



Scottish
Forestry
Coilltearachd
na h-Alba

Integrating Trees Network

The Dobie Family, Abbey St Bathans,
Scottish Borders



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Scottish Forestry is the Scottish Government agency responsible for forestry policy, support and regulation
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taic agus riaghladh do choilltearachd*

The Dobie Family, Abbey St Bathans

The Dobie family farm has passed down through the generations for over 250 years.

James, Joy and their son, Gillon, manage the upland sheep farm as tenants, while James' brother William owns the land, manages the woodlands and runs the on-site sawmill.

The farm maintains a flock of around 2500 Suffolk Cross ewes across approximately 600 hectares of land in the Whiteadder valley.



The seed of an idea

The estate already had a range of established productive and native woodland, including ancient woodland. James had previously planted a small amount of woodland through forestry grant schemes, but it was Gillon who triggered this new project.

Gillon's interest in trees was driven by biodiversity, looking for future opportunities for marketing and environmental benefits – drawing on lessons from his previous work at a vertical farm. He made the case to James that planting in-field woodlands would create new pockets of woodland habitat across the farm.

James saw another opportunity. "I was not going to plant trees in the middle of a field unless I thought it was going to benefit the production of our sheep flock," he explains. "If you put shelter and shade in a field and make it accessible to the sheep from all points of the compass, I would go along with it."

As the landowner, William was happy for them to pursue the plan but asked for there to be a commercial aspect. Otherwise, William left them to it.

From there, they created a project that works for all of them, resulting in nine woodland creation sites totalling 19.5 hectares and mainly consisting of broadleaves, placed within grazing fields.



"William came from his angle, I came from my angle, and Gillon came from his."

James Dobie

A living barn

James describes the trees as a "living barn." With their unique design, sheep can escape severe weather from any direction, which he hopes will reduce lamb mortality.

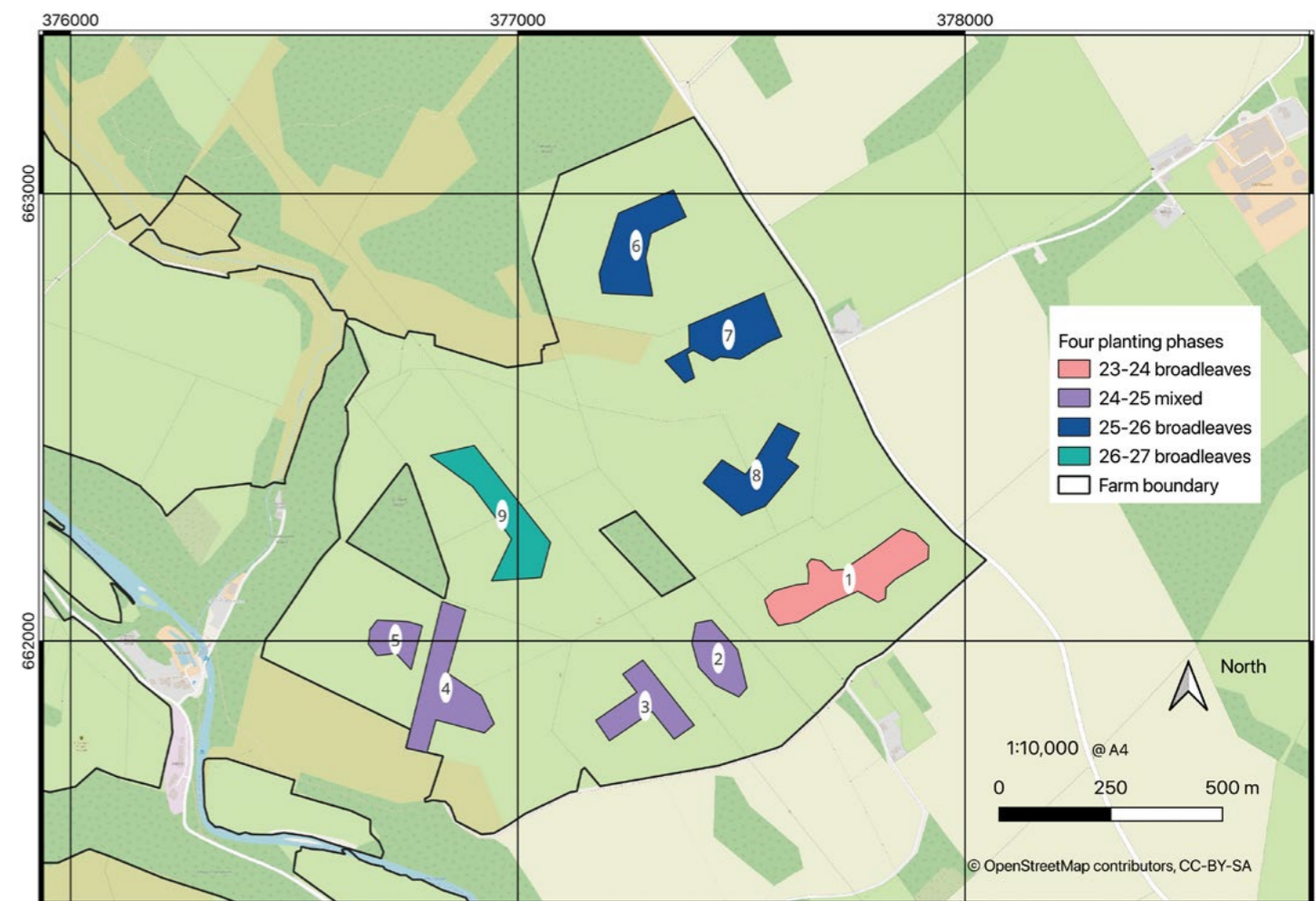
The woodlands have been designed with multiple access points leading to wide rides (cleared pathways through the woodland) that sheep can move through easily. Rather than straight lines, the Dobies created shaped edges to form pockets of shelter.

