

## Aulnaskiach Dell: Woodland in the City

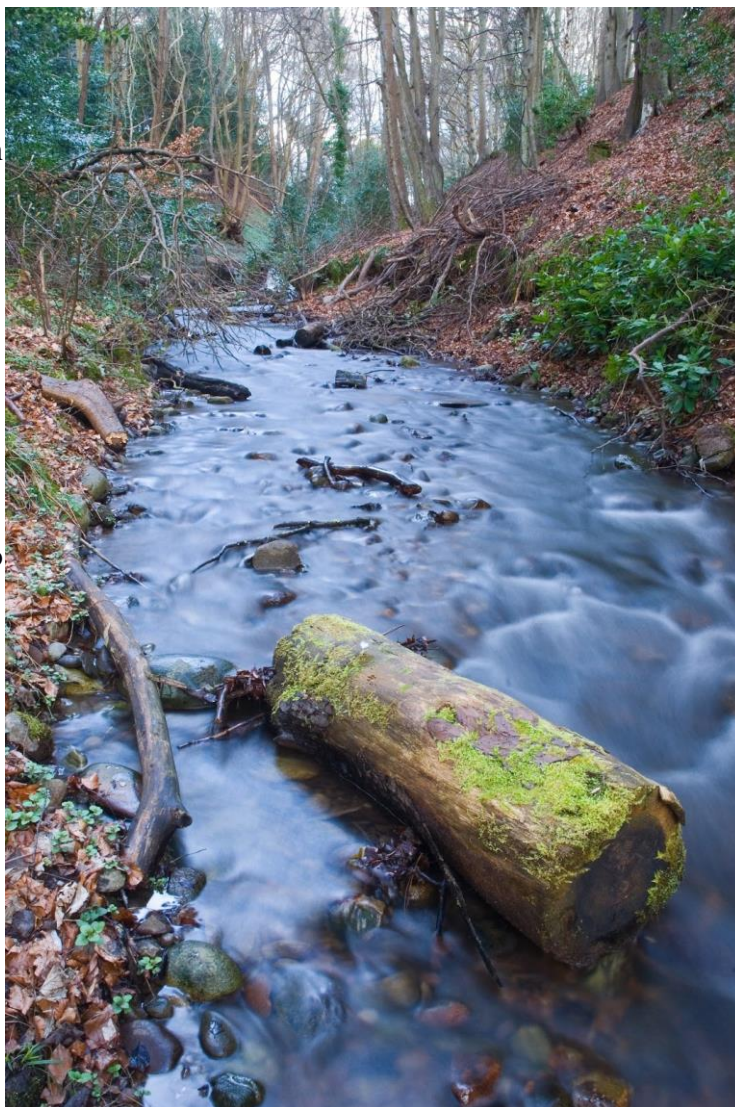
The woodland behind our house is a place of beauty. It has a touch of mystery and feeling of remoteness that is startling to those who first chance upon it, as it is not far from the city centre of Inverness. The wood is in a steep-sided valley, formed by the Aulnaskiach Burn where it gurgles and splashes its way down to the River Ness.

We have lived in this neighbourhood for over thirty years and I was always aware of the wood, walking it often with our children when they were young, however it was not until 2010 that it began to have a greater significance. It all started with a knock at the door from the owner, who had arranged a meeting locally to see if the community were interested in taking on ownership. From that meeting a steering group was formed to investigate this possibility and two and half years later, after a full consultation with the local community, endless discussions on gabions, sewage, telegraph poles and many many other issues a group formed to take forward this idea and the Aulnaskiach Dell SCIO was born!

Further work was undertaken, in particular to ascertain the real costs of this venture, and as the trustees realised the extent of work required a plan was made to lease the wood for a period of three years to allow time for the raising of the required capital. In November 2013 we took on the management of the wood for the princely sum of one pound rent annually! Our goals were to encourage greater biodiversity in the woodland and to facilitate community volunteering.

At first we were real novices, only one of the trustees having a background in forestry and it was a steep learning curve. We had funding from Highland Council's Common Good Fund for necessary tree work along with support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, local authority wards and the Forestry Commission Seed Corn Fund. We also visited and got advice from other community woodlands to ascertain the priorities for work in the wood.

There was plenty to occupy us in a woodland that had largely been untouched for fifty years. The wood contains elm, oak, ash, birch and holly and is home to a variety of fauna including red squirrels, tawny owls, roe deer, woodpeckers and dippers. In the 1950's former pasture surrounding the wood was converted into urban development so many of the mature and over-mature trees back on to peoples houses and sheds. Initial work has consisted in a programme of selective felling and replanting and this phase is nearly complete. Over a number of sessions we have planted wild cherry, oak, hazel, chestnut, rowan, alder, willow, wild rose, and blackthorn. Trustees have gained new skills in chain-sawing and we have a thriving wood-fuel project which helps to boost funds. We currently have a very healthy membership of around 57 people who assist on volunteer days



when we cut back non-native species and bag and sell firewood. With the sales of firewood, and by running events we have managed to raise over £14000, and are now in a position to take the land into community ownership.

The wood is beginning to show signs of renewal as it is actively cared for by people: wonderful contoured paths made by the Victorians are opening up once again and ground flora is restoring as light can now reach the woodland floor. I recently saw grey wagtails in the burn and bees are enjoying all the new plant life. Local children are playing in the Dell again, the local primary school visits regularly, following the Forest Schools programme, and a nearby secondary school use the Dell for Higher Biology lessons where students have identified over thirty three species of plants.

If you are interested in more information or would like to contact us you can do this at <http://aultnaskiachdell.blogspot.co.uk/>

Gina O'Brien Trustee of Aultnaskiach Dell SCIO

### **Update November 2020**

The Aultnaskiach Dell went into community ownership in February 2019. In the April of that year we celebrated with a ceilidh at Hilton church with around seventy people attending, which raised a further £700 for the wood.

Since then we have received funding from the Co-op which has enabled us to make some much needed improvements to the path that runs the length of the burn. We have also planted a further thirty trees of mixed species.

Ongoing projects that have been put on hold because of covid are a photography project of 'the Dell through the Seasons' led by Matt Sillars from the Inverness Darkroom and a project to build bird boxes run by RSPB volunteers with children from Hilton Primary. We are hoping these will run fully in 2021.

A wonderful sight in the Autumn was the fledging of three tawny owl chicks from a nest in the Dell, and we continue to have regular sightings of sparrow-hawk, dipper, buzzard and red squirrels. The redwings have newly arrived and are making good use of the bountiful food supply here.

The woodland has proved a tonic for people during these difficult times and attracts a number of visitors. It will be good to see the schools returning hopefully sometime next year.