

Forestry Act 1919: 100 Years

Introduction

On 19 August 2019, 100 years will have passed since the Forestry Act 1919 received royal assent. The Act established the Forestry Commission following concerns about the condition of woodland and forests in the UK. The Act gave the commission wide powers to:

- acquire and plant land;
- promote timber supply and forest industries;
- undertake education and research;
- make grants; and
- give advice to woodland owners.¹

Today, UK woodland coverage is estimated to be 3.17 million hectares. In 2017/18, 9,000 hectares of new woodland were created, with conifers accounting for over one half (56%) of this area. England's forest cover is now double what it had been in 1919 and forestry is estimated to have contributed £339 million to the economy in 2018.²

This House of Lords Library Briefing provides background information on the rationale for the Forestry Act 1919. It then considers more recent government policy relating to forestry, before providing a summary of current arrangements across the UK and events planned to mark the centenary.

Background to the Centenary

Impetus for the Forestry Act 1919

The UK had no significant state forest policy before 1919, although concerns had been raised about the size of the UK's forests.³ J R Aldhous, a former Head of the Silviculture Division at the Forestry Commission, has summarised the UK's approach to forestry up until this date as follows:

Previous action in relation to woodland had been taken ad hoc in response to specific problems arising in relation to the Crown forests or to the provision of oak for naval purposes. When this requirement petered out, the country reverted to a laissez faire policy encouraged by a vista of apparently infinite cheap imports from overseas.⁴

The UK's forests had been in decline since the Middle Ages, but demand for timber during the First World War meant forest cover had reached a new low by the end of the conflict.⁵ In addition to depleting domestic stocks, the need for timber during this period had also highlighted the strategic risks associated with a heavy reliance on timber imports.⁶

In response to these issues, in July 1916 the Government appointed a committee to examine “the best means of conserving and developing the woodland and forestry resources of the United Kingdom, having regard to the experience gained during the war”.⁷ Chaired by Francis Acland, Liberal MP for Camborne, the committee published its final report in 1918. In it, the committee urged the creation of a “Forest Authority equipped with funds and powers to survey, purchase, lease and plant land and generally to administer the areas acquired, with compulsory powers to be exercised, when needed, after due enquiry and the award of fair compensation”.⁸

Forestry Bill: Parliamentary Consideration

Following the Acland Report, the Government set up an interim Forest Authority in 1918 and on 24 June 1919 introduced a Forestry Bill providing for the creation of a statutory Forestry Commission.⁹

The Earl of Crawford, the Lord Privy Seal, spoke on behalf of the Government in support of the bill in the House of Lords. He noted that the “case for an active afforestation policy in this country is generally conceded”.¹⁰ He continued:

During the last 25 years numerous inquiries have been held into the subject, not to discuss the necessity, but to discuss the best methods to adopt. Little or nothing has been achieved, and the position in this country gives grave cause for apprehension. Many of your Lordships are aware that only one other country in Europe is so sparsely wooded as Great Britain. Only 4% of our area is under timber, whereas in Belgium 17% is wooded, in France 18%, in Germany 25%. Portugal alone has a smaller area than ourselves. Moreover, the woods we possess yield only about one-third per acre of that harvested in countries where silvicultural science is developed, so that in contrast with other countries we have insignificant areas under forest.¹¹

Lord Crawford called the report of the Acland committee a “very remarkable document”, noting that it had been agreed unanimously, before making the case for the creation of the Forestry Commission. After passing through both Houses, the bill received royal assent on 19 August 1919—just under two months after having been introduced.¹²

The Act came into force on 1 September 1919, and the first commissioners of the new Forestry Commission were formally appointed two months later.¹³ The first Forestry Commission trees, a combination of beech and larch, were planted in Eggesford, Devon, before Christmas 1919.¹⁴

Subsequent Legislation

The Forestry Act 1919, as amended, was repealed and replaced in 1967.¹⁵ The Forestry Act 1967, as amended, remains the key statute relating to forestry in England and Wales.¹⁶ In Scotland, the Forestry and Land Management (Scotland) Act 2018 provided for the transfer of forestry functions to Scottish Ministers. The Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 governs forestry policy in Northern Ireland.

