CCFG Site Visit to Morton Hall & Thoresby Estate

A Look at Two Differing Estates

By Sebastian Austin

The Continuous Cover Forestry Group field meeting in England was held in Nottinghamshire on the 20th of June 2012 at two very different but equally interesting estates, Morton Hall and Thoresby Estate.

Morton Hall

We started our day at Morton Hall, where we were met in the sunny stable courtyard by the estate’s owner Bill Mason and the former agent of the estate Ian Glenny; who were to be our hosts for the first half of the day.

The woodlands of Morton Hall Estate are slightly more than 70 ha and comprise of three main blocks, Morton park, Dunstans Clump and Walkers Wood. They are situated on flat terrain to the west of East Retford. The woodlands have been in the ownership of the Mason family since the 1830’s and originate from plantations on marginal agricultural land. The management of the woods is supported by a Forestry Commission Woodland Improvement Grant to improve the habitat for woodland birds but is also managed under an EWGS management plan which follows the UKWAS template. The species composition of the woodland comprises of around 60% broadleaf species (Oak, Sycamore and Sweet Chestnut) and the most commercially important species of Corsican and Scots Pine making up around 20% of the woodlands.

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Before entering the woodlands we gathered at the edge to view a soil pit that had been dug to show us the freely draining acid sandy loam soils that derived from Bunter Sandstone at about 50ml asl, which the Home Woods lie on. Upon entering the woodland our hosts were interested to hear our opinions on the management of unwanted Yew which has been sneaking into the older stands. A discussion ensued on the benefits and drawbacks of the Yew, it was agreed that there was no reason to remove the Yew as it is a high value timber that could be a sporadic revenue for the estate.

We then made our way to the Home Woods, it is here that CCF is mainly practiced and is also the subject of the 2009 RFS article ‘Implementing continuous cover forestry in a mixed broadleaved woodland in north Nottinghamshire: results after twenty years’ by W.L. Mason & I.J. Glenny. Bill Mason and Ian Glenny came to the Home Woods in 1976 with a management objective of ensuring a long term maintenance of their amenity value while improving the quality of the timber and obtaining sporadic revenue. After a few years of trying to obtain natural regeneration of more favourable overstory species (Oak, Beech and Sweet Chestnut) they found that the bramble was too aggressive and subsequently had to plant with artificial regeneration. Relying on natural regeneration was shown to not be reliable, and a more systematic approach of regular thinning to favour better quality trees and planting gaps without waiting for natural regeneration would have to be implemented. Along with this management approach regular monitoring would be carried out to observe the results. They found that this method of regular monitoring is an essential tool for future managers, as it documented the stands response to intervention and thus provided essential information to avoid concerns over continuity.

The group then cut through a broadleaf stand to come out upon Morton Park’s pinetum. The pinetum was established during the late nineteenth century and for the first three decades it expanded progressively with an array of varied varieties. After a lull of many years it was then brought back into management after the 1976 gales. Since then there have been small scale plantings of around 60 species. Bill Mason has an objective of returning it to its past glory by increasing this number to around 100.
Our final stop was in the centre of a dark stand of Grand Fir, Western Hemlock and a variety of Pines. The objective for the stand is to convert it to CCF while still keeping the shade bearing trees. The group’s discussion focused on this and it was agreed that planting with a soil enriching species such as Douglas Fir would help regeneration while also being able to grow in such dark conditions.

After a well deserved lunch break in the stables courtyard we gave thanks to our guides for such an interesting and informative morning and then made our way to our next site visit at Thoresby Estate.

Thoresby Estate

We met George Clarke, who was to be our guide through Thoresby woods, at the edge of a shady woodland track. After a brief introduction we consolidated ourselves into the cars that were able to take the muddy woodland roads and where then on our way.

The Thoresby Estates are around 14,000 acres in size and are made up of an assortment of farms, woodlands and leisure land. The area that the CCFG visit took place was part of Thoresby woods. The woodland is 150 to 200 meters above sea level with a soil type of Bunter Sand and Keuper Marl. Rainfall is 20 to 25 inches which is often subject to late spring frosts.

For many years Thoresby woodland has been heavily subject to the governments ever changing forestry policies and grant. Post war there was an expectation that timber would become a commercial crop in the coming years and so during 1954 to 1980 the government’s grant aid and tax relief allowed Thoresby estates to expand its woodlands by 1,750 acres with mainly conifer species. After the collapse of the industry in the 1990’s however the government’s new policies post 2000 meant that Thoresby Estates would no longer have to work the woods for a hard profit but could instead create a woodland that was enjoyable for the public with only a part of the it set aside for timber
production. The parts of the woodland that are still bringing in a revenue were where we were taken.

After a brief drive we stopped and were taken to a mature stand of Pine which was bordered by a 5 year old replanted clearcut. The clearcut area had a vigorous natural regeneration of Pines and Birch outcompeting the replanted broadleaves. George Clarke’s objective for the mature stand was to transform it into CCF and have as much natural regeneration as possible to save on planting costs. He was apprehensive however as to whether the Birch would outgrow any natural regeneration that established itself. He asked us for our views. It was people’s opinions that there was very little that would have to be done to attract natural regeneration of the pines as there were plenty of mature Pines at the right age that would be good seed sources. Also that if natural regeneration was so prevalent on the adjacent stand there was no reason for it not to work here. As for the Birch there was no need to control it as it is a good soil improver and would die off before it became a problem but if they were to thin it out at a later stage there was now a market for it thanks to the wood fuel sector.

We then made our way to a clearfell area up the road, where there were good pockets of natural regeneration in between the bracken and brambles. George Clarke was considering as to whether he should allow the natural regeneration take its course or if it would be better to clear it and replant. Conflicting opinions arose within the group, whereas some people thought it better to scarify the whole area and start again others thought that the natural regeneration could be allowed to get on its way if the bracken and brambles were controlled with spraying. The very opposite of this problem was being had across the road in a mature stand of Pine, where very little understory was present. We were asked by our guide if it would be possible to convert the stand into CCF. After some time of discussion over this it was agreed that the stand was possibly too old for CCF and that it would be better to start again with a species that would be more suited to CCF. This conclusion to our day seemed only too fitting that something I would never have thought
to be associated with CCF, take it down and start again, was actually the best action to be taken. It highlighted that I have much to learn about the subject and that CCF isn’t always the step lightly and preserve everything approach people perceive it to be.

Many thanks must go to Rik Pakenham and our hosts, who organised a very enjoyable and informative day.

References


Sebastian Austin is in his final year of a Forestry and Woodland Management degree at the University of Cumbria. He says he has had some great years of learning the theoretical and applied knowledge gained in a degree and is looking forward to putting this knowledge into practice.  seb.hjaa@gmail.com

ABOUT THE CCFG

The Continuous Cover Forestry Group was founded in 1991. Our primary objectives are to promote the transformation of even-aged plantations to structurally, visually and biologically diverse woodlands, and to promote the sustainable management of high quality timber. We play a key role in training and education, and are influential in the formulation of new forest policies in England, Wales and Scotland. We have over 200 individual and corporate members, and membership is open to all with an interest in forestry, forest conservation and woodland environments. The CCFG website gives more information and membership details.

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