

To Hell and Back

John Fish and Treewood Harvesting

Sitting in the office of his Essex-based contracting yard, just off Junction 7 of the M11 – not a place best known for its forestry – John Fish, owner of Treewood Harvesting, is a man who (at age 48) is finally at ease with himself and the choices he has had to make. John tells *Forestry Journal* that, at its zenith, Treewood Harvesting ran the largest fleet of machines in England and Wales, before pointing to the holes in the soles of his boots, which he still wears because they are comfortable and he likes them.

He has thought a great deal about what he will say and is armed with a list of reminders and a title for his story, 'To Hell and Back'. He says, "To be successful in the tree harvesting business, employing others, you have to tick three boxes. You need the right members of staff, with the right skills and attitude, working the right machine to suit the job. You also need the right rate for the job. If one box is unchecked, there is a big problem. At times, I would have been unable to tick any."

John began his career shovelling dung on his father's pig farm, where the contracting yard stands today. Aged 14, he used his first chainsaw (a Black and Decker) to cut firewood from felled lengths of diseased (Dutch elm) timber to burn in the house. Leaving school at 16, he combined his log round, delivering firewood to neighbours on a tractor and trailer unit, with agricultural work.

"When I delivered their logs peo-

ple would ask me to bring my chainsaw; a dead tree in the garden needed taking down. I went self-employed in 1978 [aged 18] and within five years gave up the farm work to run a tree surgery business. By the late 1980s, I was taking down trees in local farmers' woodlands. I was getting drawn back to my passion, forestry."

In 1990, John borrowed £45,000 to buy his first purpose-built harvester (a Makeri) to complete one commutable contract, cutting 500 tonnes for the Forestry Commission in Suffolk. A year later he was harvesting between 5000 and 7000 cubic metres of conifer. "Even back then, the thought in my head was always, 'I am not earning enough'. I can remember running from the harvester to get spare pipes from the van!"

In 1992, he expanded the operation by buying a second excavator-based harvester to cut standing timber purchased in East Anglia. "No one wanted to haul from East Anglia to the big chipboard processing factories or the pulp mill (Shotton) I was supplying in Wales, so I bought three lorries over a period of time and hauled 300-400 tonnes a week."

By 1993 John ran four businesses; tree surgery [employing a manager and ten staff]; tree harvesting; haulage and a sawmill operation. Harvesting turned a small profit, so he sold the rest. "By the late 1990s, the business becomes a blur. The only way to earn money seemed to be to cut more wood. In 2000,



Feeling angry: John Fish, with Jonathan 'Little Jon' Millen (left) and son, Jake.

I made a conscious decision to run a large fleet of machines and work nationally. It was a gamble. I thought the economies of scale (bulk buying) might help and I could employ a manager to help run the company."

From 2003 until 2005, Treewood Harvesting ran 23 machines. "We had ten harvesters, mainly purpose-built Logset machines; ten forwarders, two skylines and a German purpose-built HSM skidder. We worked eight to ten jobs at a time, mostly for the FC. We worked on all terrains, from sand in Thetford and Dorset to steep skyline sites in the Scottish Borders. In 2005, we cut 200,000 cubic metres of conifer thinnings and clearfell. Although the company had a £2 million turnover, we lost £100,000."

"It was a £2 million nightmare. We were on tight margins, constantly chasing work for the machines. I could not run the business from the forest so I went to the yard every morning in a boiler suit, wanting to get into the workshop. I would spend six days a week confined in the office answering phone-calls. 90% of them were problems. With the machines spread out across the UK, it was hard to keep a check on progress. Because I wasn't there cracking the whip, maybe there was less incentive to work hard compared to our competitors, and so we lost money."

"Welsh timber prices were low. To create a revenue stream, the Welsh FC wanted to cut more volume and increase the amount of thinning. I invested in small machines thinking that I would earn more money. It worked for a while. Then the FC realised that they were not as far behind on the thinning programme as they had first thought. They started putting clearfells out to tender. We were competing against owner-operators with big machines and

the ultimate incentive to work – big finance payments. If an owner-operator has a bad day, he can work on Saturday or Sunday to catch up. I can't say that to my employees."

"It was impossible to find a manager who combined good people skills, knowledge of the machinery and our industry sector. I became the Head of HR, struggled with new legislation and went to man-management seminars. With 33 staff, I felt I had to. Eventually I lost it when I heard about paternity leave. If an employee is off for three weeks, the machines still have to make money. It was the same when a member of staff left. I was forced to take on the first operator that came along. Often, they did not know how to operate these machines efficiently. There was nobody else out there to employ."

John employed a business advisor. "He pointed out that I was spending 80% of my time serving customers that brought in 20% of the revenue. He told me to act more like the boss and less like an employee."

John realised that by the end of 2005 he could lose the business unless he took drastic action. "There was a big black hole looming. I decided to 'grow' my business by making it smaller and more profitable, working for the best clients and getting rid of the rest. If a pair of machines did not earn money over six months, they had to go. The hardest part was offering voluntary redundancy to decent men that I liked. Last November, the Welsh Forestry Commission said it could not afford to employ the skyline until their next financial year, April 2008. This was the last team to go. It was business common sense, not passion."

