



Culbokie Woods – Past and Present

Forest Management

Culbokie Wood is part of the National Forest Estate and managed by Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS). The existing woodlands were planted in the first part of the 20th century, after the land was purchased from Findon Estate in 1926 by the Forestry Commission. At that time the woodland area was planted with a range of tree species, including Scots pine, Lodgepole pine, Norway and Sitka spruce and larch.

There is not a lot of evidence of old woodland or ancient trees today. The ancient woodland register records much of the land as long established plantation origin, which means that the earliest mapping records show woodland since either 1750 or 1860, depending on the source. But the wood holds plants that indicate a strong link with ancient woodland such as coralroot orchid and creeping ladies tresses. Juniper and aspen are also present, although in very low numbers at present.

FCS's management concept is to move away from the traditional large scale plantation approach. To achieve this, much of the area is to be managed under a continuous-cover policy and some areas are for long term retention including a strip along the Glascairn ridge. The area around the Culbokie side of the loch is recognised to have high conservation potential and is zoned for minimum intervention. Some areas are still to be clear felled and the long term vision for the wood is for mainly Scots pine with small areas of Norway spruce, larch and birch.

Closer partnership working between FCS and the community through the Culbokie Woods Group, has allowed the community to begin to take a more active role in the wood to enhance its biodiversity and to maintain informal recreation.

The wood supports mammals such as red squirrel, pine marten and badger. Birds including buzzard and red kite are recorded as nesting in the wood.

The Loch

Culbokie Loch was formed during and after the ice age and resulted partly from scooping by the glacier flowing along the broad shelf behind the village and partly from damming up by ribbons and mounds of glacial debris. It is the only natural loch left on the Black Isle as others have been drained or filled in naturally and this makes it a really important habitat for plants, birds and bats.

The loch was once much bigger, extending almost to Carn Mor Dun (see below). Strangely, maps in both 1769 and 1837 show a route-way across the loch although it is unclear what form this actually took.



Estate maps of 1769 and 1837 (extract forms part of the Tods Murray National Records of Scotland deposit) respectively showing a 'route' across the loch and the location of Carn Mor Dun

The size of the loch has been gradually reduced, both by attempts to drain it in 1965 and through natural succession. However boating and fishing took place until a couple of generations ago.



Boating on Culbokie Loch

What remains is now a mosaic of habitats from open water to swamps, marshes, scrub vegetation and semi natural woodland supporting a diverse flora which gives the site its high conservation value. The nationally rare coralroot orchid is known to grow in the damp and shady conditions around the loch. It feeds mainly as a parasite on birch and willow though a fungal association. Look out for its white flowers in June/July. The loch-side is also home to a very rare moss known as the Green Shield-moss which is reliant entirely on deadwood as its host.



Coralroot orchid and Greenshield Moss (Giles Drake Brockman)

The loch and the willow scrub woodland that surrounds it provides a habitat for a number of common bird species such as chaffinch, wren, coal tit, great tit as well as more important species such as yellowhammer, reed-bunting, willow warbler, dunnock, mistle thrush, lesser redpoll and meadow pipit. Otters have been recorded in association with the loch and its watercourses.

Geology

Glacial Moraines

The ridges and hummocky ground throughout large parts of the wood have been formed as a result of the glacial action some 15,000 years ago. The pronounced ridge at Glascairn which carries the main footpath is a moraine which was formed at the edge of the massive glacier as it flowed from the west through the valley of the Cromarty Firth between the Black Isle and Ben Wyvis. The glacial debris which can be seen under the root plates of fallen trees is made up of a jumble of shattered local sandstone along with more rounded rocks transported by the glacier from signature rock formations to the west.

Another hidden but pronounced glacial feature can be seen near the eastern entrance to Culbokie Wood at Greenhills where there is a short section of high narrow ridge that gradually gives way to a hummocky landscape of glacial debris. This feature could be some sort of 'mini esker' deposited by a glacial stream to form the sharp mound.

