

Flatt Farm, Newcastleton Woodland Creation Landscape & Policy Context Report



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Flatt Farm, Newcastleton Landscape and Policy Context Report

Introduction

This report was commissioned by EJD Forestry Ltd to undertake a landscape and policy context assessment for the site of a proposed Woodland Creation scheme at Flatt Farm near Newcastleton in the Scottish Borders. In particular, a question has been raised concerning the status of the site in terms of the Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy (SBWS) and therefore its suitability for woodland creation and this report is intended to consider that issue. N.B. This is not a report on the proposed woodland creation scheme itself but simply an assessment of the status of the site.

The report is based on a site visit carried out on the 19th September 2023 and desk-based assessment and previous knowledge of the area. The site weather conditions were cloudy but dry with fair visibility.

Location and Context – see Figure A below

The site occupies the lower slopes of Carby Hill which is a sub summit of the Blinkbonny Height on the north side of the Kershope Burn, a tributary of the Liddle Water which flows south and west to join the River Esk leading to the Solway Firth. At this location, the Kershope Burn forms part of the Scotland England border. The site is moderately sloping, flattening out towards the Liddle Water with 2 areas of flat haugh land adjoining the Liddle. The highest point of the site is at the road junction on Carby Hill at just over 160m AOD. The lowest point is around 95m AOD where the Kershope Burn meets the Liddle Water at Kershopefoot. The site area within the red line boundary is approximately 143ha. There are sections of existing woodland cover, mostly farm shelterbelts of various ages but the majority of the landcover is improved pasture with some rougher rushy pasture on the higher ground.

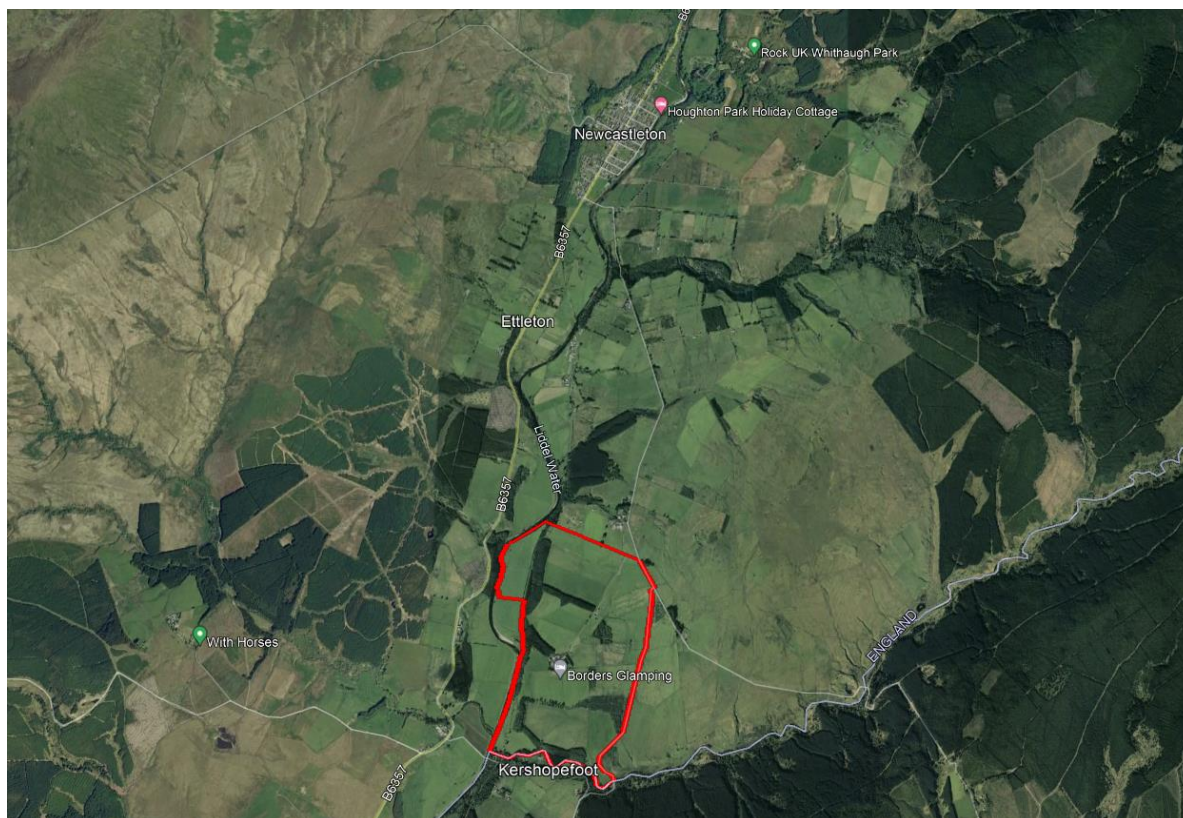


FIGURE A: SITE LOCATION

Landscape Character Assessment

One of the source documents for the Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy is the national landscape character assessment. When the SBWS was created in 2005, that was the Borders Landscape Assessment prepared by Ash Consulting in 1998 on behalf of Scottish Natural Heritage. That was succeeded by the 'Landscape Character Assessment – NatureScot 2019'

These assessments cover the whole of Scotland and define a series of landscape character areas which are described in a standard format. Each Landscape Character Type (LCT) can be considered to be broadly consistent within the described area although, of course, transitions normally occur around the boundaries. The NatureScot "Scottish Landscape Character Types Map and Descriptions" (2019) identifies that the study site lies predominantly within Landscape Character Type LCT 113: – Upland Valley with Pastoral Floor. However, the upper parts of the site are within the adjoining LCT 96: - Southern Uplands with Forest – Borders.

