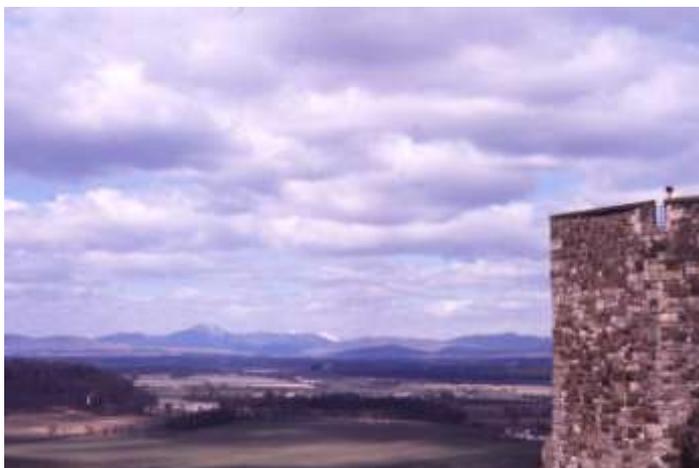


RETURN TO THE MOUNTAINS

When I was growing up in the Trossachs, that jewel of mountains, glens and lochs east of Loch Lomond, we were in a transition from medieval to contemporary technology. Up until the 1950's the mountains were virtually treeless, except for some patches of ancient oak woods along the shores of lochs and rivers. In fact, near Stronachlachar, where I was born, the landscape has hardly changed at all. Here, the summits of mountains are the same as they were in Rob Roy's time — of heather moorland (grouse moors). Their broad steep slopes are a mosaic of grassland sedge interspersed with patches of heather, bracken and the scattered birch trees - fine sheep grazing country. At the bottom of the slopes was a patchwork of crofts and farms with their lush green fields. And cradled in the valleys the lochs and rivers were surrounded by birch, oak Caledonian pine forest interrupted by heather peat bogs, sedge fens and grassy knolls. This is the sort of landscape that made tourism Scotland's second most important industry.

From October to April the Munros (mountains over 3,000 feet high) are capped with snow above 1800—2000 feet elevation. The lower elevations get mostly rain instead of snow and very little ground frost. This is not a windy area as a rule, but in the fall and late winter hurricanes sometimes flatten thousands of acres of immature forests. The comparatively high rainfall of the region means there are lots of bogs and fens, including large ones like Flanders Moss through which the River Forth meanders for most of its distance to the tidal zone east of Stirling.

During WW II we had to leave this beautiful district but returned to it 1951. We lived in a mountain village on the Duke's Pass for a few months before moving down into the village. This was a bustling village of about 20 houses for the slate quarry workers with a large school for about 30 children. The Duke's Pass, as every Glasgow tourist knows, provides access to the Highlands from the lowlands of Flanders Moss. It was here that I began my long association with peat. Every house in the village had its own section in community bog for digging peat for the fire. While the initiated may think of a digging in a peat bog is a mucky business, peat is actually very clean, odourless and sterile and a very easy medium to work with and, in the bogs case, it provided the highest quality peat fuel. There's nothing quite like doing ones homework in the glow a candle light and savoring sweet embers of the peat fire.



In this part of the Scotland the south side of Flanders Moss was part of the Roman Legion's northernmost line of defense. The ruins of their chain of forts can still be seen from Balmaha near the banks of Loch Lomond eastward to Buchlyvie and Stirling. Such was the precarious situation of these Anglo-Italian hybrids living in shadows of the mountain stronghold of my Scoto-Pictish ancestors they

literally wore dinner on their person. Constantly harried by the Picts, the Romans were often obliged to take flight at a moments notice so they carried a sort of pudding strapped onto their belts. These 'in-flight meals' consisted of a ghoulish mixture of blood, guts and other spare meat parts mixed in oatmeal and preserved by spices. This 'meal-on-wheels' is the ancestor of none other than the current king of the pudding race The Haggis, so revered by lowland Scots and other Sassenachs.

