

## Merlin Trust Green Recovery final report.

I am writing to the Trustees of the Merlin Trust, with thanks for their generous support vis-à-vis my conservation horticulture placements over last winter. Their bursary award contributed significantly towards:

- The costs of undertaking my 7-week placement at Megginch Castle Estate, the Scottish National Fruit Collections.
- The costs involved with a 7-week traditional craft hedgelayering placement over several Scottish Estates.
- A series of site visits to significant historic gardens, short-courses and NHLS craft accreditation in Lancashire.

Admittedly, my training placements took a different format than expected. I found organising placements, of sufficient quality, a good deal more difficult than anticipated. This underscores the challenges that face the various countryside crafts that I'm interested in. There really is a dearth of professional expertise in these fields, particularly in a Scottish context.

By way of acknowledgement, I have been lucky enough, over the last year, to have received training from, and been mentored by, a few key figures in Scotland's contemporary landscape conservation practice, namely Christopher Dingwall (Garden Historian), Graeme Walker (Hedgelayer), and Catherine Drummond-Herdman (Pomologist). I am grateful for their support, along with your own during this time.

## Purpose

Of note, my award was the Merlin Trust's Green Recovery Award. Rather than the typical garden placement or field botany study tour, the purpose of this extraordinary award was to enable young horticulturists to gain experience in applying horticultural solutions to broader landscape-scale problems. Whilst my training has been primarily garden based, I'm interested in how we might increase biodiversity, in a manner that doesn't compromise our landscape heritage. Whilst 're-wilding' certainly has a place, I'm interested in the potential of our agricultural lowlands to contribute to afforestation and enhanced biodiversity using traditional land management approaches. For all the ambitious schemes for planting trees, new hedgerows and other species rich environments, I've been struck that existing hedgerows, extant traditional orchards and policy woodland are often overlooked. Whilst the period of agricultural improvement was highly problematic - destroying communities, tracts of native woodland in the likes of Moray-Shire, and the mosses of the Carse of Stirling - agricultural improvers, to their credit, spoke of the 'universally acknowledged' benefit of tree planting and hedgerows. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Scotland was one of the least forested countries in Europe, surpassing only Ireland and Iceland in terms of tree cover. You were as likely, Johnson wrote on his 18<sup>th</sup> Century tour, to encounter a tree in the bleak Scottish expanses as you were, a horse in Venice. Scotland's landscape character was defined by its openness, outside of pockets of policy woodland, it was overwhelmingly, bleak, barren and unproductive. Whilst the last two centuries have been marked by changing land management, the development of a commercial forestry sector and a far greater

appreciation for the human-impact on the environment, we remain one of most denuded landscapes in Europe. Anyone who's travelled in the Berwickshire Merse, the Kincardineshire Mearns or the Carse of Gowrie will be struck by the 'agricultural deserts' that exist today in many areas of Scotland. Old field boundaries have been ploughed up, hedgerows left to decay and orchards grubbed out. Without the economic case for traditional countryside craftspeople in modern agriculture, we now lack many of the necessary craftspeople to sensitively manage certain aspects of our historic landscape. Therefore, the purpose of my training programme was to develop my skillset in two of these countryside crafts, namely traditional orchard management and hedgelaying.

### Megginch

Over January and February, I was attached to Catherine DH, training in orchard management at the Scottish National Fruit Collections at Megginch Castle Estate in the Carse of Gowrie. With the James Hutton Institute, formerly the SCRI, grubbing out most of its research orchard in the 1970s, Megginch is arguably the most important orchard in Scotland today.

Set in an important area of historic fruit growing, given the legacy of successive monasteries, the presence of a substantial Victorian era top-fruit Sector, notably with Patrick Matthews' Gourdiehill operation and as a centre for Scottish Crop Science. Megginch continues the Scottish top-fruit tradition in the Carse today.

This is significant as orchards, once defined the landscape character in several areas of Scotland, namely: Clydesdale, the Carse of Gowrie and the Tweed Valley. Unfortunately, the direction of travel in modern Scottish Agriculture/Production Horticulture has meant that top-fruit orchards, like market gardens have largely vanished from our contemporary agricultural landscape. Undoubtedly, there is a value to conserving both the fruits themselves and the orchards that they compose, for the sake of both our landscape heritage and biodiversity. Given the pressing need to diversify British Agriculture, which has precipitated experimentation with various Agro-forestry methodologies, there is a hope that the various Scottish Top Fruit Collections, such as Megginchs' might supply the necessary stock for the Scottish orchards and alley farming systems of the future.