The citation for LCT 113 contains the following relevant descriptors:

The landscape is characterised by flat valley bottom pastures, strongly enclosed by steep valley sides merging with heather and forest covered uplands.

The following key characteristics are given:

- *Glaciated valleys with moderately to strongly sloping sides and flat floor modified by river bluffs and glacial moraine.*
- *Improved pastures with occasional small woodlands and tree lines on valley floors.*
- *Rough unimproved grazing, heather moorland or coniferous forest on valley sides.*
- *Scattered stone built villages with farmsteads and dwellings dispersed along river terraces, lower valley sides and tributary valleys.*
- *A simple, distinctive landscape strongly enclosed by uplands with intermittent long views along valley corridors.*

The section of the citation describing Landcover contains the following text in relation to tree and woodland cover:

*Land cover on the valley floor is predominantly improved permanent sheep grazing pasture divided into a regular pattern of small and medium sized fields by drystone dykes. Occasional patches of rushes, scrub and rough grassland are found on the wetter areas of the river floodplains. The valley sides are typically covered by a rough mosaic of unimproved hill grassland in large units, divided by fences or drystone dykes, interspersed with occasional screes. **In some areas the valley sides are covered by large coniferous plantations which often extend into the surrounding uplands.** Elsewhere tree cover consists mainly of scattered small mixed and broadleaf woodland blocks shelterbelts and hedgerow lines which contribute to visual enclosure and diversity. The river bluffs and tributary valleys commonly carry narrow strips of broadleaf woodland. Landscape and environmental sensitivity is recognised by a high number of natural heritage designations.*

The study site does generally fit within these broad descriptions. It is worth noting the statement (Highlighted in bold by the writer) regarding the presence of larger forest plantations within this LCT.

The citation for LCT 96 gives the following key characteristics:

- *Large scale rolling landform with higher dome or cone-shaped summits.*
- ***Dominant coniferous forest cover characterised by Sitka spruce plantations with occasional areas of pine and larch.***

- *Dispersed settlement pattern of farmsteads and forestry buildings, mainly within sheltered valleys.*
- *Scattered pockets of past land use from prehistoric to post-medieval times.*
- *Simple, uniform character.*
- *Strong sense of enclosure, quietness and tranquillity.*

LCT 96 covers a wide area mostly to the east of the study site but again the descriptors are appropriate to the area. The key characteristic highlighted by the writer again indicates the significance of conifer forest as a formative feature of this LCT.

Landscape and Forestry Policies

Landscape designation

The site does not lie within any designated landscape.

Forestry Policy

The relevant policy document for forestry is the Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy (2005) including Map 6 which details opportunities for larger scale woodland expansion in Upland / Upland Fringe Forests and Woodland (i.e. where forestry is the dominant land use). There is also further guidance in the associated Technical Advice Note (2012)

[Woodland strategy | Scottish Borders Council \(scotborders.gov.uk\)](http://scotborders.gov.uk/woodland-strategy)

[Appendix III map 6 | Scottish Borders Council \(scotborders.gov.uk\)](http://scotborders.gov.uk/appendix-iii-map-6)

[Technical advice note | Scottish Borders Council \(scotborders.gov.uk\)](http://scotborders.gov.uk/technical-advice-note)

These documents include guidance on the potentially suitable locations for new woodlands as follows:

Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy

Map 6 (Appendix C) Upland / Upland Fringe Forests and Woodlands indicates that a small section of the east side of the site area is classed as “Preferred” for woodland creation but the remainder and bulk of the site area is shown as white on the map i.e. it is unclassified. **This has raised a question regarding the suitability and status of the site.**

Technical Advice Note

The SBWS was updated in 2012 with the production of the Technical Advice Note which was intended to give further guidance as to what general issues should be addressed when woodland creation was being considered and also looking at specific issues on a sub regional basis. Pages 6 and 7 of the Technical Advice Note identify a series of general issues where new larger scale planting may become a dominant land use. Pages 17 and 18 detail ‘Priorities for Woodland Management and Expansion’ specifically related to the Cheviot Hills within which the study site is located.

