

# Three Generation Game

## A penchant for thinnings, and an affinity with water

It is clear from meeting and talking to Simon Burns that he is a larger-than-life character and a man that is passionately committed to the forestry industry. His company, appropriately called Burns, Burns & Burns, is a three-generation family-run business. As he told me when I recently met up with him – things could have been so different had he followed his father into the hotel business. Instead, he started his own company and is now well known for providing forestry contracting services in the Highlands of Scotland.

He started out having been asked to work in the wood stacking 2-metre pulp, which in turn gave him the opportunity to get on a chainsaw and, in his words, "I quite liked it!" From this early experience, he soon got the idea to set up for himself and, at the tender age of 19 using his own savings, he brought a Makeri 33T harvester – "The Red One," he laughed, adding, "It wasn't the most comfortable machine unless you were strapped tightly to the seat."

After two years learning about the mysteries of electrical hydraulics, he decided on a move to something that was more productive. Finding it impossible to get financial backing from the banks, he was grateful for the encouragement and backing from his grandmother Evelyn and father Brendan. He soon found a second-hand Ösa Eva 250 harvester equipped with a brand

new Silvatec 335 MD 40 head. This was the start of a long relationship with Silvatec which still exists today.

Simon said of the Ösa that it was a 'hardy bus', and ideal for the thinnings work that he was doing. Some of his first jobs with the Ösa were with Charlie Lawson and Bill Munro, contractors in the Aberdeenshire area. These were good times as Charlie and Bill had the forwarders and the contracts and Simon had a harvester. Very quickly he started to develop networks with other contractors who helped with spares and advice when problems arose.

In the late 1990s, it was a drying up of thinnings and the relative boom in clearfell contracts that led him to make the big decision to move away from his Aboyne home. It had become very hard to compete against the bigger contractors for the clearfell work and, as he wanted to stay in thinnings, he headed down to Perthshire.

This was a hard time for Simon and his business and he became increasingly frustrated at the lack of opportunities. Just as he was seriously contemplating quitting the industry fate intervened and he was offered the chance of working on Bolfracks Estate at Aberfeldy. This was only supposed to last for six weeks, but in fact led to an eight-year association with the estate and a lasting friendship with estate forester Andy Mc Kerchar; another man who he found was dedicated to



Simon Burns' team at Elgin: (from the left) Scott Kelman, 608 operator, Jimmy Grigor, operator of the 1110D, and Simon himself.

thinning work. They operated in tandem in the forests at Bolfracks with Simon doing the harvesting and Andy the forwarding.

By the end of 2003 the thinnings at Bolfracks was reducing and an opportunity arose in the Inverness area, so he moved up to Drumadrochit. By this time another second-hand harvester had been purchased – a Timberjack 1270B with a second-hand Silvatec 445 MD 50 head – and this allowed him to employ his first driver and to take on more jobs.

This 1270B fitted in nicely because it could perform both thinnings and premature clearfells as well as being able to operate effectively in some of the more environmentally sensitive areas. By 2004, having identified the need for a forwarder, an 810B Timberjack joined the fleet, giving Simon greater control over the whole output of the jobs that he was doing. With the business expanding Simon seized the chance to purchase another 1270B, this one with a 762C head; this created an opportunity to take on bigger tree harvesting from the Forestry Commission in the Fort Augustus District, where he was already doing thinnings.

He was also taking on other work, some of which involved archaeological sites, and some with special environmental problems, community woodland projects and in particular areas where water management was critical. This raised several problems concerning the training of operators and the need to develop his own skill and knowledge on how to deal with these issues. In trying to come up with solutions, he interest-

ingly found out that there was not much information available and he very much had to work on a trial and error basis.

At this Simon realised he needed to expand the business again, and took what was then a big decision. For the first time since starting in business, Simon was to purchase his first brand new machine, a John Deere 1110D forwarder. Simon said, "I had to do something to move timber quicker because this game is about the continuity of the flow of timber; if you can't do it, somebody else will!" Also, his 810B was not proving as reliable as it could have been.

A period of buying and selling machinery followed, which resulted in the purchase of one of the last 1270B harvesters with a 762C head made by Timberjack, something that Simon couldn't resist. This machine was employed straightaway in late 2005 on a clearfell.

In early 2006 Simon started to work for James Jones, something that he continues to do. He describes Jones as, "A company that works with you and not against you." Initially he managed to secure three contracts with them and this employed all of his machinery including the ageing Ösa.

Working with James Jones found Simon and his team being involved on several jobs with particular water challenges. They have developed a great deal of experience in how to manage such jobs. Simon described one they worked in near Strathconnan. The site had fourteen crossing points, one main burn and four different water supplies, none of which could be compromised.



