One hundred years of forestry teaching and research

at the

University of Aberdeen

A brief history

by

Andrew D Cameron
THE BEGINNINGS

1895 Business Committee of the General Council of the University of Aberdeen reports that ‘among the more pressing wants of the University is a lectureship in Forestry.’ At this time, Aberdeen was seen as an ideal centre for forestry, particularly since the hinterland was the most heavily forested in Scotland and the proximity of extensive areas of forest offered excellent scope for field studies and demonstrations.

1904 A conference is held under the auspices of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society (later to become the Royal Scottish Forestry Society) where representatives of the universities submitted their ideas for forestry education to Sir Henery Craik of the Scottish Education Department. Professor J. W. H. Trail, Professor of Botany at the University of Aberdeen, stated that ‘the northern district of Scotland is interested more than any other in the development of forestry.’

FORESTRY BECOMES AN ESTABLISHED DISCIPLINE

1907 Forestry becomes fully established as a distinct discipline and the first lecturer in forestry, Mr William Dawson, is appointed. He lectured students in botany, zoology, geology, chemistry and land surveying. Forestry classes were held at this time in the Botany Department.

1912 William Dawson emphasises the need to establish a demonstration forest for teaching and research. By this year, there were no more than ten university-educated, professional foresters working in Scotland, and several of these were teaching. Assistant Lecturer in Forestry, Mr Peter Leslie, is appointed.

1914 The ordinance for the degree of BSc (Forestry) is approved by His Majesty George V. The University receives the sum of £750 to pay for a new lecturer in forestry. Craibstone Estate is purchased with the view to use the forest areas for education and research.

1915 Dr Alexander Stuart Watt is appointed to the new lectureship in Forest Botany and Forest Zoology. The First World War delays the awarding of degrees.

1919 The first BSc Forestry degree is awarded to Mr George Knowles Fraser, who went on to become a member of teaching staff.

ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY FORESTRY SOCIETY

The Forestry Society is founded in 1919. The first president is Mr Ernest Victor Laing, who went on to become a member of teaching staff. The Society has thrived over the years and, with a few ups and downs, students still involve themselves in a variety of sporting and social activities.

1923 Forestry is moved to Marischal College to accommodation on Littlejohn Street.
1925  The Chair of Forestry is founded.

1926  Professor Arthur W. Borthwick is appointed as the first Professor of Forestry at Aberdeen. Professor Borthwick studied botany at St Andrews, and then forestry at Munich under Professor Robert Hartig before coming to Aberdeen.

Forestry is moved to a new building in the Cruickshank Botanic Garden, adjacent to the Department of Botany. Members of staff comprise Professor Borthwick, Alexander Watt, George Fraser and Ernest Laing. The new Chair and building were the outcome of the commitment and perseverance of Principal Sir George Adam Smith who worked for more than ten years to establish a strong and complete school for study and research in science applied to forestry.

1929  Alexander Watt moves to Cambridge and his place is filled by Mr W. B. R. Laidlaw, whose main area of teaching is forest entomology.

**Research in the 1920s**
The main research effort in the 1920s was on the problems of establishing trees on peat soils and the importance of mycorrhizal structures in tree growth. Ernest Laing and George Fraser worked on this problem, which was funded by the Carnegie Trust. Collaboration with the Macaulay Institute was established at this time. Meanwhile, Alexander Watt was publishing results of his work on the ecology of beech woods. W. Laidlaw carried out research on parasites of several damaging insect pests of forest trees.

1936  Professor Borthwick retires due to ill health.

1938  Professor Henry M Steven is appointed to the Chair of Forestry. Professor Steven studied forestry at the University of Edinburgh before moving into forest research and became a research officer for the Forestry Commission. He worked for several years as a forest manager for the Forestry Commission before taking up the Chair.

1939  Mr William M. McNeill is appointed Lecturer in Forestry. Forestry teaching continues during the war. Courses were also run for Canadians working in British forests.
POST-SECOND WORLD WAR YEARS

FORESTRY SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER
The first Forestry Society Annual Dinner was held on November 15th, 1945. Mr Kenneth McKellar (undergraduate, and yes, the well known Scottish singer) led the guests in singing from the piano! The dinner has been held every year since, and although singing is no longer part of the proceedings (at least not officially!), it has always remained the high point of the Forestry Society calendar. It is a great opportunity for students to meet the graduates. The graduates not only buy the wine, but often help point the students in the right direction regarding careers (depending on the time in the evening!). The Forester's Frolic also started at this time.

1946 Volume 1 number 1 of ARBOR magazine is published.

ARBOR MAGAZINE
The magazine was produced by the students and included articles by students and staff, and a roundup of society news events. It was published up until 1998 when the costs of printing became prohibitive. ARBOR will return in this centenary year 2007 in an electronic format, free to download from the Forestry Society web site.

1949 Mr Percy W. Davis is appointed lecturer in forest measurement, whom along with Professor Steven, William McNeill and Ernest Laing, form the forestry staff.