But the Romans and their siblings need not have eaten crow after all because Flanders Moss has so much good food to offer. Salmon and trout from the River Forth, grouse and deer, blaeberreries and hazel nuts are but a few of its bountiful resources.

A few years after the war we returned to the Trossachs and settled into one of the rare wooden houses in the slate quarry village atop the Duke's pass. This was extremely primitive living since the toilet was a hut on the bog and although we were one of the few to have 'tap' water, it was much less preferable to the well-oxygenated "running water" of clean, fresh stream used for drinking water above and bathing below the houses. About 20 families lived here until the quarry closed around 1962. These were very hard times for workers, but for a child returning to his ain hirsle this was a land of great beauty and a joy to explore from dawn to dusk.



Bruach – by Lock Arklet. Our highland shieling stood by the clump of Scots pine and 1 Sitka spruce cnetre left. We vacated around 1940 to make way for WWII – the glens were taken over by the army and used as the largest ammunition dump in Europe. The glen was only bombed once during the night of 14-15th May, 1941 and destroyed the post office in Inversnaid Hotel but harmed no one. The story is that there was a suspected foot and mouth disease in the cattle. To be on the safe side, they started burning the cattle. However, this was a time of the year when the bracken is still brown (as it is in the photo) and so the fire spead into the bracken. At time the shipyards on the Clyde to the south were being bombed. So there is speculation the pilot was a little astray and seeing the bracken fire mistook it for the burning shipyards and dropped his load. We will never know what the pilot was thinking.

Every spring we'd come down from the mountains to collect black-headed gulls eggs — considered a delicacy then. A large colony of these birds nested just north of Buchlyvie and we'd take one of the three to four eggs in a nest despite the protests of screaming gulls diving at our heads. The round trip was about 12 miles. Of course, to young highland lads 12 miles was neither here nor there, unless one is faced with the task of transporting three or four dozen gulls eggs, notable for their weak shells, over treacherous bogs, railway tracks, fences, roads, rivers (without bridges), and that wearisome 1,000 foot climb up the Duke's Pass to home. There would many distractions from our appointed and somewhat delicate task. We had to contend with bad-tempered bulls and rams in the fields, we had to hack through bracken, poisonous snakes, clouds of midges dodge paranoid railway inspectors and farmers, the village idiot, curious lassies; and the seasonal torment of those delightful characters— the Glasgow tourists.

Needless to say, despite packing the eggs in sphagnum moss, not all the gulls eggs made it home intact. In fact, my first foray to Flanders Moss at the age of 11 was such a disaster that I remember being ordered to squeeze out the sphagnum moss to salvage a meal of scrambled gulls eggs as a lesson in fortitude. And what did this delicacy from the bog taste like? Well, each to his own. To me fried gulls eggs smelled of dog's breath and had the taste and smell of burned custard.



Alas, the gulls of Flanders Moss are no more - their nesting site has been replaced by a forest of spruce and pine planted by the Forestry Commission.

After the egg foray, the next big chore was the digging and drying of peat for heating and cooking. Those who romanticize country living ought to have a go at this task. Digging peat by hand was a cold, wet, messy, back-breaking job. However, apart from saving money, its qualities as a fuel provided incentive enough to dig it. There is nothing quite like the aroma and lasting heat of a good heather peat.

For slicing the peat off the face of the bog, we used a long, narrow tree—planting spade (a slane) to cut into 6”x 2”x 12” blocks. By the time we were 12 years old we had learned to cut and throw the peat blocks to a drying spot up to 15-20 feet away in one graceful, effortless motion without breaking them. Four peat blocks at a time were ‘stoked’ to form a sort of open pyramid to air dry them. Since the top of the blocks dried much faster than the bottom we’d turn the stooks upside down periodically during the summer. When the blocks hardened they became virtually impervious to water and would be packed in stacks in such a way as to ensure further drying. Even when there was a long period of rainy weather the peat blocks in the uncovered stacks never absorbed so much moisture as to limit their heating qualities.

