

Woodland Crofts – a new opportunity for the Highlands & Islands

There can be few contractors who have not thought sometimes whilst working in the woods ‘If it was my wood I would do things differently.....’ I certainly did in my contracting days, as the realisation slowly dawned that ‘being your own boss’ often still means working to other peoples priorities and deadlines.

Perhaps one would choose to diversify species and products, or develop another use of the woodland alongside more traditional management. Or build a shed as a workspace in the woods, perhaps even a house to manage the woodland from. Built from timber of course, felled and milled on site, and heated by wood.....

Sadly, the reality in the UK today is that the few people with that sort of access to woodland tend to be either very lucky, or very wealthy – and as a result such thoughts tend to remain the preserve only of reflective tea-breaks for most of us.

However, this now looks set to change, at least in the crofting counties of Scotland (essentially the Highlands & Islands) with the development of woodland crofts. For those not familiar with crofting, it is a form of land tenure unique to the Highlands & Islands which has as essential features security of tenure and the right to a fair rent, amongst others - crofting law is however complex and there are many other elements which govern a croft (an area of land subject to the Crofting Acts).

Perhaps more important than the regulations are their consequences – against a general background of depopulation in the Highlands, crofting areas have often been better able than most to retain their populations, not least because a croft will typically provide a site for a house and a contribution (to some degree) towards a crofter’s household income. In addition the communities thus retained are often strong in the traditions and culture of the area.

Towards the end of the 1990s, people began to ask whether a crofting model, with its accepted benefits, couldn’t also be applied to a woodland situation, particularly to more marginal forests in remoter areas where conventional management was struggling to ‘stack up’. The result (after many years of consultation and lobbying) was woodland crofts – registered crofts created from existing woodlands.

Woodland crofts are consequently governed by a combination of crofting law, and the same forest regulations that apply to any woodland. They are new, as the ability to create new crofts only became available with new legislation passed in 2007, and as a result working examples are yet to be established. It is expected that most new woodland crofts will be created via community projects (although any landowner can apply to create them), because appropriate community bodies are eligible to apply to purchase Forestry Commission woodland in Scotland through the National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS).

The NFLS allows such community bodies to buy FCS woodland, subject to various criteria, whether or not it is already for sale and is thus the most likely route for them to acquire woodland to create new crofts from (the community of Embo in the north of Scotland was the first to gain approval to buy FCS woodland for this purpose). Once the community own the woodland, they can apply to the Crofters Commission to create the crofts (and become the crofting landlord) and then let these to suitable tenants.

Who would make suitable tenants will be a matter for communities to decide according to their own priorities, subject to a fair and transparent selection process. However it is to be expected that amongst the criteria they will emphasise will be ones which relate to the woodland and its

management, as they will want to see their tenants making good use of their woodland crofts. If areas of woodland shared by the tenants, or the wider community, are also established, it will again be helpful if at least some of the tenants are knowledgeable and experienced from the outset, and can apply this to managing the ‘common’ areas.

Forestry contractors will therefore be well placed to demonstrate their value to a woodland crofts project, when tenancies are offered. And if successful, they could have affordable access to woodland, to manage for themselves, which as mentioned earlier would otherwise be a very rare opportunity.

Back to crofting itself: typically crofts are managed intensively (of time), but with low external inputs. The croft contributes some income to the household, along with paid work, but also provides benefits in kind eg food & fuel. It is very much a way of life rather than a purely economic activity.

The key to success with woodland crofts will be to seek creative ways to add value to both the woodland and the products it produces, often using small-scale and appropriate technology. Notions of efficiency take on a new dimension: if the annual harvest is only a few hundred tonnes a year, or less, spread over several months, what value is a purpose-built machine capable of maximum ‘efficiency’, but costing quarter of a million pounds, as used elsewhere in the industry? Tractor-based equipment which can be put to a variety of uses may be far more appropriate, even though in conventional terms it is considered less efficient.

Indeed isn’t the ultimate efficiency to minimise transport of round timber in the first place? The ‘inefficiency’ of local processing using a small bandsaw in comparison with a high-tech modern mill is to a large degree offset by the efficiency of not having to transport the timber in the first place, in remote areas. Such arguments will come increasingly to the fore in the fight against climate change and as fuel prices return to their inexorable rise.

Perhaps then the ultimate USP of a woodland croft is the sustainability argument: by building an intimate relationship with their woodland, a tenant will be able to maximise its values in social, environmental and economic terms – all whilst minimising his own carbon footprint by living and often working on the croft, which will contribute in kind to his everyday needs.

Done on a co-operative, ‘township’ basis as most crofts are organised, woodland crofts offer an exciting vision of a new, more holistic kind of community-scale woodland management. It will not replace ‘industrial’ forestry, but certainly has its place, and resonates completely with the growing interest in woodfuel, timber construction, and non-market benefits of woodland.

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