

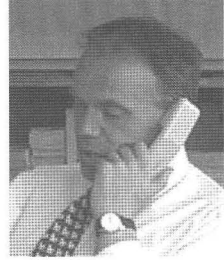
Obituaries

John McGhie

1957 – 2005

John McGhie, who died far too young in March 2005, was a consummate forester and environmentalist, and good friend to many of us.

The fact that he had somewhat dubious tastes in both music and football has already been chronicled by Rab McNeill in his tribute in the Scotsman, and so I will not dwell on these. The first time I knowingly met John was in Aberdeen in 1976, when co-incidentally the worst excesses of progressive rock were starting to give way to new wave and punk. We were both freshers embarking on a route that was designed to lead to a degree in forestry. I say that this is the first time I knowingly met John, because when we started to compare notes over our studies in the St Machar, the Kirkgate or the Dungeon it transpired that his mother used to babysit me. Even as a first year student John challenged the accepted norms, a practice that became a hallmark of his professional career. Unfortunately he was defeated in these early challenges and found that in order to progress towards a degree he really ought to have spent more time in establishments more directly linked to academic life at the university than those mentioned above.



He did not return to Aberdeen for a second year, but went to seek his fortune in the real world. His tales of the characters he got involved with as a forester in the new town of Livingston in West Lothian, or planting up the Flow Country in Sutherland with Fountain Forestry did not make it any easier to define the real world. After a year or two out he resumed his forestry studies at Newton Rigg where he fell in with a particularly dubious crowd from Northern Ireland, most of whom are now senior managers in the Forest Service. I recall visiting John, Susan and newly arrived daughter Mhaire in Thetford in May 1982 where he was working for the Forestry Commission as part of his sandwich year. The Falklands War was in full swing and the amount of red, white and blue bunting in that part of England would have done Sandy Row proud in July. Working in that pine-dominated forest, John confessed that he was missing Sitka spruce.

His Thetford experiences may have contributed to his decision to accept a post with the Forest Service in 1983. He started work in Antrim District as an Assistant Forester, moving to Belvoir in 1986 where he took over from John Gault and won temporary promotion to Head Forester, before resuming his substantive grade and moving to Trostan to assist Ian Wright-Turner. In 1987 he moved to Pomeroy to assist George Holbrook, where in 1992 after almost nine years of service he was promoted to Forest Officer III. The following year he finally got his degree, and not a BSc, a Masters in Environmental Management awarded with distinction by the

University of Ulster. In 1997 he was promoted again to Conservation Officer, followed rapidly with another promotion to Head of Environment Branch which morphed with re-organisation of the Service into Head of Forest Practice. Things had gone full circle with he and I working together again, only slightly older, but still staring into our pints contemplating the meaning of life. I sometimes wonder whether it was intimations of his own mortality that finally persuaded him to give up the chicken run from Parkanaur to Dundonald House and escape to the relative freedom of living and working on the island of Islay.

John leaves behind an important legacy in forestry in Northern Ireland. He can take much credit for the huge shift in emphasis that has brought environmental matters to be such a mainstream part of all our lives. He was here at the birth of forest certification and nursed it well in its early years. The good relations the Forest Service enjoys today with colleagues in the Environment and Heritage Service, and the community and voluntary sector are in many ways a tribute to John. His professional legacy on Islay must include the vastly improved relations between RSPB and landowners on the island. But the most important legacy he leaves is happy memories for many of us. Sue, Mhaire and Roy the thoughts of the Forest Service are with you at the loss of a husband and father, and to misquote Christy Moore, an extraordinary man.

*It's coming yet for a' that,
That man to man, the world o'er,
Shall brithers be for a' that*

Robert Burns

Pat Hunter Blair