Occasionally, when sloshing wet peat one or more of the siblings with careless digging or deliberately if one was in huff or tardy or, more seriously, if there was a territorial dispute with and over-bearing curmudgeon of neighbor, battles started with irritated grunt as simple as “ Stoap splattin’ ya wee midden, or ah’ll gie a guide skelp.) was enough for all hands to start chucking peat at each other from the fresh stooks at the each other; so much there would be little left of the nice neat grids of stooks. Then we’d have to start digging and stoking all over again. Well, the guid skelp or two and a thick lug was all that was needed to restart the whole miserable task peat cutting and stoking; at least till the next battle erupted.

The peat was burned in the open grate of a magnificent old wrought iron range. The range had two big ovens on either side of the grate and for extra quick heat required for baking a small bit of coal or wood was added to the peat. The range provided just the right amount of heat for the littler house during the cool, wet winters. The peat burned with a soft, warm glow and, since there was no electricity, homework was done mostly by the light of the peat fire flame. In summer (mid-April to mid-October) there was seldom any need to heat the house.

To the uninitiated, mountain and moorland of the Highlands may seem a bleak and lonely place. But to those of us who live and work with nature, it is a wonderful, vibrant place. John Barrington, once the local shepherd-cum-author, wrote the best seller “Red Sky at Night” which describes his life and work near Stronachlachar. Although it is written in the modern context, he does a masterful job describing highland living and work to the extent that most of us older generation certainly identify with John’s busy lifestyle.

As a young lad growing up in early 1950’s and working many parts of the Highlands I was absolutely fascinated by it all. The heather-covered bogs, so characteristic of the landscape, teemed with wildlife. We’d explore for nests of grouse, lapwings, tiny heather linties and wullie wagtails. Having found their nests, we would follow the progress of chicks from hatching to first flight. We’d search for bumble bee nests in mossy hummocks of the heather moor. These big bumble bees were harmless, and were not the least offended when we took wee bit of their honeycomb and squeezed out the honey. This sticky affair meant a trip to the stream to wash; which inevitably led to “guddling in the burn” (catching trout with our bare hand).

The bog was also the source of pocket money. For example, we’d throw a sack over the purple flowers of heather for a few days to bleach them white and then, at a convenient spot by the waterfall on the Duke’s Pass, we’d sell sprigs of it to the Glasgow tourist as lucky ‘white heather’. Like the legendary Rob Roy MacGregor the celebrated Highland rogue who lived in these parts, we thought of such mischief as purely recompense for the inconvenience these latter-day redcoats caused us during their fair-weather excursions. From the tinkers (Gypsies) we learned to make other

semi-honest products to sell to tourists; e.g., we'd make attractive baby's rattles by weaving rushes (*Juncus*) with a wee pebble inside, fashion fake birds nests, and crude carvings of dead branches of deer antlers and fish. It had always amazed me that city dwellers should be so divorced from nature and so gullible for its misrepresentations. Methink that what passed for idle folk art will spawn many a Ph.D in futuere.

We walked 3 miles to school down the mountain and back. Actually it was less than that. So technically, the County Council wasn't obliged to provide transportation – although the village garage provided a grand Armstrong Siddeley most days.



Sadly, we had to leave our mountain village for a more modern one at the bottom of our mountain paradise. But we were back to having electric lights, running water and a bathtub. Shortly after we left the slate quarry village and the peat bog suffered the same fate as the gulls on Flanders Moss - they were replaced by spruce and pine planted by the Forestry Commission. Today, it is a majestic forest by any standard. In fact, the trees have grown so tall they have obliterated all trace of human habitation save our wooden house. It is hard to believe there once stood a village not too many years ago with a school, and soccer field and a population that was large and vigorous enough to field one of the finest soccer teams Stirlingshire. How transient the human race is!



This photo was taken in 1970. Ironically, the detached and row stone cottages were the first to be dismantled. The roofing slate was pirated by an architect. 10 years later the wooden one on the left – which was our house, was demolished. The manager's house, the white one, is still occupied.

