



The Forestry Commission and the North Yorkshire Moors

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By the 17th century the coverage of woods and forests in Britain had declined to less than 12% of the land area. In 1900 this had fallen further to only 5%, and the nation's industries relied on imported timber. But with the outbreak of World War 1 timber imports could no longer be relied on, and the nation's timber stocks were depleted even further. Huge quantities of timber were not only needed for pit-props in the coal mines but also in the trenches on the front line in France and Belgium, and as sleepers for the hundreds of miles of railway lines transporting troops, ammunition and other supplies.

By the end of the War tree cover had fallen to about 3% of Britain's land area. The Government recognized that there was a strategic, critical shortage of trees and in 1916 had already appointed the Acland Committee to look into developing new woods and forests. In 1918 the Committee presented its findings and proposals for a Forestry Commission were accepted. The Forestry Act received Royal Assent on 1st September 1919.

The Forestry Commission was tasked with protecting remaining timber supplies and creating new stocks through the acquisition of land for planting new forests, restrictions on felling trees, and incentives to private landowners to create more woods and forests. It was also charged with carrying out research into everything

associated with trees, woods and forests: from the soils they grow on to the bugs that eat them and the birds and other animals that live in them.

This was a mammoth task, the like of which had not been seen anywhere in the world before. There was little money to buy and manage the new forests. However, marginal agricultural land was cheap following the War and large acquisitions were made, mainly across eastern and northern England and in Scotland and Wales. Some traditional Crown forests such as the New Forest and the Forest of Dean were also transferred to Forestry Commission management.

On the North Yorkshire Moors the first acquisitions were at Low and High Dalby. This former farming and rabbit warrening land was purchased from the Duchy of Lancaster Estate in 1919 and tree-planting began in 1921. Some of the first trees planted are still growing alongside Thornton Beck, south of Low Dalby. Over the following decades the Forestry Commission added to its holdings on and around the Moors: it now cares for over 21,000 hectares in the area.

1919 to 1960 saw profound landscape changes, with forest returning to places that had been deforested in prehistoric times. The early Forestry Commission was very much a State organisation with which most people had little

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interaction, and a fear of forest fires led to public access being discouraged, but the 1960s heralded the beginning of a great transition. Pioneering foresters and managers recognised that forests were more than a strategic timber asset; they were an environmental resource with huge potential for public recreation, as wealth and ease of access to the countryside grew. One of the leading proponents of change in the North York Moors was Gordon Simpson, a forester in the Moors from 1953 to 1993. He was amongst the first people to set public nature trails, and along with forest ranger Jack Eaton established a local history and natural history museum at Low Dalby – a forerunner to today’s visitor centres.

A sometimes controversial aspect of the Forestry Commission’s work was the visual impact on the landscape of the huge plantations – often of non-native conifers. Some efforts were made to mitigate this by planting hardwoods along roads, and where possible straight edges

were avoided. The landscape architect Dame Sylvia Crowe was appointed to the Commission in 1963 as its first landscape consultant, and in the Moors she helped design the forest edge on Sneaton High Moor in order to soften its impact. Gradually, conservation and amenity gained increasing prominence in Forestry Commission policies.

For many people, the woods and forests of the North York Moors are now an important part of the landscape. They continue to provide a sustainable supply of timber and provide recreational opportunities for over a million visitors a year. The forest roads and streams support a huge network of grassland and riparian habitats and the wider forests are home to wide assemblage of life, from goldcrests to goshawks and butterwort to baneberry. Despite the regular threat of being wound up, the Forestry Commission has become very much an organisation of the people – and by 2017 tree cover in Britain stood at 13%, the highest for centuries.



Find out more

State-owned woods and forests in or near the North York Moors are:
Cropton Forest, Dalby Forest, Guisborough Forest, Langdale Forest, Newtondale Forest.

More information at <https://www.forestry.gov.uk/visit>



Langdale and Dalby Forests stretching into the distance, seen from above Silpho