

Scots Pine – *Pinus sylvestris*. A landmark Tree

As the Scots pine is native only to the highlands of Scotland since prehistory, all colonies in the lowlands, and in all areas of England, are deliberate plantings, or self-seeded from an earlier planted tree. **This is interesting as in many parts of England and particularly in the Welsh borders, the Scots pine is historically recognised as a landmark tree. It has long been said that these trees were used by drovers to indicate a route, or a farm where they would be welcome overnight, or where safe grazing or watering could be found for the flock being brought down the drove roads to market from the remote hills where they had been kept. Places across the country where Scots pines are planted are still identified with names that associate them with droving. What is not known is who planted the trees, or when, but the planting of Scots pines, in groups of three or four, and the meaning of safe haven that goes with them is consistent across the length and breadth of the country.**

This tree is one of our few native evergreens and the only pine native to Britain. Always a pioneer species, having struggled back into Britain in the wake of the retreating glaciers, it was driven north to the Scottish highlands after the climate warmed up about 5000 years ago, allowing deciduous trees to dominate in the southern reaches of Britain. The climate and poor soil conditions of the highlands suited the Scots pine, where it spread to cover a vast area of land, eventually known as the great Caledonian Forest. The fate of this forest, and of the Scots pine itself, mirrors the fate of the Scottish people who lived in its highland ranges.

Timber from the forest had long been used in Scotland for building houses and ships, boxes, barrels and fencing, but as the Industrial Revolution advanced, English traders began to take huge amounts of timber out of Scotland to satisfy the hungry new markets of industry. First, the pines were felled for charcoal to feed the iron-making industry, then for ship-building during the Napoleonic Wars. The quality of the timber made it irresistible for the industrialised south, and access was relatively easy, as the felled trees could be floated out of the remote forests via rivers and lochs to the sawmills. Ever more new uses were found as industries developed – pit props, telegraph poles, railway sleepers, and additional uses like the manufacture of turpentine, pine resin and tar.

The ecological disaster of uncontrolled felling was exacerbated by the human tragedy of the highland clearances. As the highland communities were removed from the land, huge numbers of sheep and deer which had been bought in by the landowners ate their way through the emerging seedlings and effectively halted the natural regeneration of the great pine woods. As there was no local population left, and no effective woodland management in place, the great Caledonian forest was rapidly reduced to a few inaccessible fragments as the exploitation continued. Amazingly, it was as recently as the 1970s that sense finally prevailed, and a conservation programme got underway to preserve the remnants of the forest, and to protect some areas from deer to allow natural regeneration to take place.

People had realised long before the 1970s that the timber resources of the Caledonian Forest would not last forever, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the solution was to look for innovation outside of the country. Plant hunting was all the rage, and large numbers of foreign softwood species were collected from as far afield as America and the Far East and tested in nurseries at home for their viability in the English climate. Decorative new ornamental species were very sought-after, but there was also huge demand for new softwood species with commercial potential to address the shortage of timber at home, and it was this drive to collect and research new species for commercial forestry that led to the dark sterile plantations of non-native conifers blighting hillsides across the country.