

Green Burials in Community Woodlands seminar

**Aigas Community Forest, Aigas Field Centre
5th March 2016**



Community
Woodlands
Association



Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Iomairt na Gàidhealtachd 's nan Eilean

Green Burials in Community Woodlands seminar

Synopsis

This one-day event focused on the various ways that community woodland groups and other community land owners can generate income through developing green burial opportunities. The event covered planning and legal regulations, choosing suitable sites, infrastructure requirements, burial options, memorial areas, resources and supply chains and marketing.

Report

Thirteen participants gathered in The Magnus House, Aigas Field Centre.

Diane Campbell, Ullapool Community Trust / CWA director, welcomed delegates and introduced the speakers for the day.

Andrew Leaver, Aigas Community Forest, (<http://www.aigasforest.co.uk>) welcomed delegates to Aigas and described the journey of the community to ownership of the site. ACF started their endeavours to bring Aigas Forest under community control in March of 2009 following notification from Forestry Commission Scotland that they had declared the forest surplus and would be selling it.

A feasibility study and 5 year business plan were commissioned from consultants Bell Ingram in order to move the project forward. The feasibility was completed in August 2009 and the resulting community ballot showed outstanding support for the acquisition. Forestry Commission Scotland approved the Option to Purchase on 17 December 2009.

The DV provided a value for the forest of £690,000. The Scottish Land Fund relaunch allowed the community to apply to purchase the forest outright and with match funding from Aigas Trust the forest was transferred to the community on 5th March 2015. One of the options contained in the business plan was the investigation into green burials and the seminar was welcomed as a fact finding opportunity for ACF.

Rob Borruso from Kilfinan Community Forest Company, Argyll, (<http://www.kilfinancommunityforest.co.uk>) presented on the legal and planning obligations for green burials. Rob covered the regulations around planning including roads, Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and making money.

Planning – the responsibility for granting planning consent for green burials lies with the local planning officer and groups may need to make that person aware of Scottish Government and Local Authority support for green burials. The extent of infrastructure required is likely to be a decision taken by the roads department: they will require access to be at the standard necessary for emergency vehicles and tend to default to local authority adoptable standard, although this is not a legal requirement. The development of access infrastructure is likely to be the biggest cost.

SEPA – officials work to cemeteries guidance: <http://www.sepa.org.uk/media/143364/lups-gu32-guidance-on-assessing-the-impacts-of-cemetries-on-groundwater.pdf>

The most important part of this guidance is distance to water courses; it should be remembered that this is guidance and not legal requirements. It is likely that reports will be required from communities to satisfy officials taking decisions that all eventualities have been considered.

When making money from green burials the services being delivered need to be thought about with regards to contract law. If maintenance of the lair is included within advanced payments then contracts need to be considered and indemnity and bonds to protect people's investment need to be implemented.

This presentation is available online at <https://youtu.be/Lbj63TOKO90>

Jonathan Caddy of Findhorn Hinterland Trust (<http://www.findhornhinterland.org/green-burial/>) gave a presentation on the green burial site at Wilkies Wood, Findhorn. This site has been in operation for a few years and 16 burials have taken place. There are 68 reserved lairs bringing in a total of £50K to date. The group have a reserve of £15K which allows flexibility when reserve lairs are required.

Jonathan's presentation highlighted the need for an employed coordinator for funerals. This role includes liaison with funeral directors, family and all other requirements for an individual's funeral such as supply of coffin, etc. It is a key role which at Wilkies Wood is paid for by a percentage of each sale. This is about to be reviewed.

The other key role in any community burial project is a working group which deals with the process of establishment and ongoing management. This is essential as a means of making sure everything is addressed as required, all regulations are adhered to, records of burials and lair positions are kept correctly and that the finances are monitored and controlled.

Jonathan's presentation outlined the practicalities required, such as storage and equipment, the various implements and links to local people with suitable digging machinery. He emphasised that the land in Wilkies Wood is used for community gatherings, weddings and parties as well as for burials, and, as graves are not marked apart from a few with newly planted trees, some people may not be aware that they are celebrating on land that is also used for burials.

