

Woodwise

The view from the sharp end



Woodwise Forestry assists in the management of Ashdown Forest, which is the landscape on which AA Milne based his Winnie the Pooh stories. There are even maps of it in the books.

Good grief, I think I've just been Tango'd! There I was last month saying cheerio to 2007 and wishing you all the best for the New Year when, wallop, here I am, 2008, turning up in a different place – just like Alice in Wonderland. What happened there then?

As far as 2007 is concerned, I didn't manage to wash my hands of it completely. Some of you will remember my unfortunate incident with a very flammable Bobcat and mulcher. I think I mentioned that some four weeks after the event, the hire company still hadn't retrieved it from the wood.

Well, some 11 weeks later and multiple phone calls from the Woodland Officer to me, and from me to the hire company, they've been and moved it. I'm guessing the parts have finally arrived to repair it. Obviously, following a major burn up you can't just tape a few wires back together, bung in a fuse and go. Nor can you tow this thing out – hydrostatic drive, you see. What to do then?

Using my Sherlock-like powers of deduction (well that and the bloody great track marks running from the gate into the wood) I'd say they tracked a 21-tonne excavator almost a kilometre to the wreck, hoisted it up and tracked all the way out again. All fine and dandy you'd think.

No, of course not. The phone goes again. It's the Woodland Officer ringing to give me the good news, the machine has at last gone. I breathe a sigh of relief, but as I do he says, "But..." and I think, "Oh, now what?"

Apparently the big digger has managed to slide off what is a dead straight, very well engineered, forest road and down the rather steep bank on one side. Fortunately, some well-grown hemlock stops

him descending further. However, in the process it has removed a lot of the type one road stone, exposed the membrane and disturbed the sub-base. Quite how you manage that on a straight road I can't imagine – driver rolling a fag perhaps! Anyway, the point is, it's our only access for maintenance works and for timber lorries and now there is a very real danger of erosion so, "Get it fixed, Nick."

First thing this morning I'm on to the plant hire company. This could be frustrating. This firm must have a grump detector on their phone system as I'm instantly put through to someone I've never spoken to in my life, despite years of my custom. Having explained my problem, been looked up on the computer, cross referenced and probably Interpol searched, I'm put through to another bod and I get to repeat the whole story again.

Inevitably, I get the question as to whether I'm certain they did it. Quite firmly, I'm able to respond in the affirmative. Since the Woodland Officer drives a Vauxhall, I drive a Land Rover; do not own a gurt big digger and only them and the two of us know the combination on the lock, it has to be – the clincher, of course, being the burnt-out Bobcat in their workshop. It didn't just magic its way there did it? With that I get a polite but firm, "We'll get back to you today." Call me cynical, but I don't think I'll hold my breath.

Having had enough time to boil the kettle for a cuppa, I shall now have a large slice of humble pie with my tea as that was precisely the length of time it took them to get back – amazing! A very apologetic chap rings and explains that they had a bit of trouble. He accepts responsibility and promises that, as they are also civil engineers, they'll



"Bother!"

have it all patched up by the week-end – result!

