

*Plan for a Royal Forest of Oak in the Highlands of Scotland, by Mr  
John Williams, Mineral Surveyor.*

IN this age of Industry, when improvements are making rapid progress in all other corners of Great Britain, the Highlands of Scotland are much neglected.

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The Highlands may be made the capital FOREST of Great Britain; the grand magazine of the nation for ship-building timber; and it is capable of being made a very large one, and, in time, the best and most convenient in all Europe.

There are a great many thousand acres in the lands of the Duke of Gordon, in Lochaber, and in those annexed to the crown, in the shires of Ross, Inverness, and Argyle, which are situated upon the banks of salt water, or navigable lakes, and the most remote but a few miles from the sea. These lands form a rich stool of oak in a deep soil, where the most luxuriant shoots are produced in summer, while the goats are in the hills, but they are soon browsed down in autumn, and kept level with the heath, by the goats and other cattle; and if any plant chanced to raise its head beyond the reach of the goats, it is soon destroyed by the ax of the Highlandman, who strips off about four feet of the bark quite round, a little above the root, and leaves the young tree standing, to die a lingering death, as a monument of his barbarous greed.

I have seen, in the lands above mentioned, many thousands of fine young trees in this shocking condition, in all degrees of decay, and some of them grown above two feet in diameter.

The west Highlands is particularly convenient for raising a great quantity of large timber, being every where cut and indented by salt water lakes, many of which, as natural canals, run up into the heart of the country. These would make an easy conveyance for the timber by sea.

I will point out a few of the places I have seen, in which are stools of oak neglected and browsed down.

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A considerable part of the estate of Cromarty, particularly, most of the woody, rocky, and heathy parts of Coygach, upon the west coast, and north side of Lochbroom. A considerable extent in the lands of Kinlochmoydart, upon the banks, and within two or three miles of Lochmoydart.

Several thousand acres of the estate of Locheil form a rich stool of oak, in a proper soil, situated along the north shore of that fine salt canal, Locheil, and a great deal of it upon the rising grounds, and in the glens at the head of Lochyel, where some fine oak is pretty well advanced. Upon the banks of the river, and upon the hill side, and in the glens on the north side of the river Lochy. Along the north side of the Loch-Lochy. Both sides of the river Arkaig, and both sides of Loch-Arkaig, are beautifully and richly covered with oak, birch, and fir, where a good deal of oak is grown up out of the reach of cattle. There are also very good stools of oak upon the farms below Fort William, belonging to this estate.

All the estate of Callart, which stretches along the north shore of the salt Loch-Leven, is a good stool of oak, beautifully interspersed with spots of arable and pasture land.

Some oak appears in part of the woods of Ardsziel, and a good deal peeps out of the heath upon the braes of that estate, in summer. All the woods of Ardsziel have a good soil, in which it might be proper to drop some acorns, where the stool of oak is thin.

There are very extensive stools of oak in the Duke of Gordon's lands, in Lochaber; particularly, in those situated near Lochyel and Loch-Leven, below Fort William, as well as those situated upon the south bank of the river, and Loch-Lochy; and on both sides of the river Spey, and all the way up glen Spey, and the several colla-  
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teral glens branching off from it. A thick stool of oak appears among the heath, over great part of that extensive moor, which is situated between Fort William and the river Spey; and along the sides of the hills, and up the glens on the south side of that moor. The Duke has a spot of the finest young oak in Scotland, in the farm of Tearndrigh; and all the stools of oak in that extensive country, upon the annexed estates, the Duke of Gordon's lands, and those of Macintosh in Glenroy, &c. are in the finest soil for oak. They put forth the most luxuriant shoots in summer, and exhibit many ancient remains of the largest roots and trunks in Great Britain, which shew us what sort of wood has covered those countries; and the whole of them are near water carriage.

The prodigious numbers of roots and trunks which lie rotting, are a sufficient proof, that this part of the Highlands was formerly a vast forest of oak, of the largest size and best quality.

I have no room, in this short paper, to inquire into the reasons for destroying the woods in the Highlands. No doubt they were formerly looked upon as a nuisance; and that every method was used to get rid of it, in a country where they had no use for, and of course, no idea of the value of such a treasure, where no ships were built, but such as could be drawn on shore in a stormy night. But I think it a more interesting subject to inquire a little into the causes of the present general neglect of the woods in the Highlands: I say general neglect, for it is not universal. Several gentlemen in Argyleshire, and other places, take good care of their woods, and find their account in so doing.

The woods in the estate of Ardnamurchan are of great value to the proprietor; and it is a pleasure to see the woods in the estate of Perth, and others in the south-west of Perthshire, and north-west of  
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Argyleshire, which are well inclosed and improved. But why are the oak woods upon the north-west coast so generally neglected, where the stools are so thick and numerous, the soil rich, and the situation so very convenient for water carriage?