Following the presentations a general discussion on issues of concern was conducted by the delegates. The following points were recorded:

- Depth of Lairs – Depth is a mandatory 3ft from the top of the coffin. This is to keep scavengers away and also to keep bodies above the water table. When assessing the site planners want to see a hole dug to the right depth to determine whether water collects. It also needs to be the right kind of soil at the bottom. It was considered that mounding may help to keep the depth correct in sites which do not go deep enough.
- Policy – approach to planning and SEPA needs careful thought. Talk to councillors before going to planning to get them onside and help with communication to senior planners.
- Choice - Sensitive area to be working in and people have a wide choice. Living wills help families to take decisions but these can be overruled. Green burials tend to need more involvement by family at the time of the funeral arrangements. Prepaid is an option to generate income for managing the ground however need to consider how far to promote green burials and how much up front to take from people. Service could be open to all with special rates for people local to the site.
- People – the coordinator role is essential and involves a lot of work for the right type of personality. The role is to link people and make sure things go smoothly. Is this a role for volunteers? Need to think about potential issues, support, opposition, etc.
- Market – what is the market and how is it defined. Some have iconic areas such as Suilven in Assynt. Others don't have that to 'sell'. Traditional funerals and burial grounds are being bought up by big corporations.

- Different models to choose – big sites with national appeal down to small local sites.
- Sold and advertised as an alternative forest product. Ground could be glades, open ground, forestry with trees planted on clear fell, tie in to ancient woodland restoration, people need to be made aware of ever changing views in woodland. People need to be aware of forestry implications.
- Community Woods USP – in perpetuity as community woods are protected by community ownership. Other sites could be developed in future years.
- Pre-sale – to cover lairs and ground maintenance for future sustainability although the intention for most groups is not financially motivated.
- Marking graves. Not marking graves can lead to less interest / ability to link back to ancestry. To help overcome this Findhorn have created a memorial book which a contribution from the family / friends about the person must be made.

This presentation is available online at <https://youtu.be/g72n27MtTO0>

After lunch the group took a walk to consider a potential site for green burials in Aigas Community Forest. It seemed that the site would not be suitable as it was close to a loch that was being restored so some additional thought would be needed. The group had a short discussion about the potential for the site with regards access, water courses and planting based on morning discussions and then returned to the hall.

A short discussion took place on whether groups would be more interested in developing their green burials plans following the event and most felt that they would want to do so. Key points for CWA:

- Provide information about the wider market in Scotland for green/woodland burials.
- Produce case studies of a variety of green burials sites around Scotland
- Look in more depth at potential for coordinated approach to community woodland burial services
- Have someone to turn to for advice on practical aspects of development



Rob Borruso



Delegate Group



Jonathan Caddy

Schedule

- 10am Welcome – Andrew Leaver, Aigas Community Forest
- 10.05 Legislation and Planning Regulation – Rob Borruso, Kilfinan Community Forest Company
- 10.30 Green Burial at Findhorn – Jonathan Caddy, Findhorn Hinterland Trust
- 11.30 Coffee
- 11.45 Group discussion
- 12.15 Choosing an appropriate site: Aigas Forest.
- 1pm Lunch
- 1.45 Field visit to view the suggested site
- 2.45 Next steps to develop sites in delegates' own woodlands
- 3.30 End

List of participants

Donnie Chisolm	Aigas Community Forest
John Morrison	North West Mull Community Woodland Company Ltd
Christopher Marsh	CWA Director
Fiona Saywell	Culag Community Woodland Trust
Adrian Clark	Evanton Wood Community Company
John Graham	Aigas Community Forest
Cameron Venters	Sleat Development Trust Environment Group
Gordon Robertson	Assynt Foundation
Marco Baglioni	Abriachan Forest Trust
Andrew Leaver	Aigas Community Forest
Rob Borruso	Kilfinan Community Forest Company
Jonathan Caddy	Findhorn Hinterland Trust
Diane Campbell	Ullapool Community Trust / CWA Director

Event Feedback

	V.Good	Good	Fair	Poor	V.Poor
Location	9	1	0	0	0
Organisation	4	5	0	0	0
Catering	1	5	3	0	0
Facilities	5	4	0	0	0

Do you feel this event delivered your expectations?