Forestry Commission: Recent Developments

Government Proposals for Reform

In October 2010, the Coalition Government wrote to MPs outlining its intention to “fundamentally reform the public forestry estate, with diminishing public ownership and a greater role for private and

civil society partners”.¹⁷ It proposed clauses in the Public Bodies Bill 2010 relating to reform of the Forestry Commission, but early in 2011 announced that these would be removed following widespread criticism of the plans—including from NGOs such as the Woodland Trust, which expressed concern at the potential environmental implications of the reforms.¹⁸ At the same time, Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, announced that an independent panel would examine forestry policy in England.

The Independent Panel on Forestry—chaired by the then Bishop of Liverpool, a Member of the House at the time—reported in July 2012. It recommended that the public forest estate “should remain in public ownership, and be defined in statute as land held in trust for the nation”.¹⁹ The report also made other suggestions, including around public access and forestry’s role in the green economy.

The Government responded to the panel’s report in January 2013.²⁰ In a foreword to the response, Owen Paterson, by then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, stated that England’s public forest estate would “remain secured in public ownership”.²¹

At the 2017 general election, the Conservative Party undertook in its manifesto to “continue to ensure that public forests and woodland are kept in trust for the nation”.²² It also committed a Conservative Government to providing “stronger protections for our ancient woodland” and to planting 11 million trees across the country.²³ In February 2019, the Government revealed in response to a written parliamentary question that it was confident the latter commitment was on track to be met, noting that “over three million trees [had been] planted in this Parliament to date”.²⁴

Current Arrangements and Statistics

Today, forestry is a fully devolved matter. In Northern Ireland, the Forest Service was established as an agency on 1 April 1998 and leads on forestry matters.²⁵ In 2013, Natural Resources Wales took over most of the Forestry Commission’s functions in Wales.²⁶ On 1 April 2019, formal responsibility for Scotland’s forests transferred from the Forestry Commission to the Scottish Government.²⁷

In England, the Forestry Commission (Forestry Commission England) is currently chaired by Sir Harry Studholme.²⁸ It describes itself as the largest single provider of outdoor recreation in England.²⁹ The Forestry Commission England is also the country’s largest landowner, managing 250,000 hectares and maintaining over 3,000 kilometres of waymarked walks and mountain-biking trails. In addition, the commission has noted that England’s forest cover is now double what it had been in 1919 and that forestry contributed an estimated £339 million to the economy in 2018.³⁰

Forest Research, which describes itself as Great Britain’s principal organisation for forestry and tree-related research, provides statistics on UK-wide forestry.³¹ Its most recent release, published in September 2018, noted that:

- the area of woodland in the UK at 31 March 2018 was estimated to be 3.17 million hectares. This represented 13% of the total land area in the UK, 10% in England, 15% in Wales, 19% in Scotland and 8% in Northern Ireland;
- of the total UK woodland area, 0.86 million hectares (27%) was owned or managed by the Forestry Commission (in England and Scotland), Natural Resources Wales (in Wales) or the Forest Service (in Northern Ireland); and
- 9,000 hectares of new woodland were created in the UK in 2017/18, with conifers accounting for over one half (56%) of this area.³²

Centenary Programme of Events

As part of a Forestry England programme of events to mark the centenary of the Forestry Act 1919, Carol Ann Duffy authored a poem as poet laureate entitled ‘Forest’.³³ In addition, Rachel Whiteread, a Turner Prize-winning artist, has created a sculpture entitled ‘Nissen Hut’ as a “permanent tribute to the lasting impact of the First World War on the British landscape”.³⁴ Other events, including surveys of forest wildlife and running events, are scheduled to take place throughout the year. In Scotland, Scottish Forestry, established in April 2019, will shortly be launching a website to mark the centenary.³⁵

¹ Jan-Willem Oosthoek, *The Logic of British Forest Policy: 1919–70*, Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics, May 2000, p 2; and JR Aldhous, ‘British Forestry: 70 Years of Achievement’, *Forestry*, 1997, vol 70 no 4, p 286.