In time, livestock will have the opportunity to browse within the woodland. The farm is cobalt deficient, and goat willow has been included, which is naturally high in this mineral, contributing to flock health.

"It's amazing that you can round a corner into a woodland and the air's still, everything's peaceful, but you go back around the corner and you're in gale force winds."

James Dobie

Map of woodland creation sites



Map of the nine woodland creation sites totalling 19.5 hectares, using the Small or Farm Woodland and Broadleaves FGS options. These options meet the farm's productivity, biodiversity and commercial timber objectives, helping to future proof the business. Credit: Stephen Adlard.

From plan to planting

James enlisted the help of Stephen Adlard, an independent Woodland Consultant, to turn the plan into reality. They walked the fields together and marked out the woodlands boundaries, then chose the most suitable Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) option.

“It’s part of our normal farming year, doing some fencing. It just happens to be around woods rather than around sheep fields.”

James Dobie

“The stroke of good fortune was to get the services of Stephen,” James says. Stephen navigated the FGS application process and brought the knowledge and expertise that the Dobies were needing. He ensured the correct species were selected from appropriate seed sources, organised planting, and oversaw maintenance.

The Dobies were hands-on too. They invested in fencing equipment and carried out this work themselves. Due to the design – which required substantial fencing – being able to make that saving has made the project financially viable. As a large sheep farm, they could justify the investment in fencing equipment even without the woodland creation.

The Forestry Grant Scheme

The Dobies used a combination of the Small or Farm Woodland and Broadleaves FGS options, and also use the Small Woodland Loan Scheme.

The Small or Farm Woodland FGS option was particularly well suited to their objectives as it includes a mix of conifers and broadleaves with a productive element. However, it is limited to 10 hectares, which they soon reached.

James noted that one of the advantages of planting trees in Scotland is that you retain your basic payment for the duration of the FGS contract.

Timeline

It took about a year from the initial idea to getting trees in the ground. The Dobies planted the first phase in 2023, which is establishing well. They have just planted the third phase, with a fourth and final phase planned for late 2026.

James is looking forward to seeing the trees grow. “It all looks a bit bare at the moment but it’s going to change the whole landscape of the farm,” he says. He sees no reason why the project won’t achieve all its objectives with active management.

“The design meets all of our objectives, biodiversity, shelter and shade and productive timber.”

James Dobie



Challenges

There have been some challenges along the way:

- for the second phase, the rabbit netting was not fitted at the correct height and additional netting had to be added
- at one point there was some damage from hares
- planting for the second phase coincided with a dry summer and some areas were impacted by drought meaning trees had to be replaced.

Deer have not been a major concern – only one was seen to have entered, in the only new woodland connected to existing woodland.

James notes that deer tend to avoid entering fields with sheep, so having woodlands surrounded by grazing helps protect the young trees.

“Trees are like any other crop, there’s always a risk.”

James Dobie



Key messages



Know why you’re planting

Consider your objectives from different perspectives – production, biodiversity, and commercial. The Dobies found a design that worked for all three.



Get a good, practical consultant to help

A knowledgeable consultant can navigate grant applications, select appropriate species and seed sources, and ensure the work is carried out correctly.



It’s a rewarding experience

Challenges will arise, but with active management the results are worth it.

Find out more

For more information about the Integrating Trees Network and forestry grants in Scotland, visit the Scottish Forestry website:

forestry.gov.scot





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