FC COSTINGS SURVEY FOR SCOTLAND
This group was established in 1950 to provide up-to-date forest costs in Scotland. It was run by various people over the years, including Gordon Grant, Keith Openshaw, Alistair Cooper, John Lloyd, Chris Inglis, Donald (Don) Cumming, Wilfred (Wilf) Holmes, John (Jack) Todd, John Kupiec, Moira Baptie and Wally Leask. It was closed in 1994.

DARNAWAY
The Darnaway residential field course started in the early 1950s and continued up until 1994 when it was closed, partly due to high costs of maintaining Cooperhill House and partly due to the need to access up-to-date computer technology. The course involved the preparation of a new planting plan and a management plan covering Darnaway Forest. Darnaway seems to have had an indelible impression (some say mental scars!) on those who attended and almost everyone has a story to tell about their experiences.

1959 Professor Steven and Alexander Carlisle publish the seminal work on the Native Pinewoods of Scotland.

The first Woodchopper’s Ball takes place.

1960 Mr John Stannard (Stan) Murray joins the staff to teach Forest Pathology. Two research assistants, Mr David Rook and Mr Alan Low are appointed at this time.

1962 Dr Myles Crooke takes up the position of Forest Entomologist.
1963  Professor Steven retires and Professor John D Matthews is appointed to the Chair of Forestry. Professor Matthews studied forestry at Aberdeen before moving on to the Research Division of the Forestry Commission, eventually to become head of the Genetics Section. Dr Ian Brown joins the staff to teach Forest Genetics.

**Clipping from ARBOR 1960**
The intention of this Society evening was to introduce the first year students to their senior fellows – who almost suffered total defeat in the beer race. Our special guests, Prof R V Jones and Dr S D Richardson, tied in a two-man race. Special commendation should be given to Mr Shand for his performance of limbo!

1964  William McNeill retires (left). Mr Mike Philip, Mr Jim Henderson, and Dr Colin Millar join the staff. Mike Philip takes on the Forest Management field course at Darnaway and Tropical Silviculture.


**Sporting achievements!**
In spite of some of the less memorable sporting activities of student foresters, Jonathan Moffett and Andrew Richie represented Ireland and Scotland respectively in international rugby.

**THE YEARS OF EXPANSION**

Retirement presentation for William McNeil, June 1964. Back (L–R) - Prof Matthews, D Rook, G Grant, Prof Steven, M Crooke, Hyde. Front (L–R) – Mrs McNeil, Mrs Davis, W M McNeil, Mrs Matthews, Mrs Steven, Mrs Murray, S Murray, Mrs Rook.
1966 Dr Huw Parry is appointed as Research Assistant in Forest Entomology. Percy Davis retires. Mike Philip takes over Forest Measurement.

1967 Dr Alan Petty is appointed as a Research Assistant. The teaching staff at this time comprised John Matthews, Stan Murray, Myles Crooke, Mike Philip, Jim Henderson, and Colin Millar.

![Aberdeen University Forestry Society 1969](image)

1970 Alan Petty is appointed to the teaching staff to cover Wood Science and Forest Measurement.

1971 Mr Donald (Don) Cumming is appointed to teach Silviculture.

1974 A visitation of the University Grants Committee recommended to the University the closure of the Department. This was later withdrawn after strong lobbying by Professor Matthews. His input was seen as a notable milestone in the history of forestry at Aberdeen. Dr Ian Brown is appointed lecturer in forest genetics. Dr Stanley (Stan) Thompson becomes a Research Officer.

**Research in the 1960s and 1970s**

A wide variety of research work was undertaken during this period including forest entomology, woodland bird’s habitats, pathology of needle diseases, tree breeding, wood quality, fluid flow in wood, forest economics, and nursery practice.
1982  Stan Murray and Myles Crooke take early retirement.

1983  Professor Matthews retires after 20 years. Mike Philip becomes Head of Department. Mike Philip establishes the MSc Forestry programme. Drs Stanley Thompson and Huw Parry are appointed as lecturers to teach Silviculture and Forest Entomology respectively.

1984  Professor Hugh G Miller is appointed to the Chair of Forestry. Hugh Miller, a graduate of forestry from Aberdeen, worked as a scientist at the Macaulay Institute before his appointment.

1985  Don Cumming retires.

1986  Dr Andrew Pirrie is appointed to teach Tree Physiology and Genetics.

1987  Jim Henderson retires and Dr Paul Mitchell is appointed to teach Forest Harvesting.

1988  Mike Philip retires. He is awarded the OBE in recognition of his contribution to forestry. Colin Millar
leaves to take up interests in Africa.
Stan Thompson leaves to take up a career in the forest nursery industry. Jack Todd retires from the economic surveys unit.

1989  Dr Andrew D. Cameron and Mr Patrick Hardcastle join the staff. Andrew Cameron takes over Silviculture and the Forest Management Plan. Pat Hardcastle takes over the running of the MSc Forest Management programme.

