

Delightful Days at Castle Leod



Looking at and appreciating trees is something we all do, even those who are not arborists have a highly developed sense of the value of trees, (especially when they belong to someone else and that third party has to pick up the costs of maintenance). Therefore, it's a real pleasure to have an occasional opportunity to visit a distant tree collection on a commercial basis to get paid for the privilege of spending a few days creating a tree management plan. This wee article recounts a few days spent exploring tree and woodlands at Castle Leod in the late spring early summer of 2013 and again in the late winter early spring or 2014.

Castle Leod is the oldest intact castle in Britain, built on the site of a very ancient Pictish fort in about the 12th Century.

Annually in August the Castle grounds host the Strathpeffer Highland Gathering, one of the longest established Highland Games in Scotland; the estate is also home to the local Caberfeidh Shinty and Ross County Cricket clubs. The shinty club was founded in 1886 in the Spa Pavilion in Strathpeffer, celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2011. All of this set amidst beautiful parkland and policy woodland with a mountain backdrop. W. F. Gunn, in an essay entitled *The Woods, Forests, and Forestry of Ross-Shire*, in the *Transactions of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* in 1885, says,

"...the ornamental trees around Castle Leod are finely grown, but there are, in addition to these, many younger specimens of rare plants, hardly large enough yet to have special mention in our limited space. With careful management and selection, quite a good pinetum might be established here; in fact, there is already the nucleus of a very nice one."

He goes on to discuss some of the introduced species (including *Abies*, *Acer*, *Cedrus*, *Cupressus*, *Sequoiadendron giganteum* and *Sequoia sempervirens*) and how they have fared, since planting; mention is also made of a champion "*Laburnum of the Scotch variety*", an extraordinary occurrence at this latitude; the tree now long since deceased.

Clearly there is a long established and recognised history of tree cultivation at Castle Leod that has played an important role in our understanding of tree growth patterns and plant hardiness in the northern Scottish climate. The landscape and climate at Castle Leod has proven to be very hospitable to the growth of a broad range of exotic conifers, it is a site that lends itself to inclusion and participation in twenty-first century tree conservation. The current landscape has changed little since the mid 1800's, a period in which significant landscape re-development took place; including the creation of the existing woodlands that remain today and the introduction of many of the exotic trees; building on the history of tree planting for ornament that had taken place in the preceding centuries.

The grounds of Castle Leod extent of some 53 hectares and exhibit many of the elements one expects to find in a designed landscape associated with a property of this age and history. Much of the historic landscape is now publicly accessible, partly due to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, but largely as a continuation of the free access encouraged by the estate, particularly following the creation of the 19th century footpath network. The current Laird was chair of the Letterewe Accord that gave rise to the Land Reform Act and was a member of the National Access Forum that provided much of the detail. Specific access to the castle's private gardens and arboretum is currently by appointment.

The most important of the trees at Castle Leod is perhaps the Spanish or Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) planted in 1556 for Mary Queen of Scot's mother, Mary of Guise, even now it is in rude health and despite the obvious ravages of time and extreme weather retains a healthy vigorous and full canopy.

The Giant Sequoias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) on the north side of the castle are quite special; the one on the left of the north drive (as one departs the estate) is the largest tree in Britain in terms of bulk and is very likely the largest in the world at its latitude. Both it and the Chestnut are well known and are included in the book *'Heritage Trees of Scotland'* (Roger et al 2006). A number of trees are known to be registered with the Tree Register of the British Isles as UK, Scottish, or County champions; in the course of recording individual trees during our visit several potential new champions and other notable trees were recorded.



1556 Sweet Chestnut.



Champion Sequoiadendron behind castle.

The management plan identified a need to look at the tree population in more detail with a view to conservation of the many veteran trees and to address tree related hazard and risk assessment generally; we returned to undertake a detailed tree survey in the early summer of 2014. It is not often that when recording notable trees one would leave out beech that failed to reach 1m in diameter or over 30m in height on the basis that they were simply too small when compared to the many that were larger! In a similar vein when deciding which of the exotic conifers to include' big Douglas (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and noble fir (*Abies procera*) were mostly restricted to trees over 35m unless they had a significant girth. Getting access to measure trees was very challenging, forty or so years of little maintenance coupled with the aggressive deer control on the neighbouring property has resulted in a dense undergrowth of young ash and sycamore that is almost impenetrable; the tree assessment took a touch of the David Douglas fantasy for a while. We were smartly brought back to earth each evening on the return to our accommodation, (the Bay Highland Hotel) at Strathpeffer which we were sharing with the 'veteran' participants of off-season bus tours, another kind of adventure in itself!

One unusual tree veteran, a Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*) overhangs the cricket outfield has certainly been recognised as defective for some time; many years ago a steel chain-based support system was introduced to the tree's canopy to prevent large limb loss. This has been fulfilled the intention to date however the chain is now damaging the tree's timber and other defects have developed on which the chain system has no effect. Nevertheless the tree has certainly been seen as important, at least aesthetically, for several decades and the systems introduced to try and retain it are a unique example of arboricultural history in themselves.





Ancient Sweet Chestnut ca. 16th Century.

Although the Mary of Guise chestnut takes pride of place amongst the broadleaved trees the title is a close run race, the estate is home to tens of other sweet chestnuts of similar age, some notable oak and sycamore, and multitude of veteran beech and common lime. More unusually is a pair of very impressive Wych elm (*Ulmus glabra*) north of the old kennels, with a veteran field maple (*Acer campestre*) of some girth beneath each; a superb veteran ash close to the shinty field; various recording breaking Turkish maples (*Acer cappadocicum*) to the north and west of the castle and of particular note is the layering common lime (*Tilia x europaea*) immediately to the east of the castle. Already described is the pair of redwoods to the rear of the castle and the profusion of Douglas and noble fir; in addition there are so many other notable conifers.

Castle Leod is perhaps one of Scotland's less well known and visited tree collections on account of its location' a real hidden jewel that requires a modern adventure to enjoy.

Contact Clan MacKenzie at www.castleleod.org.uk

