



Patrick Baxter takes a personal interest in every piece of wood that passes through his business.

Dairy farming was big business up on the exposed and windswept plateau that forms the eastern part of Lanarkshire. Until recently, that is. The changes in agricultural policies and subsidies have caused as much upheaval in the Scottish Midlands as they have in the rest of Britain. In the fields between Carnwath and Auchengray, the young larches and Sitka spruces of Falla Wood are now establishing themselves as farmers opt for a new source of income.

Patrick Baxter, at Girdwoodend Farm, has been increasing Lanarkshire's woodland cover too; but his choice of species is somewhat more varied. Hardly surprising, as Patrick makes his living from an extraordinarily wide variety of timbers. He has also now gone into the business of supplying Scottish grown seasoned hardwood with second-to-none sustainable credentials. The label may merely say 'Lanarkshire Hardwoods, Patrick Baxter' but the provenance of every board is recorded in the office at Girdwoodend.

Patrick Baxter left his native Scotland to serve an apprenticeship with cabinet maker David Ackroyd in Shropshire. He was determined, however, to return home to estab-

lish his business and Girdwoodend Farm, midway between Edinburgh and Glasgow and not far from the M8, seemed to be the ideal place for Patrick Baxter Furniture. That was in 1992. Quality furniture making was the enterprise and quality timber, of course, would be needed. He admits that sourcing and seasoning the wood he required himself had always held an appeal, and local people were soon offering him timber, which sawmillers or contractors would cut for him.

By 1996 almost all of the timber used was brought in and seasoned 'in house' but it was not until 2003 that complete control of the whole process was achieved by obtaining the regular use of a Wood-Mizer mobile sawbench. The informal working partnership with the owner of the sawbench and a few others means that Patrick can make the most of a log, altering the cutting specifications as the sawband reveals the hidden qualities or faults in the timber.

This is not, of course, the whole story. Despite a Regional Enterprise Start Up Grant things were at first difficult. Furniture repairing provided much of the money coming in and Income Support helped too;



Patrick checks the progress of stack No 070906. The coding system he uses has recently been upgraded but the location and provenance of every board still remains traceable.

as did feeding and clothing by parents. Breaking into the ranks of the established bespoke furniture makers does not happen overnight. There were still the outbuildings at Girdwoodend to renovate and the woodworking tools and machinery to install. Buying new was not an option, so nothing was going to be that modern or technologically advanced. The serial number on the Wadkin 24" planer / thicknesser, for example – still in use today – reveals that it is of 1950s vintage.

There was also a period when a few staff were employed on the premises, but while that may have worked well on a production line system, with more furniture commissions coming in alongside the task of sourcing and handling the primary material, everything ran better when Patrick had only his own time to organise... until he met Rachael in 2000.

In her own words 'a classic Edinburgh townie', Rachael brought with her an interest in good furniture and an ability to take charge of a lot of the stock control and to deal with the furniture commissions and designs. The VAT returns also end up on Rachael's desk. "I control the money," says Rachael, who admits it had been a big leap from steady paid employment. Her CV was good though; she had been a Small Business Advisor in West Lothian.

The sale of seasoned hardwood boards had started in 1999 with the clearance of some offcuts surplus to the requirements of Patrick Baxter Furniture. Today when Patrick goes

out to collect timber and bring it in to the yard he has a good idea how much he will reserve for his own use in his furniture projects and how much will end up on sale to the public or other woodworkers in the retail barn at Girdwoodend. What has not changed is Patrick's meticulous attention to detail.

The original location of the tree is recorded, and the logs are numbered as they come into the yard. After cutting on the Wood-Mizer the boards are also numbered and stacked for air drying. To avoid disturbing the stacks, digital photographs can be taken and shown to prospective purchasers if they require timber with special features. A phone call to Girdwoodend can ascertain what dimension of timber in which species is currently available and what will be coming up in the next twelve months.

For many of the larger timber dealers a rapid turnaround of stock is the norm, with timber being force dried as soon as it is sawn. Lanarkshire Hardwoods policy, on the other hand, is to air dry stock for a year (per inch of thickness) in the traditional way and finish the drying in the kiln, bringing the humidity content down to 6 to 10%. The benefit of the latter method, according to Patrick, is a more stable product with more predictable qualities. The drawback, of course, is the amount of capital tied up in the lengthy process and the inability to 'supply on demand'.

