

# HARDWOOD VALUING & MARKETING

## Exploring the world of the hoppus foot.

If you're from north of Watford and your business is forestry or timber then the Touch Estate is an ideal location for your meetings and conferences. If you're from Watford or further south it is probably worth knowing that 'Touch' rhymes with 'hooch' (as in home distilled Scotch whisky); not with 'hutch'.

Touch House itself was described by the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments of Scotland as "... perhaps the most distinguished example of Georgian architecture in Stirlingshire." Forestry Commission Scotland chose it as the venue for a Regional Forestry Forum Meeting in October 2006 and Technical Development Branch (TDB) booked the house on 30 and 31 January this year for their now well established seminar on the valuing and marketing of Scottish hardwoods.

The Touch Estate covers about 1500 hectares of parkland, forestry, farmland and hill country a few miles south west of the city of Stirling. Much of the fabric and landscape of the estate has changed little since the eighteenth century. Nearly all the hedge lines, as well as the field and woodland boundaries remain as they were shown on the estate maps of 1797 and 1810.

The documents from those years show that the property had recently seen great changes; five new farm steadings had appeared on

the flat lands bordering the meandering River Forth to complement the existing hill farm. The deep peats of Drip Moss, Blairdrummond Moss and Flanders Moss had been stripped from the fertile clays below and floated away down the river out into the North Sea. Farming the reclaimed 'carse' lands was to provide the economic base for the Touch Estate for over 200 years.

Diversification has led to the stable block being fully refurbished to provide modern office accommodation as the Touch Business Centre. It may be that revenue from the estate woodlands, too, is now as urgently required as it ever has been. The current forestry work in hand is making a significant financial contribution to the estate's redevelopment and, according to Gavin Munro, the prices offered for the hardwood parcels have been particularly encouraging.

One of Britain's most experienced timber buyers, Gavin Munro has bought and sold timber on most of the estates in the north of England and the south of Scotland. As a timber buyer, he points out, you get to know your estates... and their ability to produce quality timber. The trees of Scotland's Clyde Valley are riddled with 'shake' and there is an estate in the English Midlands known to the fraternity as 'Shaky Shugborough'. The skill of grading



*If the bend is right, oak can be saleable for boatbuilding or green oak construction. This limb looks good according to Gavin Munro. A small limb is often found to have grown at the apex of the bend, as it has here, but if the knot is still alive it should be acceptable.*

is probably the most difficult part of the job and there is no substitute for years of experience, which is why Gavin has been running the Hardwood Seminars for TDB for over ten years.

Over that time, while softwood prices have wavered and rallied and fallen again, prices for the better grades of hardwood have shown a steady increase. The more than satisfactory rate obtained by the Touch Estate for the 600 cubic metres of oak and sycamore marked for felling (over £3 per hoppus foot standing) was not, however, down to chance. An appreciation of the measurement conventions used by hardwood buyers such as Gavin Munro is, of course, the first necessity.

The hoppus cubic foot (or 'hoppus cube' or 'cube' or 'h cu ft') was the standard timber volume measurement in Britain before the metric system was introduced. It is still fairly widely used by the hardwood

trade. This volume measurement is 21% larger than a true cubic foot and quite simply 'squares' the log and allows for waste. One cubic metre is 27.74 h cu ft; one metric tonne of fresh cut oak will have a volume of about 25 h cu ft; one tonne of dead elm or poplar about 32 h cu ft. Those present now had enough information to calculate the price of the Touch Estate parcel in pounds per cubic metre and may have been tempted at this point to rush back to their own estate or Forest District office to apply for felling licences.

There are a couple of 'Golden Rules', however, to take into consideration. Firstly, parcels of hardwoods should never be felled on speculation, but only after a market for the timber has been found. Secondly, the timber buyer should decide where he wants the produce to be cross-cut. The longer the timber is left the more value the sawmiller



*(Left) Softwoods come off the hill on the Touch Estate. Across the valley of the River Forth from Stirling Castle and the Wallace Monument it was the sycamore – and the high value 'boatskin' larch – that was of interest to the seminar delegates. (Right) Gavin Munro in his element. The 'burr oak' behind him will sell for about £600, but it is not perfect. Had it been, the buyer of the standing timber might have quadrupled his profit from the log.*