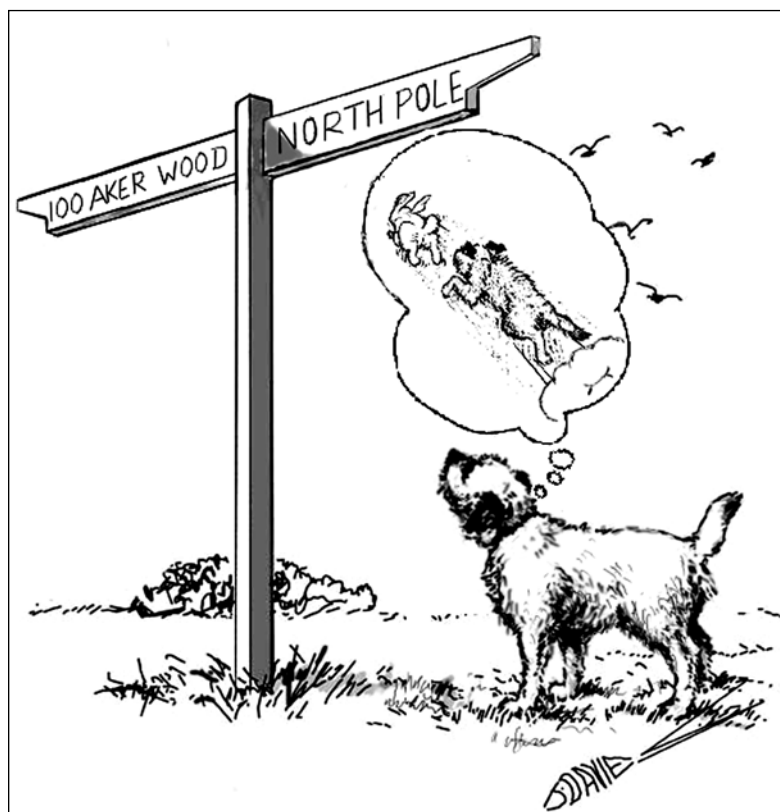
It turns out that the problem was caused when the digger driver found his way blocked by a bit of windblow. Now you and I would have used our digger's arm to push the thing out of the way, but no, presumably in a bid to make his long, lonely tracking a bit more exciting, he decides to climb over it. Of course, at the mid-point of balance, he has made his own seesaw out of a very greasy pole. 21 tonnes on wet hemlock with a friction coefficient the equivalent of oil on glass do not make for happy landings. Whoops – at least he got the windblow out of the way I suppose.

Enough of that reality. At the beginning I mentioned Alice in Wonderland and now I find I'm in the middle of a completely different

children's story.

For many years now, we at Woodwise have been contracted to do the never-ending job of heathland clearance on the Ashdown Forest. I say never-ending because, although its present size of 2400 hectares has less than 40% woodland on it, that bit keeps trying to enlarge itself by spreading out into the open areas, and with the lack of grazing animals it's pretty successful. So what you think is, "More trees – that's great."

Well, as it's both the largest area of lowland heath (2.5% of the UK's resource) and the largest free public access space in the South East, it's been designated Pretty Damn Important, but as that particular acronym had already been used, they made it an ANOB instead and triple SI'd it just to make sure.



"Pooh, Roo, Piglet, Tigger and, yes, Rabbit too...!"



(Left) Winnie's stomping ground. (Right) Valmet, aka Eeyore, in a sad and gloomy place.

So, having made it into a national treasure, the plan is to try and keep it that way.

Our job is to march/wade all over vast areas, cutting out the natural regen and spraying the stumps where appropriate. I then normally trundle around with the Valmet/Botex crane combo, picking it all up to burn in a safe area. This can be quite an exciting job as you're never too sure what's under the tractor. Heather and bracken are usually safe bets, but when you get onto the grasses – beware!

Sometimes it's absolutely no

problem and after a few hours and hectares have passed, one's sense of security can quite suddenly be broken by realising that the ground for several metres around the tractor is moving and rippling. That's when you realise you're in several tonnes of machine on a rather thick-skinned custard – which way is out?!

Alternatively, you'll drop a wheel into a slit-trench or tank-trap that the army have playfully left behind. Actually, I shall now call these 'Hefferlump Traps'. You'll see why in a minute. After all this horrendous weather, the ground is bog-

gier than ever, and, after last year's complaints about mud, I decided on a strategic withdrawal. The timing was rubbish though as, having been round my bonfire site 50 odd times, on the last trip the ground gave up any sign of support and I'm well in. Cup of tea time and wait for the winch then.

At last we get a dry, bright day and, although we can't do any tracting, at least we can finish the cutting and spraying.

While we're having a bite, a group of ramblers wander by and ask, "Have you seen the North

Pole?" The lads look at each other and mutter about global warming, getting really serious. What they don't realise is that we're smack in the middle of Winnie the Pooh country.

I can't remember from reading the book 40 years ago where the Pole is, so out of curiosity I thought I'd look it up on the web, and apart from the North Pole, guess what I also found? The Valmet had sunk in Eeyore's 'sad and gloomy place', described in the book as 'rather boggy'. Oh Pooh! *Nick Hilton*

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