Chairman’s Report  
Bill Mason, March 2017

At the CCFG’s 25th anniversary dinner in Wales last September, our invited speakers Philippe Morgan and Jurij Diaci both reminded us in their different ways that achieving lasting change in human society can take time and requires considerable patience. The task that our group’s founders set themselves in 1991 was to challenge and alter entrenched thinking about what were the feasible silvicultural regimes for use in British forests. At that time, clear felling was the only silvicultural system that was widely practised and landscape considerations were the main factor influencing its deployment. Smaller coupes were used in lowland forests or sites that were very visible, while larger coupes were found in upland forests away from the public view. In addition, most stands were composed of single species while structural diversity within forests was often limited. It is a measure of the CCFG’s impact over the last decades and the change in attitudes that has been achieved that nowadays many field meetings reported in forestry society journals include an account of a visit to stands that are apparently being managed under a CCF regime. However, despite this welcome recognition of the potential role of CCF in British forestry, recent surveys have suggested that perhaps only 10 per cent of British forests are being managed using CCF silvicultural systems. In other words, there remains a major issue of translating the increased interest and awareness of CCF into practical actions that will transform our forests into the mixed species and varied structures that are envisaged by forest policies across Great Britain. The implementation of Brexit over the next years may also provide an opportunity to highlight the relevance and importance of CCF to policy targets as new financial regimes are developed to support British forestry.

2016 was a year for reflection on what the CCFG has achieved over the last 25 years and a chance to consider the major challenges that remain. For example, we need to stress that CCF is a sensible and efficient way of developing forest structures that are resilient to the potential impacts of climate change. This was an argument that was expounded by both speakers in their presentations at our anniversary celebration. Successful development of resilient stand structures will require closer engagement between practising foresters and forest scientists, the need to better integrate our understanding of prevailing disturbance regimes into silvicultural practices, as well as other lessons from forest ecology. The requirement for monitoring of changes in forest conditions and for ongoing silvicultural and ecological experimentation will be essential to adapt our forests to an uncertain future. This desirability of developing greater complexity and diversity in our forests as a means of enhancing resilience is a recurring theme in contemporary silvicultural thinking. The ideas are outlined in recent articles and books by Klaus Puettmann (who spoke at our 2014 conference) and other colleagues. The two presentations at our Llandovery celebration were full of insights and stimulating observations and I would recommend the PDF versions of the talks that can be found on our website to all our members.
The increasing recognition of the potential role of CCF in British forests has been enhanced immeasurably by impressions gained and experience shared on study tours to various parts of continental Europe. Many of these tours have been arranged through contacts made through the ProSilva network. Therefore it was a singular honour for CCFG to be asked to host the ProSilva annual meeting in Scotland in 2016. This event was attended by nearly 50 members of ProSilva Europe and was an unprecedented opportunity to show colleagues from different forestry traditions a range of different forests and forest types in sites ranging from the Trossachs to the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. Thanks to our various hosts, during the visit we were able to explain some of the history of Scottish forests and present some of the silvicultural constraints imposed by an oceanic climate as well as by the poor stand structures resulting from a lack of thinning due to poor markets in the last century. We were also able to show the potential for developing structured forests in stands of introduced species such as Sitka spruce – this was a point also evident during our field meeting in Wales the day following the 25th anniversary - and the delegates were impressed by the native Scots pine forests as well as the vigorous growth of trees in the varied forests seen at Craigvinean and Faskally. Our visitors reminded us that the role of CCF should not be confined to managing forests that are felt to be too ‘sensitive’ for clear felling, which is perhaps often the main reason for its introduction into the management of forests in the public sector in Britain. They emphasised that CCF is also an economically attractive way of managing forests to produce quality timber, particularly if deer browsing and other factors limiting natural regeneration have been controlled. This is a point previously made by others, including Owen Davies and Gary Kerr in their recent paper on the costs and revenues of transformation to CCF (see Forests 2015, 6, 2424-2449; doi:10.3390/f6072424), but this aspect seems often to be overlooked in discussions of the wider use of CCF in British forestry. CCFG is very grateful to all the people who hosted this visit, to everybody who made presentations to the visitors, and to Mandy Clinch for her excellent administration of this event. We should also acknowledge the valuable financial support provided by Woodland Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland and the excellent facilities provided by the University of Stirling.

