

Tyn y Groes ‘the forester’s story’ audio trail *Script*

Welcome to this audio trail which includes an interview with a forester in the days of the Forestry Commission, the body that used to look after Coed y Brenin before Natural Resources Wales was formed.

Track 1: If you go down in the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise.

Have you heard the one about the forester who didn't want to cut down trees? Listen on, as it appears that something strange happens to the people who manage this 40-hectare woodland block in Coed y Brenin Forest park.

Ever since the majestic Douglas-firs, which stand proudly in front of you, were planted here in the 1920's, Forestry Commission staff have been making curious decisions that have been frowned upon by their peers – but ultimately have brought pleasure and opportunity to millions of people.

Over the course of the next 45 minutes, you will also hear the tale of flying trees, plus the forester who wanted people to walk in their woods. That may sound strange today, but back in the 1960's this was no place for the likes of you!

But let's start with the Scottish plant collector who lent his name to the tall coniferous trees on the route ahead. David Douglas scoured North America looking for plants and it is believed he introduced nearly 250 plant species into Britain that ultimately transformed our landscape and the timber industry. However, aged just 35 years old and whilst climbing a volcano in Hawaii he would have a rather unsavoury and premature death:

“Unfortunately, poor old David was killed. He was a young chap and he inadvertently fell into a bull trap. The locals had a big pit, and straw on top of it, and he unfortunately fell in and there was a bull in there and he was gorged to death. A horrible story.” [laughs]

Now follow the yellow waymarkers and look out for the next MP3 post on the trail

[2 mins]

Track 2: Sit back and relax, you're in good company

“Douglas-fir is a valuable timber, is a valuable forest tree, and the size of the trees we have got here, and the straightness of them, if you look up at them, if you lie on your back and look up at the trees, you will see they are very, very straight. And they are ideal for making ships masts and this was one of the traditional uses of Douglas-fir. It's a lovely red colour; it's quite durable as a timber outside and could be used for cladding houses in the future, as a sustainable supply of timber.”

So go on, take the weight off your feet and jump on the 'forest recliner'. From this position you can really admire the forest canopy.

It's a shame these trees can't talk though, as I am sure they would have a few tales to tell. However, we are lucky to have local Forester, Aled Thomas, share his own stories about this forest. Enjoy the sights and sounds of the Afon Eden River as you follow the trail toward the King, the Champion and post number 3.

[1 min 20 secs]

Track 3: The King, the champion and the young pretenders

Directly in front of you stands the 'king', believed to contain the greatest volume of wood here. Just a few yards to your left is the 'champion': this one proclaims to be the tallest tree in this forest. Yet neither can rest on their laurels as the conditions here make for an ideal growing environment as Aled Thomas reveals...

"Because of the precipitation and the warmth of this little micro-climate we have got in this little valley - the Mawddach valley - they have actually grown well. Because of the dampness - you know you can get up to about 100 inches of rain on this forest - and if you look at the moss layer that is underneath here, it is a great medium for seeds. The soil we have got here is quite a nice brown earth, very fertile, and the young trees you see here are Douglas-fir, so they are actually regenerating themselves very naturally. Now as foresters we are helping this process by cutting trees that shade out a lot of the light from the forest floor. Because we are in the northern hemisphere it is the side light that is more important than the down light, so we identify trees that cast shade onto the forest floor. We will then cut a little group and this will then allow sunlight to fall onto the forest floor, to allow the seedlings to shoot off to the light; that includes the broadleaves as well. So we will, in 2-300 years, have a nice mixture of Douglas-fir; and Oak; and Birch woodland here."

At approximately 50 metres tall, these 'babies' have a long way to go to be on par with their North American cousins - 600-year-old Douglas-firs have been recorded up to 120 metres tall!

The All-ability trail ends at this point. You may either return to the car park via the way you came, or continue along the main trail, following the yellow waymarkers, towards the 'Champion'. This path has short sections of steeper slopes but remains wide, with no steps or stiles.

