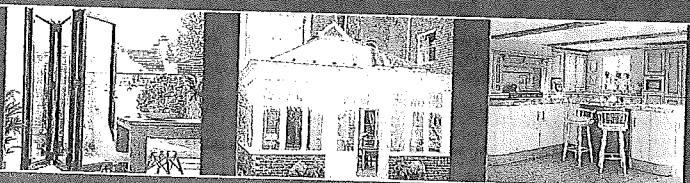
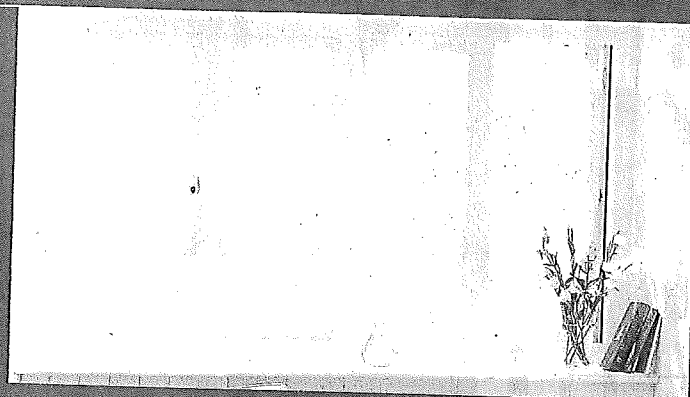




Death in waiting: The deer on Tullis Hill could be culled



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## by Gavin Madeley

**I**T must have sounded like a sure-fire vote winner when it was first presented to politicians in search of snappy slogans. Surely nobody could object to a pledge by Aberdeen's newly-elected Lib Dem/SNP administration to plant A Tree For Every Citizen as part of a major green initiative for the Granite City.

Sites were chosen, six-figure grants applied for, and schoolchildren were roped in to help with planting the 200,000-plus saplings that would be of such benefit to all... apart from one group of residents whose health is about to be very seriously affected by the trees.

The roe deer of Tullis Hill were never consulted about moves to plant 80,000 of these saplings right across their natural habitat. What is more, they remain blissfully unaware that most of them are to be shot to make way for the new forest. The dawning horror that blood will be spilled in order to achieve the dubious greening of a much-loved beauty spot has sparked public uproar.

With D-Day drawing near, some environmental campaigners who might ordinarily have supported the tree-growing initiative have vowed to do everything they can to prevent bloodshed - even if that means standing in the way of the marksman's gun.

Unwittingly, a herd of 29 deer is threatening to turn the council's coup into a PR disaster. Shooting deer has never been a huge vote-winner and, as soon as the first shot is fired, protesters including animal rights activists have vowed to spring into action and disrupt the cull.

John Robins, of Animal Concern, said: 'There is very likely going to be a protest on the ground when the culling starts. I would expect some will camp out overnight on the hill to stop night-shooting.'

'There are a lot of people who are very upset about this. A Tree For Every Citizen sounds great but most citizens are saying: "I don't want my tree if it means killing the deer."

'There is absolutely no need to kill these animals. They can plant a woodland without killing the deer. This is an extraordinary waste of public money, to kill wild animals to create habitat for them.'

An exasperated deer has yet to be announced, but anti-cull campaigner Suzanne Kelly said: 'We will stay for as long as it takes.'

'I know there are animal rights people who say they are prepared to stand in front of the gunmen, but we would urge everyone to behave

## 'We don't want to see any deaths, deer or human'

responsibly. We don't want any deaths, deer or human.'

Not only is the shooting of these wild animals contentious, but there are strong claims that Tullis Hill is an entirely inappropriate site to create an artificial forest. After all, since ancient times, trees have never flourished there and recent efforts to change that have proved a flop.

This scrappy ridge of rough ground commands affection due to its magnificent panoramic views across Aberdeen. On a clear day, one can see for miles, from the pristine beaches of Balmorie to the north to the distant Grampian hills out west. A stiff North Sea breeze whips over the top most days.

Known locally as one of the 'Gramps' or low peaks circling the south of the city, Tullis Hill's strategic importance was evident to the earliest settlers and the summit boasts a number of Bronze Age burial cairns.

In more recent times, Tullis Hill was used as the main council rubbish tip, and a large proportion of the city's household waste from the 1940s to the 1990s is buried beneath its surface.

Bounded on two sides by large trading estates largely devoted to the oil and gas industry, the hill is a tiny oasis above the racket of modern industry. And it is here that a small

herd of roe deer have made their home, managing to co-exist in of proximity with their noisy human neighbours - until now.

The £320,000 Tullis Hill tree project is part of the second phase of tree planting across Aberdeen. The first phase, completed in the summer 2010, saw 120,000 trees planted across eight sites in the city.

Around 90 acres of the 140-acre hill have been earmarked for planting made up of native broadleaf species such as rowan, hazel, wych elm and birch, mixed in with conifers including Scots pine, larch and spruce.

Preparatory work is already under way on the hill, including the removal of gorse and the erection of deer-proof fencing, but an intransigent council insists that despite the new fences most of the deer will still have to go.

Pete Leonard, director of housing and environment, insisted the five year plan was moving on 'pace' at the first plantings are expected to take place next month.

Explaining the rationale behind the scheme, he said: 'Tullis Hill provides marvellous vantage points and the woodlands have been designed so that the sweeping vistas across the city and the sea will be preserved.'

This exciting project will not only revitalise the landscape of Tullis Hill but also help promote its wildlife and archaeological significance.'

Chris Piper, the chartered forester who is overseeing the project on behalf of Aberdeen City Council, told a recent council committee meeting that the deer cull would eventually help wildlife thrive at the spot.

He said: 'Roe deer are a natural part of the woodland ecology. We are anxious to recreate a habitat for deer, squirrels, birds, bats and the full spectrum of woodland wildlife.'

The council says guidance from Scottish Natural Heritage sets sustainable management of deer numbers at eight per 250 acres. That means barely five deer are likely to survive the cull on 140-acre Tullis Hill.

A council spokesman said: 'It is not council policy to completely eradicate deer on Tullis Hill, rather to reduce the current very high population of the deer which is not sustainable in terms of the animals' own welfare and would also cause unacceptably high levels of damage to young trees.'

Yet history suggests the deer are not the only threat to the trees' survival. When the council last attempted to plant a forest on Tullis Hill, the project was handled so badly that it was told to repay £43,831.90 from a Forestry Commission grant.

A report compiled in November 2008 by the commission's own Forest Research agency found the scheme failed then because the saplings were choked by competition from weeds and were 'inadequately protected' from browsing by deer.

The report criticised project managers for using 3ft-long plastic tubes to surround the saplings instead of the recommended 4ft tubing. The report also warned: 'It is noteworthy that the establishment of large mature trees on many parts of Tullis Hill is unlikely. The rootable material is unlikely to be able to provide adequate anchorage, increasing the risk of wind throw, especially given the exposed coastal location.'

So, even if the trees reach maturity, many will probably blow down in the first big storm. Despite this, the report concluded that it should not stop the council from trying again to plant trees, as long as there is adequate protection from weeds and deer.

The Scottish Government is footing most of the bill for the latest attempt with a £214,000 grant from its Scotland Rural Development Programme.

Now it seems the council, determined not to fail again, has gone for the nuclear option - shooting up to