BIRSE TRADING COMPANY [1]

Directors Annual Report 2025

Introduction

The Birse Trading Company (BTCo) is a wholly owned subsidiary of Birse Community Trust (BCT) and manages Slewdrum and Balfour Forests on behalf of BCT. BTCo leases each Forest from BCT to implement a Forest Plan that has been agreed with BCT and approved by the public forest authority, Scottish Forestry. BTCo's current Forest Plans cover the period 2022-32.

2025 was BTCo's eighteenth year of operation. BTCo is managed by its Directors and in 2025, they were Paul Chapman (Chair), Jane Winton and Toby Rider. Doug Boyle and Robin Callander were also members of the BTCo management team during 2025. All were local members of BCT.

Forest Management

The main management in both Forests in 2025 was the continuation of the timber harvesting operations that had started autumn 2024. All the harvested timber had been removed to forest roadside by the spring, but BTCo was frustrated by the long delays before the final lorry loads of timber were removed from both Forests. BTCo had to raise this issue on a number of occasions with Scottish Woodlands Ltd (SWL), which managed the harvesting on BTCo's behalf as BTCo's forestry agent.

Deer control continued in both Forests throughout the year to enable regenerating trees to become established. BTCo's overall cull to the end of the annual season on 31st March 2025, was 16 red deer and 90 roe deer. This total consisted of 13 red and 47 roe deer in Balfour and 3 red and 43 roe deer in Slewdrum. The cull was carried out by George Ritchie, who was completing his 12th full year of controlling the numbers of deer in the Forests for BTCo. It was also the 12th year that his culls were equivalent to 20 deer or more per 100 hectares (ha). This density of cull reflects the numbers of deer that continue to move into the Forests each year due to the limited culls on neighbouring lands.

Slewdrum Forest

Timber harvesting had started in Slewdrum in October 2024 to clearfell a 15 ha site on the eastern side of Muckle Ord and all the felled timber had been moved to forest roadside for uplifting by March. The site consisted mainly of mature Douglas fir, but had suffered serious wind damage from Storm Arwyn in 2021.

BTCo was frustrated by the autumn that SWL had, firstly, not put in place arrangements to carry out the rest of the timber harvesting due in Slewdrum under BTCo's Forest Plan over winter 2025/26 and, secondly, made no plans to replant the Slewdrum clearfell area in spring 2026. BTCo therefore arranged a meeting with a senior SWL manager. This resulted in commitments that SWL would arrange to replant the Muckle Ord site in spring 2026 and to carry out the remaining harvesting in winter 2026/27.

The main element of public access in Slewdrum continued to be the use of the Deeside Way through the Forest. In the autumn, at BTCo's prompting, BCT restarted discussions with Aberdeenshire Council about the Agreement between BCT and the Council over the management of the Deeside Way in Slewdrum. Discussions about the nearly completed long term Agreement had been allowed to lapse ten years earlier.

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[1] The Birse Trading Company (BTCo) is a company limited by guarantee (SC327196) which was set up by Birse Community Trust (BCT) in 2007. The company is owned by BCT as the only shareholder and the appointment of the Directors who manage BTCo requires BCT's approval.

During the year, the Commonty Fishings proprietors erected a lockable barrier across the Fishing track on BCT land in the Forest with shared access for the proprietors and BCT/BTCo. In the autumn, BCT put a plot of land around the derelict Ord cottage in Slewdrum on the open market with planning permission for a new house. The plot remained unsold by the end of the year.

By December, BTCo had arranged for local contractors to carry out a number of jobs in the Forest in early 2026, including flailing the track edges to remove the encroaching gorse that was restricting access along the tracks and cleaning out the drainage ditch beside the Fishing track.

Balfour Forest

Timber harvesting had started in Balfour Forest in November 2024 to thin the mature pine and larch to the south and west of the main forest road. A number of relatively small stands of mature non-native conifers were also clear felled, and all the felled timber had been moved to the forest road for uplifting by May.

During the year, the Forest continued to be popular with hill walkers and mountain bikers. BTCo maintained its liaison with the Aberdeen Trail Association (ATA), which supervises the two mountain bike tracks in the Forest. In June, the tracks were used as part of two ATA organised events. In July, the Forest was used as part of a Scottish Orienteering 6-Day event in Deeside.

By December, BTCo had arranged for local contractors to carry out a number of jobs in the Forest in early 2026, including clearing some windblown trees from the Baudylace track, cutting back tree branches from two tracks and cleaning out several lengths of drainage ditch beside tracks.

Administration

In addition to BTCo's regular annual administration, BTCo analysed the timber receipts received for the loads of timber sold from both Forests. This was to check the information on the harvests received from SWL and also to provide additional details to update the Timber Harvesting Records that BTCo maintains for each Forest.

In late 2025, BTCo updated the compartment schedules for each Forest for 2026 as part of BCT's forest insurance policy covering both Forests against damage by wildfires.

Finance [2]

BTCo had an income £146,222 in 2025, all of it from the timber harvesting. During the year, BTCo's expenditure was £48,780. This included £12,284 on forest management and £2,496 on administration. The rest of the expenditure was to BCT: £6,000 rent for the two Forests in 2025, £8,000 in rent owed to BCT from the two previous years and a donation of £20,000.

The donation was BTCo's first since 2019, a gap of five years that very largely resulted from SWL not implementing the timber harvesting in BTCo's Forest Plans when it was scheduled to happen.

BTCo's net profit in 2025, together with timber income received late in 2024, meant that BTCo ended 2025 with a bank balance of £171,741. BTCo retained this unusually high balance into 2026 for three main reasons: BTCo's planned expenditure in the first two months of 2026, the potentially very high cost of replanting the clear felled area in Slewdrum in spring 2026 and a lack of certainty over future income from the proposed further timber harvesting in Slewdrum in 2026/27.

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[2] BTCo's Annual Accounts are submitted to Companies House, reported in BCT's Annual Accounts and published on BCT's website.