

The Origin and History of the Anagach Woods

The native pinewoods of Anagach are truly exceptional for wildlife, for recreation and their scenic qualities. They extend to almost 400 hectares (1,000 acres) and represent an outstanding and unique resource for locals and visitors.

The name Anagach may be derived from the Gaelic for what was known to be a dangerous ford on the nearby River Spey, or it may be a derivation of “Aonach” meaning hillocky, a very apt description for the striking landforms created by a multitude of eskers and moraines (large deposits of sands and gravel left after the glaciation of the Cairngorm mountains). The irregular landforms have resulted in the formation of an interesting variety of habitats, from dry heath and pinewood to bogs, which were originally lochs or small lochans.

The original forest disappeared over centuries as the trees were cut for timber and wild, but deliberate fires burnt even mature trees. Grazing animals (cattle, sheep and deer) ate up any seedling trees. In the Grantown Museum you will see maps from 1750 that refer to this area between the new town and the Spey as a “poor, rugged piece of heath” with plenty of “moss and other firing”, referring to the peat that was cut for fires.

The sandy soils and the peat did not lend themselves to cultivation and the remains of old dykes, seen in various parts of the woods, were low, stone and sod walls topped with timber fencing that keep livestock from straying.

In 1766 the process of deforestation was reversed when James Grant of Grant, the “Good Sir James”, initiated a “plantation of fir, oak, birch,” between the Spey and former ‘Loch of Anagauch’. At that time seed was gathered from the natural, boreal forest remnants of Abernethy and Duthil and sold to various nurseries and estates throughout Scotland. It was also sown in the Castle Grant nursery and so there is little doubt that the origin of the ‘fir’ (Scots pine) that was used for Anagach was local. It is believed that, as well as gathering seed; pine seedlings were dug up from the natural forests and planted elsewhere on the estate.

Through the following century Anagach Woods continued to grow with new plantations and as the trees matured, estate records indicate that they were thinned, selectively felled and seedling pines sprang up naturally. The estate’s Woods Manager, John Grant Thomson, after an inspection of Anagach on 13 April 1862, reported that there were a “great many natural firs rising, quite sufficient for a crop”. There may have been some infill planting of pine in areas that were not completely filled by natural regeneration.

Subsequent estate records and forestry society excursion reports (see below) all testify to the amount that the estate relied upon natural regeneration to restock the woods after felling. The stately pines you therefore see in Anagach are almost all regenerated naturally from the original planting. The evidence also indicates that these original plantings originated from the natural pinewoods of Abernethy and Duthil. So, the lineage of the Anagach pines goes all the way back to the trees that colonised Scotland after the last ice-age.

However, some parts of Anagach were still grazed by livestock until well into the 1900’s, indicated by the old fences gradually rotting away. These areas of woodland have far less pine in them, far more birch and juniper and present quite a different character to the rest of the woods.

When Grantown was established in 1765, house builders went to the Abernethy woods for timber, but once the Anagach woods started producing timber a sawmill was built at Kylintra. This was originally water powered and the remains of the leat can be seen next to Kylintra Burn. The mill was still operational in 1950, but by then it was no longer water powered.

Anagach was not just a source of timber, but it was also a source of peat, for home fires and also for firing limestone to make the limewash for houses and slaked lime for the pastures. Some evidence of peat cutting can still be seen in the bogs where a straight, low step in the bog marks an old peat bank. There are the remains of an old limekiln on the edge of the Woods near Craigroy and also across the river at Achnagonalin. The bogs were also a source of sphagnum moss for surgical dressings - some of the sphagnum has antiseptic properties. This was especially the case in the First World War, when groups of children were sent off into the woods to gather the moss - there is a delightful photograph that records this in the Grantown Museum.

Built at the far end of the woods in the 19th Century, nothing now remains of the Poorhouse but the name and the foundations under the turf. The line of the military road (C. 1745) still runs straight down through the woods, from Grantown towards the old Speybridge, but no 'red-coats' march it's length on their way to Tomintoul.

Recreation has also been a key feature of the woods and over the last 200 years a network of tracks and paths have developed. The Speyside Way runs through the length of the wood and the woods are regularly used for orienteering. The strong association between the woods and the town meant that when the woods were put up for sale in 2001, the local community was galvanised into action and the woods were bought by the Anagach Woods Trust on behalf of the community in May 2002. The woods will be managed to ensure that they remain an essential part of Grantown and that they reflect Strathspey's natural Scots pine heritage.

Extracts:

Again on 19 January 1885: "came through Anagach and was pleased to see so many young seedling firs appearing on the ground burnt some time ago." John Grant Thomson, Estate's Woods Manager.

August 1907, 13th Annual Excursion of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society (RSAS): "One of the most noteworthy features of Strathspey forestry being the extent to which natural regeneration is carried on". In Station Wood, "the first stage of regeneration was seen." In Kylindra Wood they noted, "a thriving crop of natural Scots pine, growing between and below the old parent trees." They also saw, "a dense natural crop about 70 years old." It is recorded, that of Milton Wood near Castle Grant, it is "said to have been originally planted with young, natural trees carted from Abernethy forest and is believed to be now between 150 and 200 years old" (the former is correct). Further, "the wood of Anagach also contains an extensive and thriving crop of natural trees." From the RSAS Transaction Vol XIX Pt II 1908.

The Journal also includes reference to a visit in 1881 by M. Boppe and records his comments on the management of the woods: "It is easy in Scotland to perpetuate a forest by natural means, and of this a practical proof was given to us in two forests which we visited, one near Grantown in Strathspey..... In these the results obtained under the skilful and diligent direction of the gentlemen who manage these forests for their employers form a striking example of what may be done in the way of reproducing forests by natural means." He also refers to "specially vigorous trees of known pedigree."

29 June to 10 July 1914, RSAS Tour of Inspection of Woods and Afforestable Lands. The itinerary gives valuable information on the methods used to encourage natural regeneration and shows that this method of restocking was widely practiced by the Strathspey Estates.

1933, from the Journal of the Society of Foresters of Great Britain, Vol VII No. 2. An article by W. H. Guillebaud entitled "Scots pine in Morayshire and Strathspey" details the widespread use of natural regeneration and how it is achieved and consequently managed. In particular the use of grazing stock after the crop has been opened up is of interest - the

sheep and cattle kept down vegetation, churned up the ground and were removed when seedlings appeared.

Strathspey Woods - detailed Working Plan 1950 to 1975, by J. Inglis Johnson, Woods Manager, based on extensive survey work in the late 1940's.

- Station Wood: naturally regenerated
- Kylintra Wood: mainly natural
- Kylintra mill: Seeded Scots pine and planted Lodgepole pine
- Dunstaffnage: naturally regenerated
- Free Church Wood: “ “
- Ladies Garden Wood: “ “
- Anagach: “ “
- Poorhouse Wood: planted
- Craigroy: naturally regenerated
- Back of Anagach: natural pine and birch

Glossary

Eskers are sinuous ridges of rounded stones, sands and gravels left by rivers snaking their way under the glaciers.

Moraines contain more angular rocks and form where the glaciers push them up into mounds or where they collect in heaps as the ice melts.

References:

Dunlop, B. M. S. (1993) The Origin and History of Curr Wood, Strathspey.

Acknowledgements:

This web page is based largely on the “Origin and History of Anagach and surrounding Woods” by Basil M. S. Dunlop 1993