(Left) These sycamore logs are certainly saleable – if you know where to send them. As it happens, they will probably end up entering Germany through the port of Hamburg. An ‘olive ash’ log was also on show here. The colouring was once seen as a defect, but now the stained timber is very fashionable. (Right) The timber sword and the quarter girthing tape are the essential tools of the hardwood timber merchant, together with the ‘Hoppus Tables’ for calculating volume. Before offering a price for sycamore buyers usually remove a small ‘window’ of bark from the standing tree to search for ‘figuring’, which increases the value hugely.

can add. The time of felling, too, is important as white timbers such as ash and sycamore quickly discolour in the summer months.

The exception proves the rule, of course, and where the forest owner, manager or contractor finds himself with small amounts of mixed quality and species of hardwood, he may be better to sell to a small local sawmiller. North of the border the Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers has over twenty members and their slogan is: “We want your logs!” It is amazing how much they can get out of a piece of timber, according to Gavin Munro. With parcels of timber of 100 cubic metres or more, especially if there is good quality in the lots, the bigger boys will be willing to travel and they are the ones who are able to stump up the big money.

A few options are available for the harvesting process; including selling standing to the merchant and selling the trees felled at the stump. It is all a matter of risk; even in the best stand there will be a few trees that disappoint. Such was the case with the Touch Estate parcel, with one very promising planking butt (see below) reduced to fencing grade by hidden faults. Selling felled at the stump – with the poorer grade produce and firewood extracted and the site tidy – can attract the best prices but the forester or owner then has to shoulder the risk. In these cases Gavin Munro is still willing to let experienced specialist hardwood fellers put the trees down, and then contract others with specialist machinery for the extraction. One forest manager put it bluntly: “There are plenty of ways to save money but low cost felling is not one of them.”

As for the grading of hardwoods, the best of Touch’s oak and sycamore would be ‘butts’. ‘Veneer butts’ and ‘planking butts’ tend to attract similar prices nowadays, and the classification extends to Sweet chestnut, ash, cherry and yew etc. Beech is a case apart with prices – except for prime specimens on well known estates in the Chilterns or Cotswolds – having been pegged down since 1976. “It’s not a tree that has made anyone in this country any money,” comments Gavin.

On to second grades and oak and elm are known in the trade as ‘beams’. A minimum dbh of 35cm (many merchants will still be looking for a ‘quarter girth’ of 11 inches when they come to measure) is generally required, but the minimum

length of 18 feet demanded when Gavin Munro first sold timber is now down to 8 feet. Improvements in seasoning technology have also led to a wider range of timber of this quality now being acceptable.

Common or garden hardwoods – such as ash, sycamore or field maple – can be saleable as second quality furniture planking. These timbers are often used in the construction of sofas and beds etc. Hidden under the upholstery, the ability to hold nails and to take glue are the important qualities and visual defects are acceptable. Birch, on the other hand, can look extremely good in the furniture imported from Austria, Germany and Scandinavia. Its use in Britain may have been limited by its poor planing qualities.

Those prepared to finish it by sanding may be also prepared to pay a reasonable price for good stems in parcels of oak or ash or sycamore.

The demand for ‘fencing oak’ – the third grade – started in the Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire area years ago as 3x3 inch with some waney edge acceptable. The grade is now extended to any sort of construction oak for outside use, so plenty of the durable hardwood will bring a price premium. As those attending the seminar were to find out in the afternoon sessions on the Touch Estate, even the timber of some pretty bendy and knotty oak tops, if marketed properly, could earn them about £3.20 per hoppus foot.

Hilary Burke



(Left) This may not look good to the untutored eye, but the defects in this butt are age cracks that often appear after large oaks are felled. One solution in a butt this size is to ‘quarter saw’ along the line of the major cracks and resaw along the grain. This would produce panels with beautiful wide silver banding, such as were used in the interior of the Palace of Westminster. (Right): This tree promised to be one of the best in the Touch Estate parcel but the buyer was to be desperately disappointed. What can be salvaged will probably be destined for ‘fencing oak’. The cavity would be a small problem but the cracks crossing the log are ‘star shake’. The dark stains have been in the tree for years and continue to the top. The dark circular stains show the presence of ‘ring shake’.