The west Highlands, till of late, was very little known, and many parts of it are so very inaccessible by land, that they are not yet well known; and most of the men of observation, who go to the Highlands, keep the high road. The late proprietors of the forfeited lands, were too much embroiled in politics and war, to mind their real interest. Many of the great proprietors of Highland estates live at a distance, and seldom or never see the whole extent of their lands. And some of their factors live likewise at a distance, and only visit the Highlands at the terms of collecting the rents, and setting the lands; when they sit close until business is over, and then hasten away.

The lands are generally in the hands of great graziers, who have a great number of herds, subtenants, and cottars, on each farm; and every one of these dependents has a flock of goats, and every man his ax, both for cutting fuel, and for peeling bark to tan his leather. They do not cut down a tree, and take off all the bark, which would never be missed, but, as I hinted above, they peel off three or four feet a little above the root, and leave the tree standing, with the rest of the bark, to perish by degrees. All the resident factors are great graziers, and these, as well as the other farmers, imagine the care of the woods, and their interest as graziers, to be incompatible; which is a great mistake.

True it is, the stools of oak must be inclosed, and the goats must be entirely banished from the neighbourhood of those inclosures, to the glens behind the hills and mountains, where they can do no  
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hurt, as the woods in those glens are almost inaccessible, and of little value, except for shelter to the cattle, and for country uses.

All cattle must be kept out of these inclosures carefully, for the five or six first years: But, after that period, it will be so far from being a loss and inconvenience to grazing, that the inclosed woods will be a very profitable convenience, as a well sheltered winter pasture, which would enable the graziers to keep many more and better cattle, during winter, than they can at present. And this advantage, gained by the inclosures and shelter, would continue until the oak required to be cut for the bark, which, in that country, where the soil is good, and the growth hastened by the constant summer rains, would be at the end of every eighteen or twenty years at farthest. And when the woods are cut, they must turn out all cattle again, for other five or six years, until the saplings are out of the reach of danger. And even this inconvenience may be mitigated, and almost removed, by cutting down the woods in rotation.

I have hinted here at the common method of managing oak woods in the Highlands, which is, to cut all down, except a few standards, when the bark is at the best, which I must own is the most eligible method for present profit, especially in the west Highlands, where all kinds of small wood gives a good price, for charcoal. And, moreover, this method employs a great number of hands, in cutting down, managing the bark, and in burning charcoal, &c. which would make money circulate, and many live more comfortably than they do at present.

This method of managing the woods, if put in practice, would be a substantial improvement of the north-west Highlands, and a great blessing to the country, by employing numbers of poor inhabitants; but this is not my principal view in writing this paper. We have,

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by the present management, no timber for ship-building, unless the few standards left happen to thrive extraordinary well. I say extraordinary well, for they are generally left at so great a distance from one another, that they seldom come to any thing, for want of shelter.

My principal view is, a ROYAL HIGHLAND FOREST OF OAK; and therefore I would advise, that, instead of cutting down the oak woods at certain periods, they should be only thinned, leaving the principal plants thick enough to defend one another from the injuries of the weather; and, when these grow too thick, then thin them again and again, until they have room enough to advance to full grown trees, with large spreading branches.

It is not to be supposed that proprietors of small fortunes will fall in with this plan, as it is not the best for present profit; but, if represented in a proper light, such a nobleman as the Duke of Gordon, having the future interest of his family, and the grandeur of the nation at heart, might be induced to put it in practice.

It is a certain fact, that the woods on his Grace's estate in Lochaber, may, in about twenty years time, be made to produce a better yearly income, than the whole lands give at present, and the rents of the lands not diminished, but rather increased, on account of the commodious winterings the inclosed woods would afford: And if he would adopt my plan, of leaving the standards thick enough to come to the perfection of full grown trees, in sixty or eighty years the woods would be of immense value. This would be acting a public spirited part indeed, for the future welfare of his family, and of the nation. In that event, merchant ships, and even men of war, might be built at Fort William; and the timber might be carried by sea from thence to any part of Great Britain. The same may be said  
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of the annexed estates upon the west coast, and they have the farther advantage, of much more extensive stools of oak, near the sea and salt water lakes: So that, if the woods on these estates in the north-west Highlands were inclosed, and properly managed, the benefits reaped by the country, and by posterity, would be immense. But it is to be presumed, that this plan will not be countenanced by the greatest number of the factors, nor of the gentlemen who reside in that country, as they are all graziers, and connected with graziers; nor would the plan be popular in the country at first, until the advantages of it were in time experienced.