At stop 4 you'll hear about the man who wanted to share his trees with the visiting world.

[2 mins 15 secs]

Track 4: Get off my land

Before the 1960's, the seasoned forester could happily go about his work cutting down trees and use his trusty horse to extract the valuable timber. The thought of normal folk trampling through pristinely managed woods would have sent shivers down many a spine. And no doubt when an earlier Forester, Reg Wheeler, set out this vision, many of his colleagues must have thought the long, lonely hours had got to him.

“They saw forests as basically productive areas for trees and not for recreation purposes. Reg saw an opportunity to open up the forest and if you look as you walk along the present route. Just look for little footprints on the trees; they are in white and these were the original footpaths that Reg put together, and that people have enjoyed for years and years.”

But had it not been for another equally forward-thinking forester then we may not have been enjoying these magnificent, tall trees today. During the 1970's these trees were scheduled to be clear felled, maximising their economic value...

“But the district forester here at the time, and also the national park and a lot of the public liked the cathedral affect of these large trees here. And between them all the trees were saved and they weren't felled as part of the normal forestry production. And this has been saved for us now to manage and these will be managed from now on by, what we call, a non-clear fell system where we will be taking out a small percentage of the volume every year that is sustainable and that will be sustainable for perpetuity.”

So when the trees are cut down, what is the best way to get them out? Find out further along the trail at stop 5

[2 mins 10 secs]

Track 5: The skyline - health and safety isn't what it is now

“As a young forest worker I remember being told to come to this site and to fell trees here, for what we call the skyline. Basically, it's a static wire that's elevated at about 15 metres high, and by different pulleys and mechanisms it will extract timber. This is an old system, but has gone out of favour because it is quite expensive. But on this particular site, the public road is in front of you, the skyline was situated on the bottom side of the council road and the timber was on the top side of the council road. And in the 70's health and safety was what it is now and the foresters, and us, would fell trees without much appreciation for cars passing and we would extract timber. And there is this story of a timber, which was two to three metres, that's two to three tons, being dragged across the road and a car stopping within inches of it. Ok, nobody was hurt, thank goodness, but it has allowed us to be able to thin this crop and have it in this cathedral state that you see now. But yeah, it was quite fun then.” [laughs]

The trail now heads back towards the car park along the side of the tarmac road. Keep a watch for traffic as you head towards the next stop.

[1 min 50 secs]

Track 6: A forest fit for a King

As you can see on the inscription, this stone commemorates King George the fifth silver jubilee, but why place it here on a quiet lane in Coed y Brenin?

The answer lies in the forest's name.

Originally, this forest was part of the Nannau Estate, which dates back to the 12th century. When the male bloodline ran dry the female line, which had married into the powerful, influential and royalist Vaughan family, took over, and the area became known as "Vaughan Forest". In the early 20th Century the Forestry Commission purchased the 9000-hectare woodland and in 1935, the whole forest was renamed Coed y Brenin - The King's Forest - to celebrate the jubilee. The stone was laid here as it leads to the Vaughan's family church in the village of Llanfachreth, then onwards to the Nannau estate house.

So it is thanks to not only the Vaughan Family for managing this forest but equally the visionary foresters who have played their part in raising the impressive 'King's Guards'.

"You know, we have had a couple of crazy foresters here, one that didn't want trees felled and another that wanted to introduce recreation into the forest and lately, in the early nineties, we had Dafydd Davis who wanted to introduce mountain bikers - goodness me, you know! But their visions have paid off, and now Coed y Brenin's one of the premier areas, especially for mountain biking. The Douglas-fir here is the largest area of Douglas-fir, of this age, in Britain and we use it as a education facility to show people how woodland can be managed properly to produce timber, recreation, conservation."

You can hear more about Coed y Brenin's rich history on four other trails in the Forest Park. The audio trails were funded by The Rock Trust, a Meirionnydd Based Charity, and they are all available to download free.

[2mins 20 secs]



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