In those days it was customary to learn ones trade by starting from the bottom and working up. Latter day yuppies tend to go in the opposite direction career—wise and we have long since passed each other. Anyhow, the day after I left school I was working for the Forestry Commission. Guess what one of my jobs was? Right! Digging drains in the peat bogs!

In the mid-1950's two-tone cars that looked alike were uncommon in our district since most people preferred the train still operated then to art drafty, art deco Bluebird Bus which waddled o'er the narrow, dangerous, winding roads more like a boat than a bus. Road, such as they were really old coach and cattle tracks with a thin slice of rough tarmac.

Since we hadn't quite gotten out of the iron-age, mechanization in forestry was still very much in its infancy. And every scrap of war-surplus rolling stock the Forestry Commission brought in came in either grey or khaki camouflage that seemed to have evolved from the reconstituted hulks of warships and left overs from tank warfare. We even wore matching clothes bought from the army-navy surplus store or demobbed soldiers who moved into cleaner jobs. Like the impressive big pug-nosed Morley fire lorry, a mighty behemoth that slouched over the B 829 from ditch to ditch. Not the sort of beast you'd want to practice road rage on! We also got jeeps with wobbly steering and a front grill with a toothy grin. Of course, they had no tops and were hardly suited for a 'frequently wet district. In the days before 'wet-weather time' was granted to forestry workers, I remember a day up in Duchray when 4 of us sitting in a open jeep when it was absolutely drenching rain when –when the Head Forester drove along side us in smart new Land Rover (with a canvas top). "What's up lads?" "It's raining, Sir." Says we. "Listen laddie! The rain it canny get past ye're skin." Says he. "Ye mean it fa's aff oor backs like a duck." Says we. "Aye, just like duck -and ye're a' quartered for the day." Says he as he as he sped away in the dryness and warmth of Land Rover. Being quartered means being dock quarter of a day's wages about 2 shillings at the time. For us lowly workers back then, that was huge sum and without it, there was no social life for a week or two.

My official Forestry Commission vehicle was the ultimate mean green machine, big daddy-long-legs ex-army courier bicycles with an ill-fitting, battle-scarred seat. You may know 'em as Post office bikes Ma'am! They were not exactly suitable, or particularly safe, for the roadless mountains and glens.

From incredible, recycled war hulks we got lightweights such as cast iron power saws such as the Mark and Danarm. They were 5% sheer terror when they worked, and the other 95% sheer exhaustion trying to start them. We had peat ditchers that resembling a Forth Bridge groveling across the landscape. But oh! What a bonny sight it was see them gurgling their way down into the bottom-less murky depth of a bog. . Outboard motors came with a 3/4 inch horse-hair starting rope which, due to the resistance of the starter pulley, we promptly replaced with 1/2 inch steel cable. There was a steam tractor with iron wheels that came with a gentleman called a stoker to compliment the driver, plus another gentleman or two each with a shovel. Never did know what it was supposed to do.

Gradually, more sophisticated motorized implements arrived on the bogs and barrens. They all came with an operator plus a gentleman called a 'grease monkey' (of the stoker pedigree), and another gentleman or two each with a shovel. Of course these revised mechanical editions required roads that didn't exist in places they had to go to carry out some undefined application. So in came surveyors, engineers and white-collard sorts from the research squad to point the way to an indeterminate destination. And, of course, and of course the manpower for these mechanical

behemoths required construction of a village to live in at the end of the new roads they had built. In this way mechanization brought 'efficiency' and expanded the population of the region. Anyway, years later we still had our war surplus Land Rovers which were kept rolling with spare parts from surplus jeeps and the odd pair of pantyhose for belt replacement to keep the cooling fans turning. It was quite remarkable the way our welder formed a union between such misfits.

For transporting workers we had a monstrous pug-nosed Morley – an army lorry with a canvas cover which survived a stint with Allied command during the war. In spring the Morley doubled as forest fire lorry since it could carry an extra large water tank.