Treewood Harvesting now employs twelve machines, eight full-time staff and four subcontractors.



John appreciates old machinery as well as new, and he stands in front of his 1942 AEC Matador timber tractor.



Jake Fish driving the Logset 506H harvester, cutting between 2500 and 3000 cubic metres of conifer at Bollington Hall, a private estate near Stansted. At 16, Jake is already harvesting around 75 tonnes of 75-80 foot tall Grand fir per day and John is struggling to keep up. John says, "The scary thing for Jake is that we will come back in five years and take out the rest of the conifer, leaving just the hardwood. That will be our part of the industry finished here. Jake is already saying, 'Where is my future Dad?'"

tors. Business is good. They work in the South of England, Wales and Cumbria, cutting 80,000 to 100,000 cubic metres per year, over half on direct contract to the FC. John drives a forwarder three days a week on a private estate near Stansted alongside his son Jake, who is thinning 2500 to 3000 tonnes of conifer and hardwood using a Logset 506 harvester which is now nine years old. (Having owned it from new, with TLC and no expense spared on the maintenance, it has years of work left in it). At 16, Jake is too young to work on FC land.

During the first half of this decade, John spent most days feeling angry, and he still does on occasion. He wonders how the economic downturn will affect his industry, having experienced similar in the past. Although he is keeping an eye on biomass, he cannot see the potential in the immediate future. He is as concerned about the lack of skilled operators as he is for the next generation of forestry workers and where, if any, the work will be. He wonders, is commercial forestry going the same way as the coal industry?

We walk to the workshop, where Jake is feeding blunt chains onto a German-made automatic chain sharpener, watched by Jonathan ('Little Jon'), John's right hand man. Jonathan joined the company when he left school 17 years ago, one of several pupils opting to learn a trade rather than go on to further education. Nine months ago, in a

year of 147 students, Jake was the only school-leaver to get a job. He says, "At school, they have no idea what forestry is. I gave up explaining what Dad did for a living, even to the teachers. They thought he was cutting down the rainforest when he was in the New Forest. My friends can't understand me wanting to drive a harvester."

The bottom of John's list of written reminders reads, 'this is my opportunity to get on my soap box and say what needs to be said'. He continues, "Jake is the only young person I know to come into the industry. Perhaps he should have gone to college, but there appears to be no colleges in our area that specialise in running courses for operators. Everyone comes out of college as a forestry manager and it is too expensive for me to train an operator from scratch. If I put a novice on a newish machine, in the first year, through lack of production, it could cost me £75,000 to get that operator up to speed, only then for him to leave because his girlfriend is fed up with him working away from home!

"The timber industry, from contractors and timber growers to the FC, is useless at selling itself to outsiders. The FC was first set up because the government were worried about the UK timber supply after WW1. Now they are taking productive land and returning it to heathland to prevent the fat man on the bike from having a heart attack. Trees are not even being

replanted. Where is the industry going? The government needs to ask itself whether it wants to be supplying wood for its own home market. If the answer is 'no', then they need to tell us. We are competing with boatloads of timber coming in from Canada, Germany and Finland. Unless we can all stop fighting, and pull together, there will be no industry left."

'Little Jon' is, as usual, working away from home, in Ringwood. When John asks him why he thinks contractors are angry, he says, "There is not enough money for the long hours worked away from home. The mechanisation of for-

estry has almost ruined people's lives. Chainsaw gangs used to work locally. Machines have cut the local timber, so we have to go away from home to make a living. That and the lack of respect for contractors. We are treated like the amoebas at bottom of the pile in this industry."

It is this lack of respect in some cases that still angers John. "I have always tried to give something back. I spent time and money sending out operator training proposals to FC departments all over the UK, suggesting ways in which colleges, contractors and the FC could work together to bring new blood into this industry. Everyone thought it was a good idea but no one would take on the role because they were all busy doing their own jobs. Nothing happened. I could do no more."

John concludes, "I have been to hell. I will not go back for anything. I am not that interested in going out to see the machines any more, but this industry still fires a passion in me that can and will, if you let it, overtake common sense. I kept pushing and pushing to make a success of things, when the business should have been about money and balance sheets. If the forests had been on my doorstep, maybe things would have been different, maybe I could have kept an eye on the work – I will never know. In 2005 my accountant looked at the books and said, 'John, you have £3 million worth of equipment on finance. Why are you doing this? Maybe this passion is the Neanderthal urge, a man swinging his axe out in the woods. Only nowadays, contractors sit on the axe and drive it."

Carolyne Locher



There are around ten tonnes of saw logs on the Logset forwarder. John bought these machines – the Logset 506H harvester and 6F forwarder – brand new in 1999. Because he has spent so much on maintenance they have a lot of life left in them, and because they are 'paid for', the pressure is off. He would not want to have to put them on front-line work – they are better on private estates.