

Bangor University, Forestry, Ghana, Woodland Heritage and the Commonwealth. More in common than you might imagine.

by James Walmsley, Senior Lecturer in Forestry, Bangor University and Woodland Heritage Trustee

What do forestry programmes run by a university in North Wales, a former global empire, a small UK-based woodland charity and a small country in West Africa have in common? Very little, you might imagine...

Every other year, groups of ~25-30 students and 5-6 staff gather for two weeks in Ghana for Bangor University's bi-annual MSc Tropical Forestry study tour. But this is no ordinary study tour. The students attending have never met before; they are all part-time distance learning students, typically coming from up to 18 different countries.

Alongside their studies, these are professionals, typically working full-time in varied roles, such as plantation forest management in Zambia; forest reserve management in Rwanda; afforestation in Malawi, reforestation in Lesotho, forest research in Kenya, agroforestry in India, forest monitoring in Guyana. These students are exceptional – many of them in receipt of prestigious Commonwealth Scholarship Commission scholarships. The staff team members are equally diverse, including Professor Phillip Nyeko from Makerere University, a Bangor alumnus from 2001, and staff from Bangor with experience in the Americas, Africa, Australia and Europe.

Gathering such a group together for two weeks leads to the most enriching learning experience. The itinerary for the study tour typically includes a week of 'traditional' study tour activities – guided forest visits, plantations, cocoa agroforests, sawmills, private farms and markets selling diverse non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Yet it combines these visits with many student-focused activities, including several research projects, which culminate in a student-led research symposium at the Forestry Research Institute of Ghana headquarters in Kumasi.

Having led this study tour on three occasions, I've been surprised at the number of connections between Bangor University, Ghana, Woodland Heritage and the Commonwealth, prompting me to write this article.



Ghana study tour group

By coincidence, since 2014, several Bangor alumni have been in touch, unprompted, reporting their links with Ghana. For example, Martyn Baguley (BSc Forestry, 1960) told me of a project he had worked on in Ghana in 1994 on the economics of mahogany plantations and their potential to supply national electrification projects – ideal historical context given renewed interest in plantation forestry as part of reforestation efforts. Martyn also shared information about a fellow Bangor graduate of 1960, Elias Afanyedi, who rose to number-three in the Ghana Forestry Commission.

Meanwhile, James Sandom (BSc Forestry, 1973) contacted the university, reporting he had worked on several forestry projects in Ghana - he was able to provide current updates on rosewood harvesting in northern Ghana. There are many similar stories. On every study tour to Ghana we encounter more alumni, highlighting the long tradition in Bangor University of educating people who go on to make substantial contributions to forest research, management and conservation across the world, including West Africa.

The tour's first stop is at the excellent Aburi Botanic Gardens in the hills overlooking Accra. The Gardens gently introduce the immense task of 'tree spotting' in a country where a single hectare of natural forest may host far more species than the United Kingdom!



Visiting the *Grevillea robusta* planted by Prince Charles

The Botanic Gardens have also hosted numerous visits by royalty and dignitaries with several trees planted in their honour; the links in this article's title emerge again.

One of the ceremonial tree plantings is a *Khaya senegalensis* (Mahogany) planted by HRH Queen Elizabeth II in 1961. Queen Elizabeth II is the Head of the Commonwealth – a group of sovereign nations whose members are nearly all former territories of the British Empire. The Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, which generously supports so many of the MSc Tropical Forestry students at Bangor University, is a direct consequence of the Commonwealth: eligibility is confined to applicants from developing Commonwealth countries alone. It was established in 1959 to provide educational opportunities and exchanges amongst member countries: since 2011 it has generously supported over 100 scholars with their MSc Tropical Forestry studies at Bangor University.

The study tour provides a unique learning experience for forestry professionals from many different corners of the Commonwealth, who come together and share their expertise, knowledge, ideas and cultural insights, and form many life-long friendships in the process. Such inter-cultural experiences are vital as part of attempts to improve the management of forested habitats across the planet.

The other ceremonial tree planting of relevance to this article is a *Grevillea robusta* (Silver Oak or Silky Oak) which was planted at Aburi Botanic Gardens by HRH Prince Charles in 1977. Prince Charles has been patron of Woodland Heritage since 2005.

This is where this story comes full circle: Woodland Heritage has been an unstinting supporter of forestry education and research at Bangor University since before I arrived as a PhD student in 2004. This longstanding and



James Walmsley and Sarah Ellis at Buckingham Palace

significant support has included numerous Garthwaite Bursaries which have enabled students (and staff!) to attend international symposia, as well as subsidised places on the excellent 'Woodland to Workshop' and 'Irregular Silviculture' courses, plus several substantial research grants relating to vital Acute Oak Decline research. Most recently, Woodland Heritage provided invaluable advice and support to the Bangor Forestry Students' Association (BFSA), who hosted a European meeting of forestry students in North Wales in April 2019.

On a personal note, had it not been for my work with Woodland Heritage, I would not have had the privilege to attend a Garden Party last May at Buckingham Palace, the official London residence of the Head of the Commonwealth. The former BFSA president, Sarah Ellis, was also privileged to join.

Take from this story what you wish. What I have taken from these experiences is that the world is full of surprises. Organisations, institutions and indeed nations that at first appear to have little in common may actually have many shared interests and overlapping histories. Recognising these and building on them is a rewarding and productive endeavour that can yield unexpected outcomes. At a time of great political change and environmental concern, these are surely as important as ever.

Further reading:

Various articles on this webpage: bangor.ac.uk/natural-sciences/courses/distancelearning/articles.php.en

Commonwealth Scholarship Commission
scuk.dfid.gov.uk
Forestry Research Institute of Ghana
csir-forig.org.gh