

Where has all the hardwood gone?

Misinformation, ignorance, bureaucracy and the FSC are all combining to cause a lack of management in our woods and a loss of skills.

The home grown hardwood sector is going through a period of change. The volume of decent quality hardwood coming onto the market has been dwindling over the past 4 or 5 years, but this year has seen a massive reduction throughout the UK. One company that has lived through these changes and continues to adapt to them is Chantler Timber.

As recently as five years ago they had eight people on the road, sourcing and buying timber. There are now just two, with 90% of their timber being bought from Europe. Five to ten years ago Chantler's timber sales would have been 50% export and 50% to the home market. This has also changed dramatically. Now only 10% is sold into Europe with 90% being sold on the home market. The company has moved from being a major exporter to become a mass importer.

So where has all the wood in the UK gone? Nowhere – it is still out there. Massive amounts of mature hardwoods could be felled, but the UK seems to have switched off with regard to felling.

The hurricane of 1987 took a huge chunk out of the natural supply chain. Also 30 or 40 years ago a large amount of felling was carried out with very little replanting.

Although these factors have had some impact on current supply, ignorance, misinformation and complex procedures also seem to be playing a major part. Farmers and estate owners are not prepared to go through the long and complicated process of getting permission to fell, and the bureaucracy can be daunting for the inexperienced.

In the past it was possible to enter a woodland grant scheme fairly simply. Now it is so complex that owners cannot be bothered. Comments by famous people in the public eye have also had an impact. When someone such as Prince Charles comments publicly that he will be reducing the amount of felling, or says he requires a percentage of fallen wood to be left in his forests to help woodland wildlife, there are those who will follow blindly.

To leave wood lying on a large scale is to invite trouble and increase infestation by unwanted pests such

as the Platypus beetle. This beetle, on the endangered list in 1987, is now endemic. This was shown at the time of foot and mouth when timber merchants' movements were restricted. In the relatively short time it took for the ban to be lifted and for the collection of timber to begin again, the beetle had become evident throughout the timber.

There is already enough natural fall of branches and lying debris to keep forest life happy. In the UK we have the most sustainable forestry in Europe yet the Forestry Commission seem to have decided to protect everything in sight while forgetting that when a tree reaches maturity it is good management to fell it and replace it with two to three younger trees. This together with pandering to the FSC has not helped the landowner who wishes to 'simply' fell his trees. Other European countries are more proactive in managing their woodland, with continuous rotational felling and regeneration, yet still maintain beautiful forests. They close sections when working and restrict public access for short periods, allowing the forests to continue to belong to the people but not at the expense of the forest.

Confusion leads to bad practice. Yes it is nice to see mature trees, but once a tree has reached maturity it will start to decline, leading to rot and decay. We can continue to view our forests as an amenity, but it is vital that we assist woodland owners through making them better aware, informing them that felling is best practice while reducing the bureaucracy involved.

Another effect of these changes is that expertise and knowledge will soon be lost. Quality fellers are becoming hard to find. These experts in their field are retiring or moving on. In 30 years, when felling will be a necessity, this gap will be a real problem for the industry.

Sawmillers too will continue to suffer. A lot of big mills have now gone and the smaller family firms left will not be geared up for volume. Employing staff brings with it more confusion and regulations.

Perhaps we have to ask ourselves whether we really need the FSC. It has produced a lot of confusion. Surely it is enough that felling is



Chantlers want to buy a million pounds' worth of timber over the next six months. There is timber in Britain, but they will probably have to import it.

by permission only. There is as little as 2% requested demand for FSC timber.

There are myths that the price of timber is low. How do growers know? If it is cost effective to bring in loads from Europe, then the UK grower has the advantage of lower haulage costs. Another myth is that you have to have an advisor or consultant. Not true – the more people in the chain, the more cuts are taken from the final price.

Chantler want to get the message out that they will help the grower by dealing with all the groundwork involved. They come and look at timber, do the paperwork and remove the hassle in getting the timber to the marketable stage. If the buyer then decides to sell to another party he will only be charged for time involved.

Experts like Chantler know what the market is looking for and can help the grower get the best price for his timber, felling when required rather than when demand for specific species is low.

Michael Chantler told me that never in his history in the business has so much been paid for sycamore and oak. Yew is also in great demand. The Forestry Commission has vast amount of yew it is not felling. The market for yew will die as veneer companies learn to use alternatives. Where is the forward planning in that?

Although generally not planted just for their cash value, growers need to be aware that certain species and grades will make very high prices, providing the selection and timing of the fellings are correct. There is a need for continuous liaison between the grower (or his agent) and companies such as Chantler Timber to maximise the value in a parcels of hardwood.

Chantler Timber wants to buy £1,000,000 worth of good quality hardwoods over the next 6 months for ongoing projects throughout

the UK. The standing or roadside prices for oak are at an all time high and their annual requirement for oak is in the region of 500,000 hop-pus feet (20,000m³) most of which is currently sourced abroad.

Contrary to many beliefs an oak log does not need to be 3 feet in diameter before it becomes marketable. In fact trees with a minimum of 11" mid quarter girth (14" mid diameter) growing clean and straight are big enough for the two main uses of oak today – flooring and beams. These trees can be removed when thinning.

Sycamore, elm, sweet chestnut, ash, cherry and yew are the other species in demand. Other more unusual species in constant demand include walnut, London plane, cedar and any tree with a large covering of burr – generally oak and elm.

Roadside sales in an ideal world want to be at least 1 x 20 ton load, but part loads are regularly linked for collection.

High value logs, *ie* burrs, veneers and yew can even be collected individually and still return a good income to the owner. Constantly sought are specific logs, large dimension beams in oak and Douglas fir, and bends for the renovation of historic buildings, boat building and special new build projects.

Chantler Timber still has a positive outlook and has recently ordered another Volvo despite all of the above. The time will come when all the timber out there will need to be dealt with, but when? Must we wait for another storm to do the work, and if so, will we have the resources, skills and manpower to cope, or will Europe benefit? Wouldn't it be better for our forests and woodlands to be properly managed, helping the people and industries involved to make a decent living?

There is money in managing our woodlands better. **Anne Berry**
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