Needless to say, most of these 'marvels of mechanical genius' were started with a crank, and were cranky to start. Consequently, they had considerably more downtime than up. Not only were the machines unreliable in those days, but in such a mountainous region with few roads, they were virtually useless to the point where, as I hinted, they required an entourage to keep them functioning. Even the much celebrated Cuthbertson peat plow had trouble on the bogs where caterpillar tractor, plough and driver frequently had to be rescued. Those of us neither called in to the rescue of these awkward mechanical beasts, with neither a fore nor aft, know how frustrating and messy this can be. The harder we pulled with the winches the deeper the creature sank into the mire. After a week or two of battling the bog to extricate the seemingly immovable contraptions we'd eventually haul them out. But a week or two later we'd be called back to extricate them again from another part of the bog. Occasionally, the mire would simply swallow up its prey and we considered this a blessing. In the murky depth of these bogs there lies prospects for a few Ph.D's in for aspiring archaeologists not yet born. I wonder what they'll make of the tangle steel cables? Will they describe them as something to do with the starter motor? Seriously, during these rescue operations there would many an overstressed steel winch cable, some of which snapped with tragic consequences. Luckily, such accidents were infrequent and operators were maimed such as a relative of mine, and a neighbour killed when his machine rolled down a mountainside.

In the light of these problems with mechanization, hand tools for forestry work were comparably efficient; and although there were also accidents with hand tools they were few and never serious. In any case, the steeper slopes were inaccessible to any kind of road or machine and even horses, so we still had to carry most of our heavy tools and supplies on our backs up the mountainside to as high as 1,500 feet. Our load included 1 cwt (112lbs) sacks of fertilizers, bags of 2-3,000 bare root tree seedlings, rolls of fencing wire, 10 ft. fence posts including the 8" diameter large strainers, and, perhaps worst of all, the awkward flesh-ripping rolls of barbed wire. The terrain was even unsuitable for horses and a squad of us was assigned to hauling heavy poles thinnings down the forested slopes with loops of fencing wire trying not to skin the butts of standing trees while unsuccessfully straining to keep the poles from careering down the slippery surface at a dangerous speed. We laugh at it now, but it was damn foolish work.

Most of the land that made up Loch Ard forest had been acquired by the Forestry Commission in the post war period and much of it was treeless. Hence, emphasis was put on establishing plantations on land that was infertile sheep grazing mountain pastures or lower quality grouse shooting moorland. However, around Loch Ard in particular there was still a lot of ancient and semi-mature oak woodland to look after.

By current standards, working conditions may seem atrocious. Most of us who worked in forestry were also part-time farmers and crofters or had part time work as a shepherd, gamekeeper and/or gardener on one of the many fine private estates in the area. Come rain or sunshine we'd work for the Forestry Commission from 7 o'clock in the morning to half five at night, six days a week, have quick supper, then out in the fields farming till sunset. On Sundays and holidays, we'd go hill walking (sports on the Sabbath were frowned upon). We didn't really mind the long hours at all because, being in good physical condition, hard work was not particularly strenuous. Also, forestry was and still is the most interesting and diversified of all the rural occupations and, for the most part, was pleasant and invigorating work. And when it wasn't raining, what a magnificent landscape – treed or not. Tourist just loved to see us working with a magnificent Clydesdale hauling logs out of the woods. Yes, covered with gum from the trees and sloshing about in the muck and dung coaxing a sweaty horse with the hairy feet of a Neanderthal and brains to match, must have been a pretty sight indeed. And who can forget the midges on a damp foggy morning followed by most annoying squads of big black, hairy arsed flies when the sun came out. Gosh, it was romantic!

Growing and harvesting a forest by traditional methods required a broad knowledge of nature and skill in craftsmanship. Those who sought to specialize in one activity or another were considered lazy or incompetent. But, the Forestry Commission plantations were expanding at a phenomenal rate and to increase its work force they built villages with beautiful houses to attract workers from the cities. These workers were noticeably good at math come every payday, but initially lacked common sense as far as rural skills were concerned. No matter, to their credit, they were quick learners to sure. Often, their stamina and physique were a poor reflection on mankind. Although a trifle ignorant of nature and seemingly ill-suited to country living, they had the blind obedience of factory breeding and could be relied upon to do relatively unskilled work on a massive scale, like tree planting, road building, cutting bracken, brashing and thinning.

