



# Woodland on Atholl

Today there are more trees on Atholl Estates than there have been for centuries. Since 1990, Atholl Estates have planted 2,500 hectares of native non-commercial species such as Scots pine, rowan, beech, aspen and birch – the equivalent of an additional 4 million trees, taking the total number of trees on the estate up to roughly 15 million.

Woodland has always been a crucial strand in the history of Atholl Estates. Not only are there magnificent specimen trees at Blair Castle – some of the tallest in the kingdom – but the estate has been at the cutting edge of commercial forestry in Britain. In 1740, the 2nd Duke (1690–1764) was responsible for one of the first tree plantations in Scotland, with a crop of European larch for harvest. Forestry gathered pace with the 3rd Duke (1729–1774) and particularly with the 4th Duke (1755–1830), known as “Planter John”, who planted no fewer than 10,000 acres of larch – “for profit and beauty” – between 1774 and 1830, the majority on the Dunkeld Estate.

Planter John used 15 million young larch trees, nearly all of which were raised from seed in his nurseries, and popularised the species across Britain with his 1807 treatise, observations on Larch. He pioneered the use of larch in shipbuilding and planted it extensively on hill pastures, where sweet grasses could flourish beneath its light shade. (Relics of his schemes can be found at altitudes as high as 1,800 feet.)

His enterprises were the largest of their kind in Scotland, and helped make Perthshire the cradle of Scottish forestry. Such was Planter John’s fame that Robert Burns addressed to him a poem, in the voice of a stream begging for tree cover, entitled *The Humble Petition of Bruar Water to His Grace the Duke of Atholl*. It runs:

*“Would then my noble master please  
Togrant my highest wishes,  
He’ll shade my banks w i’ tow’ring trees  
And bonny spreading bushes.”*

Planter John did as he asked, and the woodland inspired by Burns can still be seen at Bruar Falls.





In 1884, the 7th Duke (1840–1917), after a trip to Japan, brought home seeds of the Japanese larch, which he raised, and 11 were introduced to Dunkeld the following year. A decade later in those woods, a new form of larch was spotted, quick growing but strange in appearance. It turned out to be a self-pollinating hybrid between the European and Japanese larches, which combined the best of its parents' qualities, growing well in cramped plantation conditions and tolerating poor soil.

In 1904, seedlings of the newly christened Dunkeld Hybrid larch were planted over the Atholl lands, and soon throughout Britain. At their prime, estates of Dunkeld Hybrid larch were capable of yielding 154 cubic feet of timber per acre per year – an exceptional crop for larch. In recent years, much of these historic larch plantations have been infected with *Phytophthora Ramourum*, and are being replaced with a diverse mixture of birch, oak, beech, aspen, willow, rowan, Norway spruce, Douglas fir and Sitka spruce.

The First World War brought great change to the wooded landscape. Great areas of woodland were felled to meet the acute demand for timber. It was not until after the Second World War and entry into the Forestry Commission Dedication Scheme that the estate planting approached its former capacity. Working with agencies such as Scottish Natural Heritage, Cairngorms National Park, Scottish Forestry (formally known as the Forestry Commission), SEPA and RSPB, Atholl Estates plans to continue its planting of trees. In 2020, Atholl Estates created a new woodland of 400,000 trees at Struan Point and three large native broadleaf schemes across the estate at Dalnamein, Fender and Tulliemet (totaling an excess of 1500 hectares) are currently in the planning stage.

Great importance is given to the design of woodlands to make them biodiverse, and a good habitat for threatened species, such as the capercaillie and the red squirrel. The woodland tracks are marked by the Atholl Ranger Service in a series of walks for visitors and residents, linking woodland through farmland, alongside rivers and onto moorland. The Ranger's Information Centre in Blair Atholl has displays about the area and a centre for children's activities.

At Blair Castle, you will be able to learn more about our trees and the stories that lie behind them. Some of the finest trees, not only on Atholl Estates but in the country, are in the castle gardens in Diana's Grove, named after the Roman goddess of hunting. Comprising two acres of tranquil woodland, Diana's Grove hosts a nationally important collection of exotic conifers and many champion specimens, including the tallest Japanese larch and red fir in Britain. We hope you can come and visit and enjoy our beautiful woodland.