ICELAND FORESTRY ASSOCIATION TOUR OF FORESTS IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

Sunday, October 25th to Saturday October 2nd 2011

Notes by Ragnhildur Freysteinsdóttir

The tour primarily focused on forests in the Scottish Highlands, notably those of the Forestry Commission (Scotland) and also private estates – especially those notable for their gardens, woodland pastures and arboreta, containing many of the tallest trees in Britain.

There were visits to historical sites and highland villages and town set in the beautiful scenery of the mountains and lochs, moorland and well-stocked farms of the Highlands.

**Day 1:** Upon arrival in Glasgow off a short flight from Reykjavik, the relatively large group of 75 boarded two busses and drove northward stopping at Rough Castle, the site of Roman Fort and the huge Falkirk Wheel boat lift on the Forth Clyde Canal. Crossing from the rich farmlands of the lowlands around Stirling and Perthshire into the highlands at Dunkeld we stopped briefly in the picturesque Highland town of Pitlochry, went thence onward through the lands of Atholl, Badenoch, Spey, and the Cairngorm Mountains to Inverness, the capital of the Highland and western Islands. For three nights the group stayed at the beautiful and well-appointed Kingsmills Inn in Inverness.

**Day 2:** A day trip to the Isle of Skye along the north side of Loch Ness - hoping for a glimpse of Nessie the Loch Ness monster while admiring the pastures, gardens and natural and planted woodlands of the Great Glen Forest – birthplace of the British Forestry Commission. Leaving the Loch Ness, at Invermoriston, the route took us across the moorlands of upper Glenmoriston and Glenshiel with spectacular views of the mountains, notably, five sisters of Kintail. Crossing Shiel Bridge the route followed the shore of Loch Duich to Eilean Donan Castle - set in its stunning scenery of sea lochs, mountains and forests in glorious sunshine. After a brief walkabout, clotted cream and coffee, our journey skirted the coastline and o’er the fine bridge across Kyleakin to the grandeur of the Isle of Skye and Portree. After a lunch and a fine walkabout in Portree the return trip by the same route, with a diversion to Fort Augustus, gave an entirely different perspective of the region. We made a brief stop at the Viking haunts at Urquhart Castle before retiring to the Kingsmills Hotel and a walkabout in its exceptionally fine garden.

Day 3: This was a leisurely day where we travelled a relatively short distance across the River Ness through forests and rich farmland – notable for growing the best barely in Britain for whisky production, and then a visit to the town of Dingwall (“Thingvellir”), the seat of one of many kingdoms founded by the Vikings in the British Isles. We also visited the Muir of Ord distillery. In the afternoon the participants got free time to explore the beautiful Royal Burgh of Inverness and for very pleasant walks along both sides of the Ness River with beautiful architecture, of the castle, riverside gardens and parks with very tall trees, and many spectacular churches.

**Day 4:** We headed south from Inverness to spend a little more time in the Big Tree Country of Atholl, in particular a visit to Blair Atholl Castle with its the giant coniferous trees, magnificent garden, pastoral landscapes and deer park with ancient oaks. From there we passed by the Forestry Commission’s Craigvinean Forest to Dunkeld to see the famous European larch known as the “Mother-of-millions” and some of its beautiful hybrid ‘children’ on the manicured grounds of Dunkeld Cathedral beside the River Tay (the finest Salmon River in Britain). These hybrid larches revolutionised Scottish forestry. From there we travelled along narrow winding roads lined with native birch and oak and well-kept farmland for lunch at Aberfeldy and further on to see the famous Fortingall Yew – one of the oldest trees in the world. The yew was already very old when, according to legend, the infamous Pontius Pilate played under the Yew tree as a child. From there we took the narrow, winding roads along the north shore of Loch Tay through beautiful and diverse landscape of mountains and lochs, ancient woodland as well as new forests, pastures, charming highland villages of Killin, Strathyre, Callender and to Drymen not far from Loch Lomond., where the group stayed in the historic Drymen Arms Hotel for the next three nights.

**Day 5:** From Drymen we took a short drive to David Marshall Lodge - the Forestry Commission’s interpretation centre set in the Queen Elizabeth Forest Park. There we met Forestry Commission staff and were given two fine lectures by Hugh Clayden and David Robertson, respectively, explaining the Commission’s policies, goals, successes and some problems of forestry in Scotland. From there the group went to Loch Katrine and took a short walk along the lake, with a talk in the woods by Liz Shortall, head of the Great Trossachs Forest Project, followed by a cruise on Loch Katrine in the century old steamship, Sir Walter Scott. In the evening at the Buchanan Arms we had a grand Ceilidh featuring Fergus Wood and Tommy Walker (two members of Kinlochard Band, one of Scotland’s most favourite and well-travelled ceilidh bands), and a champion highland dancer and piper. Incidentally, both Fergus and Tommy are sheep farmers. Fergus, who owns Ledard Farm, at Kinlochard, is also Provost of Stirlingshire as well as a successful businessman and great entertainer and popular politician.

Day 6: This was our finest “tree day”, which began with a drive up the grandeur of the Bonny Banks o’ Loch Lomond, round the top of Loch Long by Arrochar, past Ben Arthur and over the Rest and be Thankful. And down Glen Kinglas to the amazing Ardkinglas Woodland Garden, which has many ‘Champion Trees’ including the tallest tree in the UK - a grand fir over 64 m in height. Then the group headed to Inverary, for lunch in the huge ancient kitchen at Inverary Castle, Home of the Duke of Argyll. From Inverary we drove southward to Benmore Botanic Garden and Arboretum noted for amazing trees - notably the magnificent avenue of giant redwoods trees.

**Day 7:** On the only rainy day of the trip we drove away from Drymen partly alongside the Roman Antonine Wall (known to Scots as ‘the Devil’s Dyke) built on the orders of Julius Caesar, and through the rich farmlands of Flanders Moss and Carse of Stirling to the extensively restored Stirling Castle. After that the group headed to Glasgow for the afternoon where we stayed for one night at the Novotel Hotel in the heart of Glasgow. The participants got the rest of the day off and used it to stroll-n-shop along famous Sauchiehall/Buchanan streets famous for their malls and Victorian architecture, and to visit museums and enjoy the fine pubs and restaurants.

Day 8: Sunday the 2nd of October, the group flew back home from Glasgow Airport at Paisley.