

Working together

UPM Tilhill and the Davies brothers.

It is no exaggeration to say that the mood of those harvesting timber in Wales in the last few years has been pretty subdued. After gaining their own National Assembly, Welsh contractors and forest managers may have thought that their elected representatives would be keen to make sure that Welsh grown timber continued to be harvested and, more importantly for the Principality's economy, continued to be processed in Wales. That, if appearances were anything to go by, turned out not to be the case. Continuous cover forestry and production of woodfuel seemed to become the primary objectives.

The subsequent closure of pulp mills and sawmills in South and North Wales respectively will have done nothing to raise the spirits of those in the Welsh forestry chain. After all, the gloomiest of forecasters were already predicting the imminent extinction of the forestry contractor in the Principality. But as Wynn Humphreys was to put it: "What else are we going to do? This is the job we have been doing for most of our lives."

Wynn is UPM Tilhill Harvesting Manager for Central Wales and was speaking on the roadside above Pontbren-y-ci Wood in Powys. The steep banks of the Afon Cain on the south side of the road four miles beyond the small town of Llanfyllin were planted with a mix of Norway spruce, Grand fir and Douglas fir by the Forestry Commission. Comisiwn Coedwigaeth (FC Wales) has now decided that the timber is ready for harvesting and the parcel has become part of BSW's long-term contract.

Wynn Humphreys admits that he had to give a lot of thought to the job before he took it on. Although there was almost three thousand tonnes to come out of Coed Pontbren-y-ci, the access was extremely difficult and the space at roadside for stacking was limited. The small waterway known locally as Nant Alan also runs down the centre of the gorge on its way, eventually, to join the River Vyrnwy and then the Severn. In the planning process for the operations Wynn acknowledges the great assistance provided by the Forestry Commission – in the shape



Gareth, Barry and Wynn down in the valley bottom with the first section – downstream from the landing – well under way. The late spring weather in Mid-Wales could not have been more favourable for the contractors and the forest works manager.

of Mike Sadler of Wales Harvesting and Marketing (WHaM).

Fortunately for UPM Tilhill, the Davies brothers were available. Barry and Gareth have been working in the Welsh woods for twelve years and been running their own business for eight, so there are contractors with longer pedigrees in the area. Wynn Humphreys explains: "This is a very difficult job which is why we have Barry and Gareth here. They've done a lot of work up at Lake Vyrnwy on Severn Trent land managed by Forestry Commission Wales and we know they are the ideal team. The boys set a very high standard of work."

The Davies brothers are local to the area; in fact Barry lives only a mile and a half north of Coed Pontbren-y-ci. They are prepared to travel to work within a fifty mile radius of Llanfyllin but despite the problems facing Welsh forestry, they have for the last year been operating within ten miles from home. The Environment Committee, or whatever they have down in Cardiff at the Welsh Assembly, should be pleased that their short travel is reducing the output of greenhouse gases. Barry and Gareth probably appreciate more the extra hour at work, or at home, as the case may be.

The Timberjack forwarder and Ponsse Ergo harvester had recently spent a while over in Dyfnant Forest. "A wet site but a good job to do. We got a lot of praise for successfully completing that one," said Barry. The forwarder, normally operated by Barry, retained its all-round band tracks down at Pontbren-y-ci. They may have assisted on the climb out of the steep gully to the roadside landing, but primarily

they were to protect the mineral soil alongside the watercourse. The ground conditions in the valley bottom are good... and all involved in the contract were doing their best to make sure they stayed that way.

The water in the Nant Alan, as previously mentioned, will find its way into the River Vyrnwy long before it weaves its final course between the sandbanks of the Severn Estuary and becomes lost in the muddy eddies of the Bristol Channel. Timing of the start of the contract was arranged for early summer when the stream was expected to be less prone to flash surges. The summer flow in the opposite direction, along the B4393, is normally more predictable – day trippers from the North Wales border towns and the English Midlands on their way to Llyn Efyrrnwy, as it is known in the Welsh language.

