trustees could, for example, after consultation have offered to give the land to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority or hand it back to Scottish Ministers to manage as a demonstration project through Forest and Land Scotland.

The trustees of course may have tried to do this and had their overtures rejected. It appears, for example, that they had close links with the LLTNPA both through the peatland restoration project and because Dr Philips' linked-in feed includes references to Simon Jones, the LLTNPA's Director for Conservation. They would appear to know each other. Unfortunately, however, the LLTNPA has never taken any interest in land-ownership or making the case for public financing of conservation management but instead has spent much of the last five years trying to dispose of its own assets to the private sector. In a real National Park there would never have been any need for the RSFS to put Cashel up for sale.

Cashel Forest could still, as one of the oldest new native woodlands, play a really important role in

informing future policy and practice about these schemes and be used to drive reform of the Scottish Forestry grants system. What lessons, for example, could be learned from the impact of grazing animals on the peatland, the lack of natural regeneration on site or the poor state of deer fencing (all referred to in the sales particulars etc)? What about the potential to demonstrate and research the impact of tree planting techniques – would Forest Research, for example, not have been better conducting its experiment on alternatives to plastic tree tubes at Cashel rather than in the heart of the Glenmore Forest?

The longer native woodland planting, as financed by the Scottish Forestry grants system and boosted by the Woodland Carbon Code, has continued the more disastrous it has become (BrewDog's Lost Forest is just one of several examples considered on Parkswatch). Within that context the need for a demonstration project, such as RSFS originally intended at Cashel, is greater than ever. As a voluntary organisation the RSFS could have offered an independent critical view of what is now going on: its claim that its work at Cashel is finished is completely premature and a counsel of despair.

Unfortunately I cannot see the trustees of the Cashel Trust, the senior management and board of the LLTNPA or anyone in the Scottish Government sorting out this scandal. Only public pressure will do so and that probably has to start with members of the RSFS forcing the Cashel Forest Trust to consult publicly and change its decision.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. climate change
2. forestry
3. Governance
4. land reform
5. LLTNPA
6. peatland restoration

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