"People coming to us are sometimes stunned by the diversity of the timber we produce. They can



Rachael, Holly (what other name could the wee lassie be given!) and Patrick under the Wild cherry at Girdwoodend Farm. The Gean (to give it its Scottish name) is not reputed to grow too well in the higher parts of Lanarkshire, but it has been given the chance here.

be fixated on oak, mahogany or plywood. It's difficult to get oak here so I rarely have much, but I am often able to persuade people to consider something else instead," says Patrick. Although the furniture commissions mean that Patrick is frequently working on site at Girdwoodend, customers – always welcome – are advised to phone before starting their journeys, which in some cases involve considerable distances. Thursday, however, has been set aside as a regular opening day and Patrick will be found on the farm; probably at the moment working on a bed fashioned from 'spalted' beech.

The timber used in the design came from a very large tree near Hawick. The dark colour of the spalting is actually a sign of internal decay within the tree, but if it is caught at the right time it makes great figuring. The strength of the timber is compromised but the components of the piece are being crafted with an inbuilt chunkiness to compensate. The clients in this case had been in no doubt, when they were shown the timber from the Borders giant, that it was just what they wanted for their piece of furniture.

At the moment about 90% of Lanarkshire Hardwoods' production is for sale to both the amateur and professional craftsmen who come to rummage through the stock in search of the boards that take their fancy. While a few come from far and wide – even from Devon in the

south and over from the Scottish Islands – many customers are local; like the timber they are after. Patrick has the experience necessary to offer advice both on the selection and the use of the product.

But what is available in the round to Lanarkshire Harwoods? Elm, explains Patrick, comes up in fits and starts as local estates blitz their woodlands of diseased trees every few years. Lots of around twenty tonnes are not uncommon when this happens. This being Scotland, a fair proportion is in the form of Wych elm. Yew, which he has always considered to be one of the harder timbers to get hold of, has been arriving in the last couple of years in 'enormous amounts' from three or four sources. The Wild cherry (known in Scotland as the Gean) does not thrive in most parts of Lanarkshire but the Bird cherry is not uncommon so some cherry is usually available.

Rachael is not the only 'Edinburgh townie' at Girdwoodend at the moment. The dark, hard wood of the laburnum is not uncommonly used for inlay work in cabinet making and boards from a tree that grew in 'Auld Reekie' are available for sale – Ann Street to be precise about the provenance. Patrick has also recently obtained the largest bole of the species he has ever worked with but he has definite plans for the 2½ inch boards which will be cut from that one. From another rarity, mulberry, he has fashioned and presented a donation box to the Biggar



Larger boards of elm, beech, cherry, oak and sycamore are always seasoned under cover. The Manitou Tele-handler moves logs, loads stacks into the kiln and also handles the crated firewood.

Museum Trust. It will be returning to Girdwoodend for storage during the winter whilst the establishment is closed and Patrick is eager to see how it has changed: mulberry wood slowly takes on a deep chocolate brown hue with exposure to light.

Back to things more mundane and, despite the fact that Patrick Baxter is now more choosy about the boles he buys than he once was, there are still parts of trees that will not make saleable boards or woodturning blanks. The sawmilling and woodworking residues, for example. The recent acquisition of a new machine has seen Patrick striving to learn just how to produce the perfect biomass briquette. He has already, with some difficulty,

sourced a secret by-product from an industrial / craft process to enhance the handling and burning properties of the briquettes.

Traditional firewood logs are split with an electric powered splitter or the Austrian Leonhard Müller splitting axe ("The best I've ever seen," according to Patrick. "So big... so heavy. And with a superb edge.") Stored under cover out in the yard the logs are crated for easy uplift with the Manitou Tele-handler. The Baxter attention to detail is also in evidence here. It will come as no surprise that the quality and condition of the logs and the date of production are marked on the crate... and probably recorded in the office too.

Hilary Burke



(Left) In the workshop Patrick Baxter applies a little 'elbow grease' to a board of spalted beech. The large wane edged board of chestnut behind him came from a tree in Dumfriesshire. (Right) Batch 4650 (Sycamore) in the retail warehouse, which is open to customers whenever Patrick is working on site. The one inch wane edged board in the foreground is elm from Biggar in Lanarkshire.