I am persuaded that the laird of Ardnamurchan has drawn more money for the woods, since he possessed that estate, than all his other rents; and why should it not be so on the estates of Gordon, Lochyell, Cromarty, &c.

These have as much need of the circulation of money as the improvements of the wood would occasion, and the poor inhabitants have as much need of employment. Nevertheless, they have been hitherto neglected, and I am persuaded they will in a great measure be neglected, until some better plan of management be adopted, and some public spirited person or persons shew a laudable example.

Were I permitted to give my advice, I would suggest, that the Honourable Board of Annexed Estates\* should lead the way, by chusing a sober person of character and abilities, to manage their woods: One who would have courage and integrity to follow the rules of the Board, without being influenced by fear or favour.

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\* This paper was read before the annexed estates were restored.

That this manager should point out to the Board what places should be inclosed, and get their orders for that purpose; and that the factors should assist him in procuring workmen, and in setting bargains of the inclosing; but that they should have no authority over him, nor power to disturb his proceedings.

That this person should have the care and management of all the woods upon the annexed estates in the north-west Highlands, but should have no power to fell without the presence and concurrence of the factors, &c.

If the woods upon the annexed estates in those countries were improved with spirit, and properly taken care of, there is no doubt that others would see the advantages of it in time, and follow the example, which would be one of the greatest improvements the country is capable of, as wood, fish, and cattle, are the only commodities it seems to be capable of producing in any great quantities; and some person must begin improvements in every neglected neighbourhood.

If the Honourable Board will take the trouble to examine their books, they will see how profitable their woods in the south Highlands are, where they have a long land carriage for their bark, and nothing like so good a sale for their woods, as in the west Highlands, near the sea, where every stick is of value for charcoal.

The improvement of those woods would bring the greatest advantages to the country, by creating a circulation of money, and giving employment to the poor inhabitants; which would be the happiest event in a country that affords almost no employment for labourers, but what they get in the woods in other parts of the Highlands: And the late emigrations, and the numbers poured out every harvest, are clear proofs of the want of employment at home.

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The deed would be worthy the first of patriots, to step forth, and procure such lasting advantages to a country that stands so much in need of them. This alone is motive sufficient for so good a work, exclusive of the national advantages in future, of having a vast additional forest of ship timber, which is of the first consequence to a commercial country, that has a great naval force to support. This would lay the foundation of lasting advantages to Great Britain, and would make the annexed estates an immense and a durable national treasure; and it was this consideration that prompted me at first to throw these hints together.

I am well acquainted with the countries mentioned, and have long thought they could be made a glorious Royal Forest; the greatest and best magazine of ship timber, so near the sea, in all Europe. Every good citizen is under obligations to contribute all he can towards the public good, without hurting himself; and thus, I cast in my mite to recommend a design, which I think deserves the attention of people of such abilities and public spirit as those concerned.

I cannot help thinking that this subject deserves the attention of the British legislature. There are no oak woods in Great Britain to be compared with what these might be made, for extent and situation. The largest forest in England dwindles greatly, when brought in comparison with this, and all of it (by the deep indentings and turns of the shores) near water carriage: And it is very evident, from the numberless large roots which appear in many parts of the country, and the many extraordinary large trunks which lie rotting in some of the glens, that there has been as large oaks in Lochaber, as in any part of Great Britain; and therefore, it surely is worth while to set about the improvement of the Highland Forest without loss of time: And I presume to suggest, that the woods on the annexed estates should immediately be secured to government by act of parliament, and

and made a Royal Forest, in case those estates should be disposed of in future, by sale or otherwise.

If the Highland Forest was improved, the advantages to the Highlands, as well as to the nation in general, would be inconceivably great. The lands which are proposed for the Royal Forest, do not now pay a rent of above two pence an acre, upon an average, and perhaps are not capable of affording a higher rent in their present state; but if inclosed, and the woods properly preserved for twenty years, it would then be worth more than twenty shillings an acre *per annum*, on an average, which would be a vast additional treasure to that poor country. And when I consider the many shores, lakes, and rivers, which are on one side of these stools of oak, and the many bogs in several places on the other side, I do not think the inclosing would be very expensive, in comparison of the extent and vast importance of the subject: And there are some woods that would soon require thinning, which would contribute something towards the expence of management.

The Royal Forest proposed would be so very extensive, and would produce such a vast quantity, and such a variety of oak timber, in the rank soil and shelter of the glens, and upon the hard exposed situations of the sides of the mountains, that there would in time be a plenty and variety sufficient, not only for all the royal navy of England, but also for all the shipping in Great Britain and Ireland. And if so, such a forest must be of immense importance to the nation in general, and to the Highlands in particular.

*Report*