Yes 8, No 0, Partly 1

If answer was no / partly please tell us why and how we might improve things:

Not enough opportunity to discuss the market for green burials and to understand likely demand. Maybe start with an overview of the issues rather than the details of planning, etc.

Please tell us why you wanted to take part in the event?

I was speaking about the Aigas sites but did want to get more info as woodland burials is just an idea at this stage at ACF

Abriachan FT interested to develop ashes scattering site

My CWA members groups in Skye are interested in woodland burials.

To find out more information about green and natural burials and the legal issues to consider

Have previously looked at green burials but info wasn't clear cut so project didn't progress thought this would be a good opportunity to clarify the process.

To learn practically from those with experience / focus the mind / committed to the idea.

Organisation has considered woodland burials as an option.

Learn more of what is involved and share experiences.

Early stages of looking into this issue

What benefits do you feel you gained from attending the event?

A lot more info on what is involved, constraints, etc but also opportunities that there are and what can be gained from woodland burials

Awareness of legal issues, organisations, cost involved.

Useful regulation detail / good discussion of individual issues, queries / useful overview of simple set up.

The information might be useful

Learning about other groups experience and how to progress the project.

Advantages and pitfalls clearly pointed out / network / contacts.

Better understanding of the legal frameworks and practical issues surrounding establishment of a burial ground.

Better understanding re potential pitfalls re planning

Shared experience and ideas

What will you do with the experience / skills/ ideas you have gained from attendance?

Go away and think – take it to the board, possibly see what the community think if board are interested

Disseminate information to the directors and board. Make local community aware of the potential/option.

Advise my groups of my findings / explore sites in a more knowledgeable and progressive way.

Revisit the idea with the board and if positive response consult with community as to whether they

would be interested/against the project.

Report back, consult with community, form focus group, consult with planners

It will inform discussion at board level when this opportunity is raised.

Carry on with our project with renewed enthusiasm look at coordination role.

Feedback to board agenda next week.

Would you recommend other to take part in such an event?

Yes 9 No 0

Please explain why / why not:

Informal educative way of discussion and learning from other members.

I thought the talks were interesting

To advance knowledge of project planning and to network with other groups and share experience.

Gave me all the plusses / minuses. Very practical

It was informative. Good to meet folk from other groups.

Shared experience is always beneficial

What would you like to see Community Woodlands Association do next?

Are there other training / seminar opportunities you would like to see organised?

A seminar on alternative products i.e. not just softwood products but also hardwood timber as well as berries, mushrooms, etc. A look at what's possible really.

For the time being keep a record of burials sites / CWA members. Medium term: archive case studies and survey members for central coordination. Long term: coordinate a funeral business.

In terms of green burials assist with centralized marketing, admin and liaison with funeral directors.

Could CWA be the central access point offering different sites at com woods?

Great if someone could have someone we could contact for central/ practical advice.

More information about the size and growth prospects of the woodland burials market in Scotland.

Certainly look at the possibility of a central resource to help / advise / share info.

Working for health

Would you be interested in working in collaboration to promote green burials across Scotland?

Yes 3 No 1 Maybe 5

Do you have any other comments on any aspect of the event?

A Very Good Day

Additional email feedback from a delegate who left early:

Interesting meeting at Aigas. There are three issues that I have identified that it would have been good to know about.

1. Woodland Burial Grounds can be consecrated which is a positive for people of Christian faiths. Also consecrated ground is virtually in perpetuity and can only be de-consecrated by Act of Parliament which addresses this issue of what happens if the woodland goes bust. Needs a little research to confirm that Scottish law is similar to the rUK. Certainly the CofE owns and operates three woodland burial grounds.

2. It would have been useful to know that willow caskets and urns are made locally by Naturally Useful at Forres. Adult coffin £650, child or baby £150 and urn £80

3. Delliefure Burial Ground at Strathspey is another model of operation where a company, from Wales, manages and markets the site, leaving the landowner simply to pocket the rental and fees. This may appeal to some Forest Groups who don't want to get involved in the minutiae of running a Woodland Cemetery. Having to dig a grave when the local farmer has just gone off on his yearly skiing holiday could be interesting!