² Forestry Commission, *Forestry Statistics 2018*, 27 September 2018, p 3.

³ JR Aldhous, ‘British Forestry: 70 Years of Achievement’, *Forestry*, 1997, vol 70 no 4, p 286.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Forestry Commission, ‘100 Years of Forestry’, *London Gazette*, accessed 29 April 2019.

⁶ JR Aldhous, ‘British Forestry: 70 Years of Achievement’, *Forestry*, 1997, vol 70 no 4, p 286.

⁷ Ministry of Reconstruction, *Reconstruction Committee: Forestry Sub-committee—Final Report*, 1918, Cd 8881, p 425.

⁸ *ibid.*, p 427.

⁹ JR Aldhous, ‘British Forestry: 70 Years of Achievement’, *Forestry*, 1997, vol 70 no 4, p 286.

¹⁰ *HL Hansard*, 7 July 1919, col 221.

¹¹ *ibid.*, col 222.

¹² *HL Hansard*, 19 August 1919, col 1051.

¹³ Forestry Act 1919; and *London Gazette*, ‘2 December 1919’, p 14920.

¹⁴ Forestry Commission, ‘100 Years of Forestry’, *London Gazette*, accessed 29 April 2019; Forestry England, ‘100 Years’, accessed 29 April 2019; and BBC News, ‘Eggesford Forest Commemorated 100 Years After Planting’, 16 May 2019.

¹⁵ See Plant Health Act 1967 and Forestry Act 1967.

¹⁶ Daniel Greenberg, ‘Insight: Forestry’, *Westlaw* (£), 19 October 2018.

¹⁷ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘Forestry in England: A New Strategic Approach’, 29 October 2010.

¹⁸ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘The Future of Forestry in England’, 17 February 2011. See also, House of Commons Library, *The Forestry Commission and the Sale of Public Forests in England*, 28 November 2014, pp 12–16.

¹⁹ Independent Panel on Forestry, *Independent Panel on Forestry: Final Report*, 2012, p 9.

²⁰ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement*, January 2013.

²¹ *ibid.*, p 2.

²² Conservative Party, *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2017*, 18 May 2017, p 26.

²³ *ibid.*, pp 25–6.

²⁴ House of Commons, ‘Written Question: Tree Planting’, 7 February 2019, 216358. See also House of Commons, ‘Written Question: Tree Planting’, 14 May 2019, 252670.

²⁵ Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, ‘Forest Service’, accessed 29 April 2019.

²⁶ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ‘Three New Appointments to Forestry Commission’, 1 April 2019.

²⁷ Forestry Commission England/Central Services, *Annual Report and Accounts 2017–18*, 21 June 2018, HC 1066 of session 2017–19, p 2.

²⁸ Forestry Commission, ‘Chair: Sir Harry Studholme’, accessed 29 April 2019.

²⁹ Forestry England, ‘100 Years: Timeline’, accessed 29 April 2019.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Forest Research, ‘About Forest Research’, accessed 29 April 2019.

³² Forestry Commission, *Forestry Statistics 2018*, 27 September 2018, p 3.

³³ Forestry England, ‘Forest by Carol Ann Duffy’, accessed 29 April 2019. See also Helen Briggs, ‘Paying Tribute to the Nation’s Forests’, BBC News, 14 February 2019.

³⁴ Forestry England, ‘Nissen Hut’, accessed 29 April 2019.

³⁵ Scottish Forestry, ‘Celebrating 100 Years of Public Forestry in Scotland’, accessed 29 April 2019.

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