Rassal SSSI is an important survival of ash woodland Growing on a series of striking karstic limestone terraces. It has been managed by the Nature Conservancy Council and now Scottish Natural Heritage since being declared a National Nature Reserve (NNR) in 1956 with the aim of preserving the ash woodlands, the associated vegetation and epiphytes. This has involved constructing a series of exclosures to exclude stock and at least two programmes of tree planting. As a result there is a dramatic variation in the vegetation within and without the enclosed areas. Rassal was declared an In March 2014 though it remains a Natura Special Area of Conservation of national and European importance.

The copper mine at Rassal was first mentioned in 1767 and was reputedly closed soon afterwards because of the problems of transporting the ore. However it was referred to by a visiting mineralologist Williams in 1810 as the ‘best copper ore he had ever seen’ suggesting it was still being worked into the 19th century. Examination of the mine suggests it is more likely to have been abandoned due to flooding and the direction of the lode. A processing area has been exposed by erosion to the south close to a longhouse building and these lie with the mine in an area protected as a Scheduled Monument (outlined in red on page 5).

A group of four buildings, unmarked on the 1st edition map survey lie just north of the enclosed woodland. The woodland itself has traces of a dyke surrounding it suggesting grazing was restricted in this area. It has recently been recognised that the mature ash trees are restricted to the limestone outcrops with the level areas between being managed as wood pasture and probably as arable ground. Recent tree plantings have compromised this historic landscape pattern and a rapid spread of hazel scrub within the oldest exclosure is potentially restricting the floral and epiphytic diversity of this area.
A study by Peterken, based on tree-ring counts on 9 trees felled for a wayleave, identified trees starting life in 1760, 1785, 1788 (x2), 1800, 1814, 1814, 1844 and 1852. One tree had its core missing but could potentially have started life in the 1680s. Though woodland is shown here on the Roy map of c1750, Peterken recognised that the current trees were unlikely to originate in closed canopy woodlands.
Given the known planting of woodland policies in the 18th century a query must be raised as to whether these ash trees are a small relict survival, a colonising group from the Alt Mor gorge woodland to the east or even a deliberately planted group, perhaps connected with the exploitation of the copper mine. The crucial factor in their survival seems to be the dyke defining the eastern edge of the wood as shown on the plan on the opposite page and at the bottom of page 6.

A detailed map was drawn up in 1960 for SNH identifying the different tree species evident in a fenced conservation plot. The blue colour marks outcrops of Durness limestone.
The central area 1, outlined in green on this plan, has been enclosed since 1966. The dense woodland found here is visible in the photograph above.

This plan was drawn up in 1990 long before the new exclosure (or ‘ecological corridor’ as shown on page 5), the narrow zone extending to the south east, was constructed. It is an unwelcome intrusion in this landscape. Fortunately the possible roundhouse recorded here lies well outside the excluded area.
The group of house remains surviving here were not shown on earlier OS maps and are partly obscured by bracken.

Note the contrast between the visibility of the house remains outside the fence and the coarser grasses in the ungrazed area within the exclosure.

A possible roundhouse site obscured under long heather lies just outside the enclosed area. Note the closely planted ash trees just inside the fence.

The area highlighted in red on this plan has statutory protection as a Scheduled Monument of National Importance.

Another possible roundhouse site c10 metres in diameter lies on flat ground just outside the woodland.
The shaft of the copper mine, visible as a cut and stone heaps defining the original vein of ore, plunges deeply into the ground and is now flooded. Any traces of earlier possible prehistoric workings are likely to have been long destroyed.

Fragments of copper ore lie exposed near the remains of a building, possibly connected with storage and processing of the metal.

The dyke enclosing the woodland shows how excluding animals has allowed this woodland to become established and thrive.
Many of the ash trees in this wood show evidence of being altered, however they do not appear to show evidence of deliberate pollarding. A more detailed survey of individual trees including a series of dendrochronological cores was carried out as part of an undergraduate thesis.

Cattle have now been introduced to the fenced woodland as part of a grazing management programme. This should encourage a more diverse woodland flora and reduce the spread of bracken. It is hoped a less managed woodland can evolve which still retains its historic landscape interest.

The Rassal woodland lies in an open landscape dominated by the impressive hills of Applecross. There is clearly scope for a wider landscape study, not just limited to the boundaries of the NNR or SSSI, to examine adjacent habitats and historic features in a wider cultural landscape.
Archaeological importance

Elements of this landscape, such as the Copper Mine, are of national importance which is why the latter has scheduled monument protection. Other features such as the possible roundhouse or the house sites to the north of the wood (and perhaps connected with the copper workings) are also significant. The retention of the open areas of the woodland as areas of wood pasture is also a significant part of the historic landscape.

Why preserve these remains?

While it is recognised that there are potential conflicts with the nature conservation designations for these woodlands, the historic elements of the landscape have value not only intrinsically but also for understanding the processes by which this woodland has developed.

Protection work required

The main protection work is in recognising that any nature conservation work to enhance the woodland has implications for both the individual sites and the wider historic landscape. It may be after discussion that apart from the legally protected site the nature conservation interests have greater value. But this can only be achieved by giving full weighting to arguments for the greater protection of the historic landscape. At present the landscape is obstructed by the rigid boundaries between the farmed and the excluded areas. These fences are unsightly.

Opportunities for enhancement

Reduction of stock and selective grazing in key areas will produce a more diverse landscape which allows the woodland to thrive and the historic landscape features to be preserved. This may require some selective management such as bracken spraying or limited cutting of vegetation over key features. The wider picture of whether to restore the more open landscape of the wood pasture with its associated diversity of species is more difficult to answer and may depend on differing political priorities such as the identified needs of particular species. It would be a pity if this led to the loss of the wider historic landscape.

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References

PS Since this case study was first produced SNH have introduced a stock of cattle for selective grazing as a wood pasture regime. Further documentary and dendrochronological work has established more information on the woodland history. (A Dendrochronological Analysis at Rassal Ashwood NNR, Wester Ross Mills C 2010 & Cooper T 2010 A cultural dimension to Rassal Ashwood Undergraduate dissertation. A version of the latter paper has been published as part of the proceedings of the Scottish Woodland History Conference 2010 (see http://nwdg.org.uk/doc/NOTES_XV_2010.pdf)