Lake Vyrnwy has supplied water to Liverpool for over one hundred years and is now one of the major attractions in this part of the Principality for those seeking outdoor diversions. The brown tourist signs direct most of the seasonal traffic to the reservoir by way of Llanfyllin and the minor road bordering the harvesting site. Traffic management and the use of a 'banksman' system would therefore be required for felling a fair proportion of the trees. As much of the timber as possible was to be harvested mechanically, but both Barry and Gareth would have to spend a considerable amount of time on the saw felling the timber on the steep banks inaccessible to the Ergo. Any highlead or winching work necessary – and there was bound to be some – would also be carried out by the Davies brothers. Wynn Humphreys pointed out that



Timber from the west of Wales runs in to BSW's Newbridge sawmill aboard the wagons of Danny Williams and Son of Lampeter in early summer. Despite the appalling weather conditions that were to ensue in the following couple of months, Les Hughes of Ceri was still able to contribute to the flow with the green logs from the Coed Pontbren-y-ci site.

the plan was to stick to one haulage contractor; in this case, Les Hughes and Son of Ceri, some twenty miles south near Newtown on the Welsh section of the River Severn.

As it turned out, midsummer's day saw Wales and central England subjected to almost unbelievable amounts of precipitation... and similarly incredible tonnages of soil and silt would pour off the land and ended up in the swirling and heaving waters of the Severn and Trent estuaries. The enduring poor weather no doubt sent visitor numbers plummeting in Mid-Wales, as it did in the rest of Britain. But with residents and farmers in the English Midlands counting the cost and filing the insurance claims, how did the team of UPM Tilhill and the Davies Brothers cope with the adverse conditions and the swollen waters of the Nant Alan?

As our poor excuse for a summer drew to a close, Wynn Humphreys was able to report that Barry and Gareth were finishing the contract at Coed Pontbren-y-ci. The bridges they had constructed with harvested timber to cross the watercourse had held up well and all the produce from the difficult site had been brought out up to the roadside by the Timberjack forwarder. All of it, too, had stayed within the Principality for processing. The green logs had gone to the Newbridge sawmill of BSW. The mill is adaptable enough to take a range of species, including larch. Chipwood was sent to the Kronospan mill in Chirk, south west of Wrexham. Fencing quality timber had been dispatched to the sawmill of AE Evans at Overton that lies not

far from the Shropshire border.

The Davies Brothers and Wynn Humphreys were not the only ones to take on the Welsh weather this year and come out on top. Down in Hafren Forest Daryl Bolter and his 125cc Husqvarna took the top prize in the Welsh 2-day Enduro competition. In his case the 2-stroke was powering a motorcycle along the appallingly wet and muddy forest roads. The 'Husky' proved to be more than a match for 4-stroke machines of double the cylinder capacity. Anyone remember Bryan 'Badger' Goss and Vic Eastwood? They were the British Husqvarna Motocross heroes of the 1960s who ended almost every Saturday afternoon BBC 'Grandstand' plastered in mud. The Greeves, Matchless and CZ motorbikes were formidable opponents but the Husqvarnas often afforded Goss and Eastwood the white-toothed smile of victory.

Mention those classic machines to Wynn Humphreys and he'll know what you're talking about. When he gets a spare moment from managing the more difficult timber harvesting contracts in Mid-Wales, he is researching the route of the motorcyclists who competed in the Welsh 1961 International 6-Day Enduro Trial. There may be those who remember New Zealander Tim Gibbes powering his way through the Sitka spruce saplings to gold on his AJS 350. If you have any information about the missing direction signs or the 'timing clock incident' Wynn Humphreys would love to hear from you.

Hilary Burke



Gareth Davies aboard the Ponsse Ergo harvester processes timber felled by chainsaw on the far side of the watercourse that runs through the harvesting site. The felling capability of the Ergo was used where possible, but this still left many stems to be felled by the chainsaw.



One of the first requirements had been maximising the capacity of the restricted timber landing area. Trees on the roadside edge had been cut high to safely support the stacks above the steep bankside.



Barry Davies aboard the Timberjack starts to build another bridge across the water from a stock of timber set aside for the purpose. The harvesting operation had revealed the extent of fly-tipping to which the roadside woodland had been subjected. For example, a source of potentially dangerous contamination, in this case a discarded refrigerator, was found to be lying in the centre of the stream. It would need to be removed.



The appropriate siting of fuel storage facilities was also extremely important. In ideal circumstances the bunded tank would have been stationed further from the running water. The possibility of unauthorised interference ruled out the option of placing it on the timber landing.