Consideration of the Issues

Appendix 1a – Map 4 Landscape Classification Hierarchy on page 61 of the SBWS shows the map base that was used in the preparation of all the indicative maps in the strategy including Map 6 referred to above. This Map 4 indicates that the majority of the study site lies within landscape type 22 (Upland Valley with Pastoral Floor) a ‘River Valley Type’ (coloured yellow) but that a small section lies within landscape type 5 (Southern Uplands Type Forest Covered) an ‘Upland Type’ (coloured brown). These landscape types were taken directly from the original Landscape Assessment by Ash Consulting which was current at the time the strategy was prepared. Type 22 (Upland Valley with Pastoral Floor) exactly corresponds with LCT 113 in the updated 2019 assessment and similarly Type 5 (Southern Uplands Type Forest Covered) exactly corresponds with LCT 96 in the updated strategy.

The reason why Map 6 of the SBWS does not show a colour for most of the study site is because only the ‘Upland’ (brown) and ‘Upland Fringe’ (pink) areas on Map4 were selected for GIS mapping for the Upland/ Upland Fringe category – i.e. because most of the study site was located within a ‘River Valley’ type it was not shown.

Reference is also made to Appendix 1 of the SBWS on page 60 which explains the GIS parameters that were used to derive all the maps of the strategy. In keeping with Scottish Office Development Department Circular no 9/1999, all maps were intended to define proposed planting areas as either ‘Sensitive’, ‘Potential’ or ‘Preferred’. The definitions of these categories are given and the criteria for selection of sensitivity are explained. (N.B. The default position on mapping was that all land should be considered as ‘Potential’ unless there was a defined reason to specify otherwise.)

Appendix 1 indicates that for ‘Upland / Upland Fringe’ Forests and Woodlands where forestry would become the dominant land use, all the identified sensitivity categories should apply i.e. Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM), Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLV), Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes (HGDL), National Scenic Areas (NSA) and Designated Wildlife Sites (DWS). The presence of any of these categories would trigger a ‘Sensitive’ category *“where new planting may be supported but where the design of the proposals is likely to need to accommodate one or a combination of specific issues.”* Since none of these categories are triggered on the study site, it should be concluded that it is not ‘sensitive’ and should therefore be considered at least as either ‘potential’ or ‘preferred’ because there is no defined reason to specify otherwise.

Map 6 defined that the criteria for a ‘preferred’ status were that the land in question should be classified as F5 or better in terms of the ‘Land Capability for Forestry’ classification and should also lie within 2km of an agreed timber transport route. Both of these categories are met throughout the study site and this explains why the small part of it within the LCT 96 (formerly (Upland type 5) is shown as ‘preferred’ (coloured green).

Landscape character assessment describes land areas that exhibit broadly similar characteristics. However, these are not absolute and normally merge and grade into the adjoining areas. In the original Borders Landscape Assessment (1998), landscape types were grouped into broad categories of Upland Types, Upland Fringe Types, River Valley Types etc. This hierarchy was discontinued when the classification was reviewed in 2019. However, it remains as the basis and explanation of the mapping found in the SBWS. Nearly all landscape character types merge gradually with the adjoining types and within the study site at Flatt Farm this is the case. Near the boundary of the ‘Upland’ type 5 (LCT 96) there is clearly an area that exhibits ‘Upland Fringe’ type characteristics where slopes are

moderately steep, ground vegetation is rushy pasture and field size is large. Only the flat ground adjoining the Liddle Water is really 'Lowland' in character so the 'River Valley' type within which the site is placed can, at least in this case, be considered as a transition zone from the adjoining upland i.e. it is similar to 'Upland Fringe' in character. Since most of Flatt Farm forms the lower part of a ridge running down from Carby Hill, a wooded character on these lower slopes would not be inappropriate and would not conflict with the aims of the Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy.

The basis for judgement of the proposed woodland creation at Flatt Farm in terms of the Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy should therefore be compliance with the various issues identified at pages 6, 7, 17 and 18 of the Technical Advice Note (2012).

Conclusion

There is no basis within the SBWS to disqualify woodland creation at Flatt Farm simply because most of it lies within a 'River Valley' landscape type rather than an 'Upland' or 'Upland Fringe' landscape type. None of the categories that would indicate a 'sensitive' designation are triggered and indeed there is a case to be made that the site could be considered as 'preferred' for woodland creation.

References:

Landscape Character Assessment – NatureScot 2019, Borders Landscape Evolution and Influences
[NatureScot LCA Review - BORDERS - LANDSCAPE EVOLUTION AND INFLUENCES - pdf - July 2021 \(A3509487\).pdf](#)

[NatureScot: Scottish Landscape Character Types Map and Descriptions \(2019\)](#)
[Scottish Landscape Character Types Map and Descriptions | NatureScot](#)

[‘Scottish Borders Woodland Strategy \(2005\)’](#)

[Woodland strategy | Scottish Borders Council \(scotborders.gov.uk\)](#)

[Appendix III map 6 | Scottish Borders Council \(scotborders.gov.uk\)](#)

[Technical Advice Note \(2012\)](#)

[Technical advice note | Scottish Borders Council \(scotborders.gov.uk\)](#)