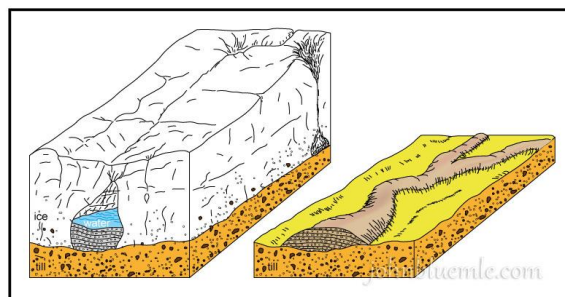


Diagram of esker formation (image from John Bluemle of North Dakota Geology)

History and Heritage

Culbokie wood contains strong evidence of the human activity over the centuries.

Carn Mor Dun

Carn Mor Dun, lying at the end of the Glascairn ridge, is one of the best surviving examples of an Iron Age Fort on the Black Isle and one of at least three dun sites remaining in the Findon parish. It is thought to be around 2000 years old.

The mound of the dun is not man made but makes use of one of the more prominent natural glacial hummocks. The outer stone wall measures 30 metres in diameter with a denuded entrance on the south side. The interior measures about 17 metres and shows some signs of previous excavation. The outer defences consist of a pronounced ditch and a rampart.

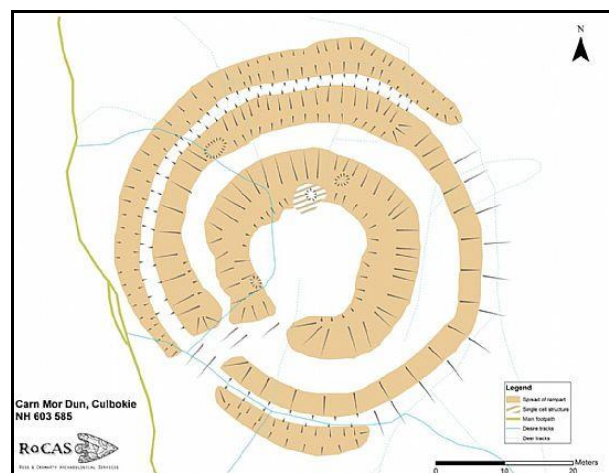
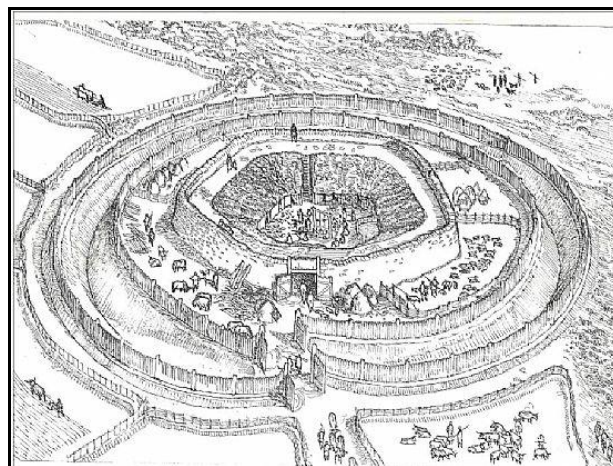


Diagram produced by Mary Peteranna on behalf of the Forestry Commission.

The dun would probably have been the fortified home of a local family, also providing shelter and security for domestic animals from rustlers and wild animals. The surrounding land would have been farmed.