My apprenticeship in forestry prepared me well for the years ahead and even now gives me an advantage over most of my colleagues, primarily because of the knowledge and experience handed down to me through the centuries of tradition. In the 1950's the Forestry Commission saw to it that I became experienced in every facet of forestry operations imaginable. There was a fine mixture of ancient oak woods to tend by ancient silvicultural methods, as well as the modern silvicultural concepts for establishing and managing much younger woods (less than 100-120 years old) of majestic Douglas fir and larch, some of them 150 ft tall. There was the tree nursery where I learned to grow millions of tree seedlings from seeds of dozens of species of trees collected locally and sent in from far off parts of the world. I learned to survey thousands of acres of land to assess the plantability and what ought to be planted. At that time we were not the mono-culturalists as many foresters are today. With the squad there were sites to prepare for planting, young plantations to thin. We dug miles of fire breaks around the six foot high deer fences we had erected to protect the plantations. We brashed and thinned acres and acres of young and mature stands. We cut thousands of fence posts, coal mine pit props, and large trees for lumber and veneer using cross-cut saws and axes of the finest Swedish steel and later with not quite so cantankerous power saws. We used the Garron and Clydesdale horses, and the skyline and new inventions, like the lightweight double-drum winch, to haul the timber out of the woods. We controlled deer and vermin. We built our own roads and bridges, mapped the vegetation, prepared our work plans, and built tourist recreational

facilities. Through integration of folklore, tradition, modern theory and work experience were combined the finer aspects of silviculture and arboriculture, essential for a career in multiple use forestry designed to produce a breed of foresters and forestry workers who had a reputation and public respect that latter day foresters do not seem to enjoy.

If I experienced drudgery in those formative years it had to be draining peatland for plantations. We used only three simple tools for draining bogs and fens, the rutter, houk and square shovel. In bogs with a lot of wood in them we'd have a short and long-handled bill hook, although a notch filed on the edge of the rutter for cutting through heather was also adequate for cutting most roots.



My carving of hill draining tools and One of my drains in Duchray still working after 50 years

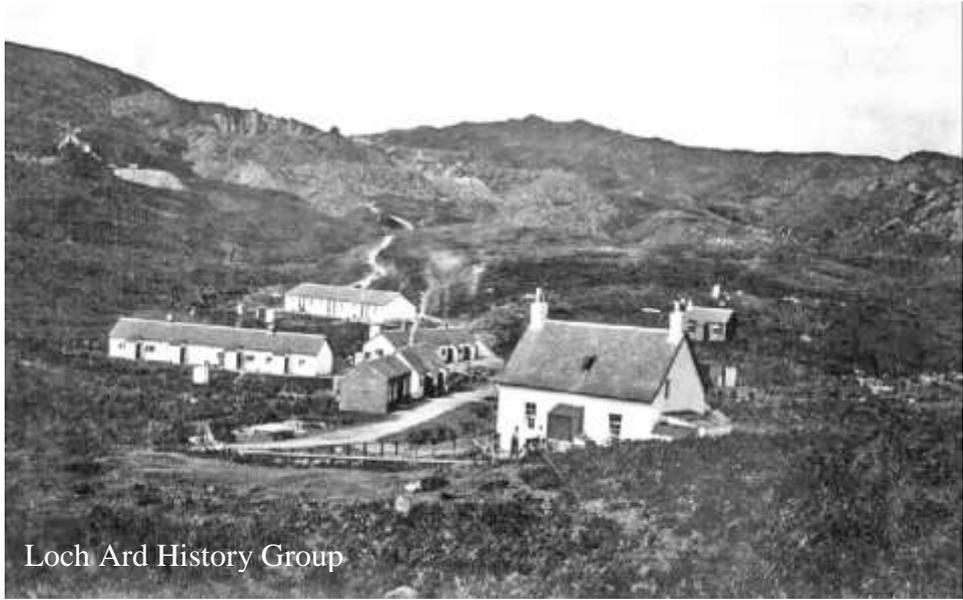
The peat lands were mostly small heather bogs and grassy fens up to about 100 acres in size. We drained all them up to the tree line about 1500 feet elevation. Our ditching was not restricted to peaty soils; for we also cut drains in shallow mineral soils simply to provide planting turves to make the trees grow better among the heather, bracken and sedge.