To that end, I was tasked with helping to renovate the living collection, which mainly consisted of a great deal of restorative pruning on overmature trees to try and slow their decline, stimulate new vegetative growth so that they could be propagated from, as well as tending to the younger trees which require protection from pests, such as rabbit and deer. I spent many days on my hands and knees re-training fruit trees on wires, weeding and formatively pruning. I also gained a good deal of experience with woodland management, assisting with the extensive clean-up, the legacy of Storm Arwen. The placement gave me a brilliant opportunity to visit local orchards with the Carse of Gowrie Orchard group, the James Hutton Agroforestry field station at Glenshaugh and the National Trust for Scotland's School of Heritage Gardening at Threave under the Auspices of the Northern Fruit group. Whilst at Megginch, I also had the opportunity, which your grant assisted with, to visit the historic orchards of Country Armagh, and undertake vocational forestry certification at the Royal Agricultural University, Cirencester besides. Through Scotland's Garden and Landscape

Heritage Society, with guidance from the their Vice Chairman Christopher Dingwall, I will be co-running an orchard history day in 2024 to raise awareness of the role orchards played in Perthshire's agricultural history and how they might be conserved going forward.

### The Hirsell and CharteHall Estate

Following on from a traineeship at the University of Dundee Botanic Garden, I spent several months training under the NHLS accredited Master Hedgelaye Graeme Walker working at several historic Estate landscapes/designed landscapes in the Scottish Borders.

Building on my first traineeship with Graeme during my 'Heritage' garden apprenticeship and now equipped with a chainsaw licence, I set to work on the various types of hedgerows – in terms of species and maturity -improving my craft with a view to ultimately obtaining craft certification. Something as innocuous as a hedgerow might be taken for granted as a timeless or even natural part of our landscape but their original purpose, current state and prospects are of great importance to Scotland's Lowland landscape character. The overwhelming majority of Scotland's historic hedgerows are the product of the period of Agricultural Improvement where these 'fences', as in the Scottish landscape tradition, dykes, hedgerows, and dead hedges were broadly described, were erected in a mania. Typically Hawthorn, these hedgerows were concentrated in the lowland counties of Scotland and delineated a transformed and greatly more productive landscape. However, given changing land use, misguided agricultural subsidies in the post war and a widespread lack of technical expertise in their proper management today, what remains of Scotland's hedgerows are by and large much degraded. Unfortunately, hedgerows - besides being expensive to maintain - often suffer from the mischaracterisation of being more typically or traditionally 'English', given that the Southwest (Devon and Somerset in particular) has a comparatively ancient hedgerow tradition. However, this is reductive, belying the importance of hedgerows to the modern – post 'improvement' Scottish landscape tradition. One need only consider the classic, arguably archetypal Lowland Scottish views of Melrose and the Eildons from Scott's view, or the patchworks of the East Nuuk and the Carse of Stirling, to see the contribution that hedgerows provide. To say nothing of their biodiversity value, our landscape would be a good deal bleaker without them. Their gradual decline is also remarkable as their loss effaces one of the key markers of the incredible period of landscape transformation that defined the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Improvement era hedgerows, alongside accompanying drains and dykes attest to the (not unqualified) achievements of the Agricultural Revolution. Scotland went from being one of the most impoverished countries in Europe to one of its most advanced. Its newfound food security and increasingly urbanised population created the necessary conditions for fomenting the Industrial revolution and modernity.

This craft is in a particularly poor state in Scotland with only tiny pockets of contemporary practice, chiefly focussed in areas of shooting estate where the cost of the practice can be justified by the return on exaggerated game bird numbers. It is my hope that with greater awareness of the historical scope of the tradition, alongside the environmental impetus associated with biodiversity loss and climate change, we might arrest the modern decline of our hedgerow stock, restoring them to health and ultimately replanting the many thousands

of lost miles of hedgerow. To this end, the craft of hedgelaying, an essential tool of the landscape conservator has to survive, in order to be passed down to future generations. Given that there are only two NHLS accredited hedgelayers working in the whole of Scotland, both of whom in middle age, I am trying to become skilled in the craft myself. My hope is that given the experience and eventual accreditation I will be able to work commercially, restoring hedgerows with a view to eventually training others in the craft myself.

Given my experience learning under Graeme during the Autumn of 2022, I subsequently trained in Lancashire and Westmoreland (a distinctive hedging style) in the Forest of Bowland in March 2023. I was successfully accredited in the craft to a bronze level. This allows me to train for the silver level accreditation next season (hedgelaying is only practiced during Autumn/Winter).

#### Concluding thoughts.

I would just like to reiterate my thanks to the Merlin Trust for their support during this time. This has been a very valuable string of experiences, allowing me to train in some incredible landscapes, under the tutelage of accomplished craftspeople. However, I would caveat this with a note of real pessimism about the prospects for young person looking to pursue a career in the Scottish Landscape Conservation. Whilst the environmental case for conserving our landscape heritage has been well stated, the reality is that the necessary funding, and the accompanying willingness to pay by landowners simply isn't there. Whilst there are many brilliant people working in the field, undoubtedly there is an overdependence on volunteers, work parties and Woofers (and their ilk). Whilst these all have a place, and the problem is of course a greater societal one, we cannot rely on amateurs to avert ecological disaster. We require a professional class of landscape - conservation specialists who are appropriately skilled, and I stress, remunerated to enable them to tackle the task at hand.