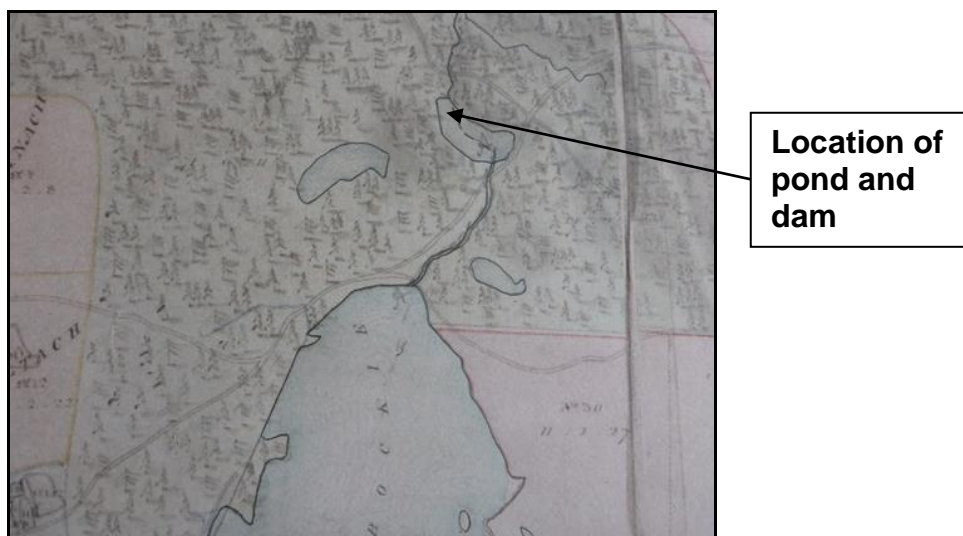


Artists impression of Dun when in use over 2000 years ago.

The Dun is known locally as Culbokie Castle and it is recorded on the 1837 and 1849 Findon Estate maps as Castle Bockie.

Dams

Two old dams can be seen on the Findon Burn as it leaves the loch at its north east end and winds through the glacial moraines of Culbokie Woods. These hummocky features provide natural walls for small water impoundments once a dam has been built. These two dams (the one to the west is larger than the one to the east) appear to have been formed by heaping up large boulders to around 2 metres in height across the path of the burn. Their age is unknown but they would have enabled the formation of ponds which could be released on demand as part of the feeder system for Findon Mill. Only one pool has been found marked on the old maps as shown below.



1837 Findon Estate Map showing one of the dammed ponds on Findon Burn. This map extract forms part of the Tods Murray National Records of Scotland deposit who have given permission for reproduction.

Boundary walls

Old maps of the village from 1837 and 1849 show enclosed fields and grazing around the loch. The remnants of these enclosure dykes (turf walls) can be found at various places in the woods including some running down the hill into the loch and others in Glascairn woods.

Why is it a wood and not farmland ?

If we could strip away all the trees, we would see a marked contrast between the almost chaotic landscape of Culbokie Wood, all ridges and hummocks and hollows, and the smooth slopes above and below. The rocky glacial debris would have been difficult to cultivate, and even if cleared the coarse sandy material is often too dry and infertile for crops. It is ideal ground for our native Scots pine!

Natural Heritage and Wildlife

Red Squirrels

Red squirrels are a nationally endangered species but luckily, here in the Highlands, they live without the presence of the American Grey Squirrel which is threatening the survival of the reds. Red squirrels, which are rarely seen, leave evidence of their whereabouts by the presence of pine cones which have been stripped by the squirrel in order to get at the seeds. These cones can be seen on the ground under the tree canopy or on tree stumps which have been used by the squirrel as feeding places. A less obvious sign of squirrels is a large drey (nest) high in a tree but close to the trunk.



Stripped cones found in Culbokie Woods

Amphibians

Common frogs and toads are plentiful in Culbokie Woods. Look out for their spawn in the small ponds and ditches during March and April.

Butterflies, Dragonflies and Bats

On a calm day from late spring to late summer butterflies and dragonflies will be on the wing in warm sunny areas of the woods. Butterflies are most likely to be seen from April through to October and about 15 species have been recorded of which the Speckled Wood is frequently seen. Dragonflies, and damselflies, can be seen mainly during June but if the weather is favourable some might still be around as late as September.

Bats may be seen in the late evening and early morning hunting over the loch and through the woods, before returning to their roosts in some of the buildings in the village itself, such as the old school. Daubentons bats are associated with water and have been recorded at Culbokie Loch

Great Spotted Woodpecker

The distinctive drumming sound that can often be heard in the woods in spring and summer is made by the rapid knocking (10 - 40 strikes per second) of the woodpecker's beak against tree trunks. The woodpecker steadies itself by using its stiff tail as a prop, and grasps the tree firmly with specially adapted feet – two toes point forward, two point back.

Both sexes drum, as a way of finding or keeping in touch with their mate, and to announce their territory to others. Woodpeckers chisel into living or dead wood – their long, sticky, spiny tongues, which wrap around the skull, probe deeply into holes in order to extract insect larvae. Shock absorbent tissue protects their skull from the fierce bombardment of the bill on wood.

Both sexes are predominantly black and white with red under the tail, while the male is distinguishable by a red patch on the back of the neck. Juveniles have a red crown which they lose as they mature.