The herring bone system was the standard pattern of ditches. First we'd make a main ditch about 3 feet deep, 2 feet wide at the top and 18 inches wide at the bottom through the lowest part of the bog or fen. Great care was taken in deciding the alignment of the main ditch, bearing in mind that a bad alignment could create a small loch or, worse still, a messy mud hole suitable for elephants. But, intuition, bred by experience in recognizing subtle changes in the vegetation mosaic, usually kept us on the right course. The rutter cuts the form of the drain and it is also used for cross-cutting the turf. The houk is swung into the top of the loosened turf and, in one graceful motion like an athlete swinging the ball-and-chain; the turf is lifted out of the ditch. Most of the turf is deposited alongside the ditch, but some of them were thrown to a spot where trees will be planted in them. The next phase is to cut the herring bone ditches which are spurs cut at a 60° angle off the main ditch about every 24 feet. Depending on the size of the bog, there may be a system of several branches of main ditches each with their own herring bone network. As we progressed up the mountain we would look back down the glen with satisfaction on our complicate but elegant patterns of ditches and regimented patterns of planting turves. Sometimes we'd be amazed that no new lochs were forming as result of human error or a main ditch caving in. When one considers that Loch Ard Forest and the neighboring Achray and Rowardennan Forests are over 40,000 acres in size and at least half drained by hand in the old-fashioned herring bone style, it was a major operation by any standard.

In physical terms, the scale and intensity of ditching in Loch Ard Forest is a magnificent achievement. However, I should also note that, such was our impact on the hydrology of the region, we were responsible for a dramatic increase in the rate of run-off after heavy rain storms to the point where massive flash floods seriously eroded the banks of the River Forth and created havoc among the farms, villages and towns in the low lying country of Flanders **Moss**. Thankfully, no one has ever been drowned or lost their home because of these floods. In any case, lowland farmers were accustomed to floods long before the Forestry Commission came into being. So I suspect they were common enough occurrences long before forestry started ditching these hills. Today, the trees that we planted on our drained mountain and moorland have grown up wonderfully and flash floods are not quite so devastating. However, flash floods still occur, and it is not unusual for Glasgow keelies (tourists) camped beside the River Forth to wake up in the middle of the night and find themselves floating in a few inches of water.

The old concept of multiple use forestry, where forester, farmer, shepherd and others lived and worked in harmony, and where wildlife, though controlled, was as essential to the landscape as sheep and cattle, has been practiced in Loch Ard Forest at least since 1794. The region is described as the most beautiful of forest parks and it was a popular tourist and recreation region long before the Forestry Commission was created. It is fitting that in Commemoration of the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in 1953 Loch Ard Forest together with the Neighboring Rowardennan and Achray Forests should be named "The Queen Elizabeth Forest Park". So if you ever go over the Duke's Pass, pause at the David Marshal Lodge, soak in the beauty of the place and give a kind thought for the cheeky wee highland lads whose sweat and aching backs played such an important part in creating this show place of European forestry.

The following photos illustrate the transformation of the Quarry village and the Duke's Pass to transformation of the Aberfoyle Slate Quarry village and the landscape of the Duke's Pass from treelessness to a fast-growing and tall forests. From 1950-2006



Loch Ard History Group









Photos of harvesting our c50 yr old plantations and the sites being re-planted in the old-fashioned way; i.e., with bare root stock and planting spade.



A. Robertson 2004