Simon Burns' 608 with 758 head is the newest harvester in his fleet.



(Left) The 1270B with Silvatec 445 MD 50 head. (Right) Simon's first purpose-built harvester, the much missed Ösa Eva 250.

They decided that the solution to the problem was to build silt traps ten feet before every crossing point. This was achieved by hiring a digger which was employed in this task for a period of five weeks to keep emptying the traps as they filled up constantly. The digger was also vital at keeping the forest road open.

Simon told me that there was a great degree of satisfaction at being able to complete this job with no problems. He was proud of how his team rose to the task and at the close cooperation and help received from James Jones. I asked him why he tackled such complicated jobs. His reply was simple: "They challenge me more than straightforward harvesting – they keep me on my toes."

Perhaps his appetite for these unusual jobs was whetted by one that he carried out on Skye. He told me it was a 'simple' task of cutting to waste a site that contained an otter sanctuary, where the only access route into the site for machines was by crossing the water from the mainland.

Undaunted, Simon told me how he transported his two 1270s across the water on an ex-army landing craft; he had his machines equipped with tracks and chains to enable them to get off the beach when they were landed. The job was completed without too much problem but an encounter with the authorities as he returned via the Skye Bridge with his pickup and trailer a 'wee bit' overloaded with tanks resulted in Simon later on having to install a tachograph in his pickup!

This was not quite as bad as trying to get the harvesters off the beach as the landing craft grounded itself. He described vividly the attempts of others to float off the craft, while he at the same time had to drive one of his harvesters at speed to get onto the craft before it sailed away! With a wicked grin he

declared it was, "All good fun!"

I was interested in what direction he saw his business going in the future. He told me that he is passionate about thinnings, which to him is more interesting than clearfells, but he also recognised that clearfelling has become an important part of his work. Indeed he was quick to discuss one of his most recent acquisitions, a Timberjack 608 harvester with a 758 head from Norman Johnston, a local contractor. In Simon's words it was, "In extremely good nick!" and will play a big part in allowing him to do more clearfell work.

He has also purchased another Silvatec 445 MD 50 because the original one has now done 23,000 hours. He has just recently replaced his Valmet 840 S2 with an 840.4. This machine is brand new, but Simon did say that he has been fortunate in the second-hand machinery that he has bought to date. His secret is having a thorough maintenance programme which ensures that all of the machines are serviced at their required intervals.

Part of the success of this programme is Simon's black Nissan Navara with its distinctive and personalised number plate – L30 BBB – which he describes as his 'mobile toolbox'. With this he is able to carry out servicing and maintenance on site at weekends or when the machines are not in use, minimising downtime and ensuring that his machines are able to operate consistently, delivering the productivity levels that he requires.

Simon is also committed to training his team, with the aim of developing their operational skills and also their ability to assist with the maintenance. Apart from the health and safety considerations, Simon has very clear views on the way his machines should be operated.

On the day I visited Simon at Level Wood in Elgin, I was able to

see both his 1270s in action, as well as his 1110D forwarder. One of his 1270s is specially set up for thinnings and is able to operate in very narrow spaces, as he does on Moray Estates at Forres, where he carries out harvest-only work.

"I just love driving this harvester," said Simon. "If I had to keep any machine it would be this one."

I asked him who have been the biggest influences on his career? Without hesitation he told me that it was undoubtedly his father Brendan and his grandmother Evelyn. Brendan himself, as past chairman of the Forestry Contracting Association, is well known in the industry, but from Simon's viewpoint he has always been the supportive person that backed his early vision for a forestry-based business.

Brendan has also been on hand throughout Simon's career with advice and guidance when asked for it. Simon told me with a laugh that his father has, "Always made sure that I'm legally compliant and on the right side of the law!" While Brendan's support has been invaluable,

Simon did point out that they 'have had their moments'!

Strangely enough another great support for his business has actually been one of his machines! He told me one of the worst times was when he had to part with his Ösa Eva after 14 years of faithful service. "It was like losing an old friend," he said. "I wasn't too happy to see it go." It was traded in for a Valmet 840 S2.

Simon does have another major project for this year which has nothing to do with forestry; he has plans in hand to build a new house on the Black Isle. He spoke as passionately about this project as he had about all his involvement in the forestry.

From my time meeting up with Simon, it is clear to me that he is totally committed to working in forestry and to continuing to build his business. He also has very clear views on the industry and the way he wants to operate his company. The future seems very much assured as Burns, Burns & Burns heads for two decades of existence.

James Hendrie



The Valmet 840.4 is light on its feet, making it suitable for thinnings as well as clearfell. "A good all-round machine," says Simon Burns.