



Paul Maguire sitting in the remains of a furnace, with Fiadh on his Mayo farm. Pictures: Mark Moore

Forestry, farming ...and a furnace

Diversification into forestry, biodiversity schemes and heritage projects is helping to secure the future of the Maguire family's small farm in south Mayo

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Most mornings before his long commute to work, Mayo farmer Paul Maguire follows a simple routine. Having checked the stock and walked the dogs, he steps into his forest for five minutes.

In that short time he immerses himself in the calmness of the trees ahead of a day's work in social care with the Brothers of Charity in Galway, where he supports adults with intellectual and mental health challenges.

Paul has been farming for 30 years in Furnace, located near Partry, on environmentally sensitive land situated along the Cloon river, which

flows into Lough Mask. Inherited from an uncle, it was a traditional small west of Ireland cattle farm – small fields, marginal land and low income.

In the early years Paul remained faithful to the suckler farming model he inherited. But over time, while juggling a full time job and starting a family, the realities of this type of farming became clear. Business as usual was not viable. To stay farming he needed to diversify.



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Forestry

Forestry appealed to Paul. Between 2007 and 2011 he availed of Afforestation grants and premiums to plant 30 acres of commercial conifers and broadleaf trees. Trees provide a better and more secure return from his most marginal land and will in time yield income from timber.

But Paul also values the ecosystem benefits the trees provide in complementing the farm's existing native woodlands and blanket bog – two of Ireland's most ecologically important and threatened habitats.

Since 2019, new life is being breathed into the farm's ancient oak, birch and hazel trees under the Woodland Conservation Scheme. This is helping to secure the woodland's long-term future by encouraging natural regeneration and planting a new generation of trees. This forms part of Paul's vision to manage all his forests using a Continuous Cover Forestry approach for long-term tree retention. The active integration of his farming and forestry enterprises saw Paul enter the 2024 RDS Teagasc Farm Forestry Awards, where he was shortlisted in recognition of his achievements to date.

Farm diversification

On his farming land, Paul has consolidated his economic and environmental ambitions by participating in successive agri-environment schemes. In 2021, he joined the NPWS Farm Plan – a targeted five-year scheme for farming in areas of high conservation importance. This scheme is aimed at protecting water quality and biodiversity and prioritising the management of species rich grasslands.

With a reduced grazing area and strict grass management rules, Paul has changed his cattle enterprise and stock in recent years.

He now rears Speckled Park heifer calves, which he hopes to keep as cows. He also plans to keep Droimeann cattle – a rare Irish cattle breed suited to this sensitive environment.

Blanket bog

The blanket bog has been largely untouched since turf was cut there during the Second World War, and with this period of recovery it appears in rude health, festooned with flowering heathers, bog cotton and bog asphodel. Its wet, spongy soil is an ecological jewel as well as an increasingly valuable carbon store, adding another unique facet to this



Paul Maguire with Teagasc forestry advisor Noel Kennedy; (below) Paul has switched his stocking to Speckled Park heifer calves, which he hopes to keep as cows.



Exploring other options on the farm: 'the spirit to survive and thrive burns brightly'

The land in Furnace weaves its own magic and is a special place for Paul and his family. Appreciating this wonderful place they call home and how it can support positive health and wellbeing, Paul is exploring other diversification opportunities to share his land of which he is a guardian and contribute towards a sustainable future.

Forest bathing - Taking time to connect with the forest and absorbing all it has to offer through all the senses - sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste - is at the heart of forest bathing or shinrin-yoku, which originated in Japan.

Paul has already welcomed a number of groups to his woodlands to experience forest bathing and hopes to welcome many more.

Social farming

In 2016, Paul was one of the pioneers of social farming in Mayo, a practice which allows people with intellectual and physical disabilities to be part of everyday farm chores from feeding and caring for stock to vegetable planting and dry stone wall building.

It was this experience with social farming that opened the door for Paul to begin a career in social care.

Woodworking

Having returned to education as a mature student in 2003, Paul qualified with a degree in furniture design from Letterfrack College of Furniture Design. As a skilled woodworker, Paul is also hoping to offer woodworking classes as part of a social farming service.

Knowledge Transfer Groups

This year, Paul has already hosted groups of fellow forest owners to his woodlands for peer to peer learning as part of DAFM funded Forestry Knowledge Transfer Group Scheme.

Long-term vision

As the guardian of the farm in Furnace for over thirty years, Paul Maguire has achieved so much. But he is the first to admit that his vision for environmental enhancement, social inclusivity and cultural appreciation has to be built around a sustainable farming model.

Innovative diversification streams and determination will be central to the future of this small farm in Mayo which is so dear to the Maguire family.

But have no doubt: the spirit to survive and thrive burns brightly like the furnace that was working here two centuries ago.



A rare relic from the early industrial revolution in Ireland

The townland of Furnace contains one of the oldest surviving examples of a blast furnace in Ireland and Britain – hence the name of the area.

Built in 1738, this rare structure from the early industrial revolution produced pig iron, using locally mined ore, for over a century. It is believed that peat and wood from local bogs and woods were used to burn the iron ore found on the Partry mountains.

A unique feature of this furnace is the remarkable condition of the sandstone lined chimney and the furnace's intermediate zone, (known as a 'bosh'), both of which remain free standing and a testament to those who built it 286 years ago!

Since 1992 Paul has been protecting and highlighting the cultural and industrial significance of the furnace. Having hosted several Heritage Week events and recently welcomed a group from Westport Civic Trust, he is actively seeking support from relevant state agencies to refurbish parts of the furnace and allow him to offer more structured tours of this unique historic site.



Useful links

2023-2027 Afforestation and forest management schemes:
www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/grants/

General forestry information www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/

To enter 2025 RDS Teagasc Farm

Forestry Awards

(closes 9th September 2024) see the forestry news section on www.teagasc.ie, or follow this QR code link.