**Research in the 1980s**
Biotechnology becomes a key research area with studies into cloning trees using tissue culture. Other research includes the physiology of pine seedlings, nutrient cycling in forest stands, damage by spruce aphids, fungal diseases of trees and wood as a source of energy.

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<th>Clipping from ARBOR 1990</th>
<th>1990  Forestry moves building, located at the entrance to the botanic garden, into the Cruickshank Building, along with Plant &amp; Soil Science. Dr Steven Woodward is appointed to teach Forest Pathology.</th>
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<td>The “Sapling Shindig” was again held in the East Neuk. The third year retained the “Cock of the North” trophy for the ‘boat race.’ The Prize for the most hopeless display of the evening goes to Dr Steve Woodward’s over 30s team, who lacked the necessary mental agility required to drink 4 pints of lager!</td>
<td>1992  Pat Hardcastle leaves to concentrate on international consultancy. Mr Mark Werren replaces him to run the MSc programme. A new BSc degree in Arboriculture and Amenity Forestry is established.</td>
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<td>1993 Ian Brown retires.</td>
<td>1994 The last management plan field course takes place at Darnaway. Kirkhill Forest, located on the edge of Aberdeen, is used instead.</td>
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**KIRKHILL FOREST MANAGEMENT PLAN**
While undoubtedly something was lost by the ending of the Darnaway field course, much has been gained by locating the management plan only 20 minutes from Aberdeen. The students are based in their own accommodation in Aberdeen (helpful for drying boots and socks!) and travel the short distance to the forest each day. They have easy access to the full range of University facilities, including computers and the library. Students spend three weeks in Kirkhill Forest, studying soils, vegetation, stand health and quality, harvesting and forest management; and carry out a full inventory of the forest. A further six weeks, based at the University, is used to write up the management plan. The Forest Management Plan remains a central piece of work in the degree programme.

1995  Quincentenary celebrations at the University. The Forestry Society Annual Dinner, held in Elphinstone Hall, attracts 126 graduates from all over the world. The Annual Borthwick-Steven Lecture is founded in memory of the first two Chairs of Forestry.

Dr Gary Clarke is appointed to cover teaching of Forest Management at BSc and MSc levels.
THE YEARS OF CHANGE

1996 Forestry moves again, this time into the MacRobert Building.

1997 Mark Werren leaves to work for a multi-national pulp and paper company in Indonesia.

1999 Dr Michelle Pinard is appointed to teach Tropical Forestry. A new degree of BSc Forest Sciences is established.

Research in the 1990s
Research includes improving wood quality in birch and Sitka spruce, infection by *Heterobasidion annosum*, tropical forest plantation trees, irregular forestry, and remote sensing.

2000 Forestry is merged with Agriculture. The next four years are nearly disastrous for forestry, which comes close to the brink of extinction. Permanent staff numbers are reduced from nine to three. Gary Clarke’s contract ends and he leaves to take up a post in British Guyana. Alan Petty and Huw Parry retire in 2002. Andrew Pirrie also leaves this year. Dr Louise Page is appointed as a teaching assistant.

2003 Hugh Miller retires. The Chair of Forestry is not replaced. Schools and Colleges are formed within the University. Forestry is placed within the School of Biological Sciences, which along with the Schools of Psychology, Medicine and Medical Sciences form the College of Life Sciences & Medicine. Paul Mitchell is moved to Land Economy. Andrew Cameron becomes degree programme coordinator. BSc in Arboriculture and Amenity Forestry is closed due to low student numbers.

Strong lobbying by staff succeeds and Forestry is de-merged from Agriculture, and affiliated with Plant & Soil Science. Forestry regains its identity as a distinct discipline. This is seen as a major milestone in the history of forestry at Aberdeen University.

A temporary move to the Hilton Campus (half a mile from Kings) takes place while buildings are refurbished at Kings.
2005 Forestry returns to its original home adjacent to the Cruickshank Building after a period of 15 years (although now located in the rear of the building rather than at the front).

A new degree in BSc Forest Conservation is established.

Students at Marischal College on graduation day

**2007** Forestry reaches its centenary!

**THE FUTURE?**

There is room for cautious optimism as student numbers have increased every year since 2003, perhaps highlighting the significance of regaining a clear identity for the discipline of forestry at Aberdeen University. However, the future remains one of uncertainty since forestry, like many other small specialised disciplines, will always attract relatively modest numbers of students and will continue to be vulnerable to closure as universities strive to maximise income through high student numbers.

It is important that those working in the forestry industry take every opportunity to emphasise that educated and motivated graduates continue to be needed to deal with the complexities of forest management in an ever changing world of economics and the environment, and that positions in forest management cannot be readily replaced with graduates from associated environmental disciplines. As long as the qualities of our graduates continue to be recognised, we can enter our second century with confidence.