The Heather Family

During August and September much of the woods are covered in a lilac carpet of heathers which attract many nectar-loving insects including bees and moths.



HEATHER (*Calluna vulgaris*), also known as LING, is the dominant heather in Culbokie Woods. The flowers are lilac and held on narrow spikes.

BELL HEATHER (*Erica cinerea*), has deeply coloured purplish-red bell-shaped flowers in groups up the stems and dark green foliage. Favouring dry ground it is much less common than ling but the flower colour stands out clearly.



CROSS LEAVED HEATH (*Erica tetralix*) prefers damper ground and is distinguished by the grey-green colour of its foliage and the leaves which are in whorls of four (hence its name). It has rather globular pink flowers in clusters at the ends of its shoots.

Juniper

Common juniper (*Juniperus communis*) is one of only three native conifers in Britain and belongs to the Cypress family. Juniper was one of the first tree species to colonise the UK after the last ice age around 10,000 years ago. It enjoys open Scots Pine woodland and in Culbokie Woods can be found as an under-storey at the easterly entrance to the woods at Greenhill. Unlike most tree species, Juniper bushes are either male or female and the juniper berries – which take 2-3 years to ripen – are used in some meat dishes as well as in the making of gin. The word 'gin' derives from either 'genievre' or 'jenever' – the French and Dutch words for juniper.

Blaeberries

Carpets of blaeberries (sometimes known as bilberry, whortleberry, whinberry and wild blueberry, depending on where you come from) can be found in the woods providing an opportunity for some productive foraging. These berries, about the size of a petit pois, are quite time-consuming to pick, but well worth it for a fine 'tarte aux myrtilles', an unusual jam or as a tasty addition to a bowl of muesli. These berries are so popular in Finland that it is estimated that 50 million kilograms of wild berries are gathered every year! The acid soils in parts of Culbokie and Glascairn Woods are perfect for these low growing bushes to thrive.



View point towards Ben Wyvis

At various points in the wood it is possible to get a wonderful view of the 1046m high Ben Wyvis, one of Scotland's 282 mountains over 3,000 ft high known as the Munros. This ancient mountain emerged from the ocean along with all the NW Highlands around 430 million years ago. It would have towered over us, easily attaining the height of the present Alps. As fast as it rose, it was being worn down, the rivers often carving bold canyons with the debris being carried out onto the adjacent low ground. The last ice-sheet retreated around 15,000 years ago, and the last icecap covering Ben Wyvis disappeared around 10,500 years ago.

Folklore

The name Culbokie means 'haunted nook' in Gaelic and stories of ghostly events have frequently been recorded. This is an extract taken from an 1867 book about David Ross one of the "Men of Ross-shire" about a ghostly encounter near Culbokie Loch.

'It is said that the Muir of Crochar was the head-quarters of the Ferintosh and Resolis witches and that on meeting nights their Grand Master, Satan himself, was frequently seen to glide over Culbokie Loch towards them in the form of a spunkie.'
'David Ross used to travel back from Dingwall to his home in Braefindon in a cart with his wife and more than once he encountered Satan. Once, when he was praying, Satan passed by and raised the tippit of David's cloak from his face and began to mock him for being so pious.'

'Another time, when David was driving past the west end of the loch, his mind was all at once overwhelmed with the most gloomy forebodings; and he frequently looked back behind him, as if anxious for the safety of his beloved wife. The spot where the burn enters the loch from the west is low, marshy, and weird. Here, all of a sudden, the horse came to a stand-still, and began to back the cart and snort in a furious manner. David could see nothing at first but a little black dog; but by and bye the creature was getting larger and larger, and anon waxing fiercer and more threatening, till at last it was a sight enough to appal the stoutest heart. His wife got awfully alarmed; but her husband tried to compose her the best way he could. At last, when he saw that nothing else would do, he applied a few words of Scripture; whereupon the monster all at once dissolved into flames of fire, which, shooting along the sky with long trains of light, which emitted a strong stench of brimstone, glided towards the north and lost themselves like a number of falling stars behind Ben Wyvis.'

So beware!

The information in this document was compiled by members of the Culbokie Woods Group with assistance from the Forestry Commission and members of the Culbokie History Group.