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NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND DOUBLES ITS LAND AT DRUM TO RESTORE ANCIENT TREE LANDSCAPE

The National Trust for Scotland has completed the purchase of two parcels of land around the Drum Estate, near Banchory, Aberdeenshire to help enhance and expand the ancient tree population at Old Wood of Drum, one of the finest sites in Scotland for ancient oak woodland.

In 2022, two areas of land surrounding Drum Castle, totalling a combined 50 hectares of woodland, became available for sale by two separate landowners and the Trust was successful in acquiring both. The conservation charity's existing area of ancient wood pasture at Old Wood of Drum was approximately 45 hectares so this presented an opportunity to double this nationally important site and provide a secure future for this important population of ancient trees.

The Trust manages its places with the intention to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural features of the land for the benefit of visitors and wildlife. The charity's team in Aberdeenshire is now working to improve the ecology of the new landholdings for the long term and create more connectivity between nature on the estate.

The larger of the two pieces of land was a commercial crop of trees, mostly comprising Scots pine, Norway spruce, and Sitka spruce. These were felled and the land is now regenerating with a mix of non-native conifers, Scots pine, and native broadleaves such as birch, rowan, alder, aspen, and willow. Management will favour the native trees best suited to the ground conditions and new planting of Oak trees to create the ancient trees of the future. Invasive non-native conifers and *Rhododendron ponticum*, which choke out Scotland's natural wildlife, will also be removed to enable nature to thrive.

While wood pasture restoration is a centuries-long process that ultimately ends in the creation of ancient trees, the Trust's immediate priorities are to conduct habitat monitoring, control the population of invasive non-native species, increase the stock of young oak trees, engage local school groups, and increase voluntary participation supporting this ongoing work.

In time, oak trees will thrive across the land and be managed to recreate a wood pasture system. Management techniques, which could include woodland grazing and selective thinning, will be developed to support the establishment of future ancient trees over a long period of time and the landscape will be opened for public enjoyment.

The land also has the remnants of the estate's original tree-lined, entrance driveway leading toward Drum Castle. Now degraded, the Trust intends to reinstate this feature along with Robbie Rossie's Loch, which could be restored as valuable wetland habitat.

Philp Long, Chief Executive of the National Trust for Scotland, said: "The Old Wood of Drum is one of the few surviving medieval wood pastures and best collections of ancient trees in Scotland, and is an excellent example of the nature we care for within the Trust. The acquisition of this new woodland aligns with our Plan for Nature, a strategy that drives our contribution to Scotland's climate and biodiversity targets and underpins our nature conservation priorities and projects for years to come. Woodland restoration features heavily in the Plan for Nature and wood pasture is one of the Trust's priority habitats. At the Old Wood of Drum, we will deliver positive impacts for nature and for people.

"There are many complexities in delivering the long-term outcomes of woodland and wood pasture restoration, but a phased approach will safeguard the current landscape and continue its development. Our stewardship of this land will be in the public interest and is possible thanks to our dedicated staff and volunteers who deliver practical habitat, species, footpath, and cultural site management, as well as provide visitor facilities and support services, environmental education, and interpretation."

Chris Wardle, the Trust's Gardens and Designed Landscapes Manager in the North East, said: "Currently, there is very little established natural regeneration of oak within Old Wood of Drum, due in part to browsing pressure and in part to the lack of sufficient light where the seedlings have germinated. We have an ambition for the next 100-200 years to regenerate the wood pasture system across our land holdings, creating future ancient and veteran trees, particularly the ancient oaks that are such a historic feature of Drum. If we don't start a new cohort of oak saplings now, there will be no ancient oak trees here in the future and the habitat will be lost.

"There is a lot of work to be done to transform the area but there is a huge amount of potential. The current designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest is a great resource and will act as a feeder for the biodiversity plans for the whole site. We plan to unlock a landscape-scale ecological restoration, developing a larger and more accessible landscape of ancient and newly developing woodland and wood pasture for the benefit of nature and visitors.

"Crucially, our intention is also to ensure the Old Wood of Drum thrives for the community because we understand through discussions with the local people that public access to natural green space is important. Sensitive stewardship will allow improved access for all, including schools, nature groups, and the public, providing access to natural environments. Activity will support education and a focus on wellbeing that shines a light on nature, heritage, and sustainability.

"It is with thanks to our members and supporters who enabled this important acquisition through their continuing support of the Trust, and are vital in the endeavour to take more nature into our care. This is a special place loved by many, and we know the protection of this woodland is deeply important to local people especially. We hope that our actions will preserve it for many generations to come."

Philip Long added: "With the forthcoming Scottish elections in mind, we'd like to offer the Old Wood of Drum as an inspiration to all political parties.

"We understand from polling our members that there is a strong desire to restore nature and provide access to natural green spaces across Scotland. With this in mind, we believe it's important to transition public forestry subsidies away from commercial plantations of non-native trees, which damage Scotland's nature, and towards encouraging natural regeneration of native woodlands, planting new native woodlands, and restoring our ancient woodlands. This will help reverse the loss of nature in Scotland and improve access to nature for communities across Scotland."

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Images: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/4354QsR452>

About the National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.