As well as the ProSilva visit and the 25th anniversary meeting in Wales, we also had two excellent meetings in England and in Scotland. In June in England, we were able to revisit the Weasenham Estate in Norfolk, which was one of the places where CCF management was first introduced into Britain in the early years of the last century. The last time I had visited these fascinating woods was about 40 years ago when I was a forestry student at Bangor. Thinking back over that first visit, I feel that, at that time, I had insufficient technical understanding to allow me to appreciate the importance of the pioneering silviculture implemented at Weasenham by the various generations of the Coke family. This reflection is of interest because a recent survey of our membership has suggested that we need to give greater attention to improved ways of informing students and early career foresters about the use of CCF in our forests – this survey is also considered in one of the following paragraphs. By contrast, in September we visited some spectacular stands of big conifers in the hinterland behind Dunoon in Argyll. This is a part of the country where traditionally site factors such as exposure, steep terrain, and wet soils have been felt to severely limit the potential use of CCF and the first tentative steps towards introducing CCF have only begun since the turn of the century. However, it was clear from the various locations we visited that there was a real possibility of developing irregular structures in the more accessible parts of the forests, but also that the process of transformation would take time and patience: identifying the most suitable stands for starting this process would often mean working with younger stands rather than in the older stands with trees of 40m or more in height.
In the coming year, we will have a stimulating trio of field meetings in England, Scotland and Wales, and you can find more details about these events elsewhere in the newsletter. We are also planning a foreign trip, this time to Denmark in early September, arranged through the assistance of our colleagues in ProSilva Denmark. Danish forestry will be of interest to British foresters for several reasons – the country had a similar history of deforestation such that the forest area was only 2-3 per cent of the land surface at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was followed by a sustained afforestation programme, and some of the techniques used to establish forests in Jutland were subsequently adapted for use in afforestation efforts in Britain. More recently, there has been an increasing emphasis on managing forests sustainably for multiple benefits and since the beginning of the present century national forest policy in Denmark has encouraged the long-term conversion of forests to ‘near-to-nature forest management’. This trip should provide attendees with insight into how the conversion process is being taken forward on the ground, and hopefully will give lessons and inspiration for those wishing to practice CCF in Britain.

Thanks to the careful stewardship of our finances by Jim Ralph and Mandy Clinch, the CCFG’s financial position is now healthier than it has been for several years. At the 2016 AGM in Llandovery, the CCFG committee was encouraged to make greater use of these reserves to help promote the cause of CCF throughout Britain. We decided to ask the opinions of our members to see if there were specific issues they felt we should address or actions that we could take to facilitate the uptake of CCF in British forestry. We received many helpful suggestions and the two topics that were most popular were ensuring that students were informed about CCF during their training, and making sure that there was technical training courses on CCF available to practising foresters. Concern about training may have been influenced by the knowledge that ongoing changes within the Forestry Commission would likely result in the break-up of the FC’s Learning and Development (L&D) team. As I write, discussions are ongoing to see whether the existing L&D CCF courses will be continued and if CCFG can contribute to their content and delivery. Other topics that received wide support from members were the ideas of: providing subsidies for students or early career foresters to attend events; considering reduced subscriptions for graduates in their first years of practice; the compilation of a list of sites demonstrating best practice in CCF; and the preparation of a set of short films or videos illustrating aspects of CCF. Your committee is actively investigating many of these suggestions and some action has been taken already. For instance, we have subsidised a forestry student who wished to attend the upcoming meeting on Irregular Silviculture in Lowland Broadleaved Woods being held in early April. Further measures will be considered over the course of the year.

The success that we have achieved as a group is down to the hard work of all members of the CCFG committee and of the three country committees active in England, Scotland and Wales. We all owe a particular debt of thanks to Mandy Clinch for her tireless support to the committee and of CCFG and for her efficient management of the website and the other public facing aspects of our group. I should mention that there are likely to be some vacancies in our committee in the next year or so. Rik Pakenham who is our long-standing committee member for England is looking to stand down during 2017 and we would be interested to hear if anybody would like to take on this role. In a similar vein, I have had the privilege of serving as CCFG chair since 2012 and feel that after six years in the position it would be sensible for there to be a new person leading our group. I am therefore planning to step down during 2018 and would be happy to hear from any member who might like to take on this role.