



## ***“Trying to operate forests in the way it should be done – not simply cashing in by returning the area to heath!”***

It was said in the late fourteenth century that patience is a virtue. Since this saying is so often quoted today, you'd be forgiven for thinking that we live in a time of vice, where patience is dismissed for the short-term benefits of a quick buck and maximised profit margins. Fortunately, at the Cowdray Estate in West Sussex, impatience is something of a dirty word. Sustainable forestry, through long-term planning, is a high priority for the team harvesting the trees there. At Cowdray, securing the future for generations to come is all part of taking your place among the line of foresters that have gone before you.

Cowdray's Head Forester Donald MacDonald's views are very clear on the waiting game played by generations of tree workers. "Foresters must act with restraint – they must be patient. Anyone in forestry who isn't patient ought not to be a forester!" It's a maxim Donald has followed throughout his long career, 25 years of which have been spent at Cowdray. As a result, many of the tree plantations on the estate are the fruits borne of his labour.

When we visited, the plantation at Cocking Forest that was being felled held a special significance for Donald. "This plantation we're felling today," he explained, "is one of the first areas I was involved in thinning when I came here."

That was back in 1985, when Donald was delighted to hear that he had got the job that 27 other applicants had applied for. Having

worked in forestry since leaving Cumbria College of Agriculture in 1974, uprooting from Galloway to West Sussex was a brave move, but not one Donald seems to have regretted for a moment. In his words, "It's been wonderful to be a part of it."

Donald has, however, experienced the difficulties brought on by the changing nature of the timber market. Which forester hasn't? But he differs from many in the optimistic outlook he is able to exude over the subject and this is apparent in his management of Cowdray's forests. He showed us the accounts from that first thinning at Cocking Forest in 1985. There, in a handwritten ledger, some of the timber was marked as being sold at £20 per tonne. "Now what do you think of this?" he smiled, as he went on to explain that the similar produce from the current felling was going to fetch £21 per tonne. In a quarter of a century that has seen the population grow at an extraordinary rate, and seen swathes of that population turn from state subsidised tenants to home improving, floor laminating, gazebo building DIYers, the price of wood has risen by a quid! What on Earth happened to the laws of supply and demand?

Of course, the answer is fairly simple. If demand is high, then it follows that the price should rise and settle at a level at which supply and demand reach equilibrium. However, flood a market with cheap imports and you have an excess of supply, and prices are



*Mature Scots pine, grown on the estate's sandier soils.*

forced down. Schoolboy economics maybe, but it's precisely the reason small estates are struggling to make the books balance. At an average rise of 4 pence per tonne per year, or stated as a percentage at 0.2% a year, it doesn't make good business sense to maintain a smallholding for timber.

So it is left to those who feel passionate about the industry, helped by the economies of scale, to make British timber more than a footnote in the history books of global commerce. "Machinery has had a big part to play in it," said Donald. "Without it we couldn't harvest the quantities of timber, at the costs we can afford, to be profitable."

The Cowdray Estate extends to around 7,350 hectares of which 36% is wooded. The equipment that harvests the trees has to be robust enough to handle large quantities, but small and flexible enough to handle the diversity of sizes and species present. There is a mixture of 55% conifers and 23% broadleaved species which extend over the differing soil types. Donald and his team have opted for a Valmet 830.1

forwarder and a Valmet 931 with Ponsse H60e harvesting head. "Big machines have a very limited use in southern England," he explained.

The Valmet processor is actually owned and operated by Richard Keen, who has been working on the estate for the last eight years. "The Valmet is a good machine, but it's getting a bit old now," Richard told me. "But I'm trying to squeeze a little bit more out of it before replacing."

However, the age of the machine didn't seem to be hindering his productivity. "On a very good day, I can achieve 150 tonnes," Richard explained, before adding with a smile, "but I think most operators give you their best figures. If I'm honest, I'll probably average about 85-88 tonnes."

On the day I visited, Richard had teamed up with Kerry Hill who was operating the forwarder at Cocking Forest. Kerry was a man described by Donald as, "From a long line of agricultural engineers. If you cut him he'll bleed hydraulic fluid!" The two certainly seemed to be making short work of the 14-acre



*(Left) New Holland T6030 with Albutt grab loading small Douglas sawlogs. (Right) 60-year-old Douglas fir logs, which were extracted by skidder.*



(Left) Donald MacDonald and Valmet harvester operator Richard Keen take a well earned break to pose for a photograph in the rain!

(Right) The 931 makes easy work of the Norway Spruce at Cowdray with its Ponsse head.

site of 50-year-old Norway spruce in what can only be described as atrocious conditions. The snow had forced the operators against the clock slightly, and the access road had been turned to a quagmire by recent rain. However, none of it seemed to deter the two seasoned woodsmen.

The forestry team is 16 strong and with such a large site it was impossible to meet them all. Three had recently been presented with long service medals denoting 30 years at the estate. One employee had recently retired after 49 years! As Donald put it, "Who would want to leave?" They are all trained to various degrees on equipment the estate has on site. This includes a New Holland T 6030 tractor fitted with a radio controlled Iglund winch, a Ford 7610 mounted with a Jensen A 340 chipper, and a new HD27 with a 48 Scrubmaster that is used for weeding. It's a long way from the manual operation that Donald inherited on his arrival.

"The storm of 1987 was what really prompted the change," he explained. "We had to harvest 100,000 tonnes of timber over three years!" While most of that timber was processed manually, by 1992 the estate opted to buy a Valmet, which Donald praised for giving, "Bloody good service over the years.

"When one of the machines is down and needs a part, they understand we need it quickly and it'll be here the next day. Not that they break down much anyway," he noted.

The equipment base grew until around 2002, when Donald decided that they had enough to perform all the necessary tasks. Since then the emphasis has been on keeping the estate on an even keel through a policy of harvesting and investment in the future. This has also led to Donald taking on trainees from both his own old college and Merrist Wood. "The colleges know what I'm looking for," he said, "but essentially I'm looking for country boys and girls who'll have an appreciation for all of the activities we have here at Cowdray, such as hunting, fishing and shooting."

A quick look on the website shows the breadth of income generators the estate has. Shooting is clearly a high earner and Donald has worked hard to improve the relationship between the gamekeepers and foresters. "The woods department has a larger say than it used to in how business is done," Donald said, "but the woods also play host to game shoots and difficult access areas are good for rearing pheasant."

Much of this increase in influence is almost certainly down to the improved market that Donald has sought out in his 25 years at Cowdray. "When I arrived, the timber was sold standing to a single merchant. It didn't seem competitive, and when I looked into it, it wasn't."

Donald opened the estate up to competing buyers and sold much of the timber direct to sawmills. As a result the estate has customers as far away as the Welsh borders. Most of the timber is bought over the

phone so the estate only finds itself courting the occasional customer. However, in a toughening market the estate continues to turn a profit, and they are all optimistic for the future. "You have to believe!" exclaimed Donald.

Optimism certainly seems to have carried the estate through the numerous national crises that have arisen since the Pearson family gained ownership in 1909. The Third Viscount Cowdray ordered the establishing of large areas of conifer plantations from the 1930s onwards, though some areas had been planted as early as 1890. No doubt he was ahead of the game, as demand soared after the wars. What is more refreshing, however, is the manner in which the current owner of the estate, the Fourth Viscount Cowdray, has resisted the temptation to 'cash in' on the vast timber crop. Instead, a balanced policy towards access, sport, tourism and rural business has ensured that forestry remains a vital part of the business portfolio.

But recent times have not been easy. Much of the timber goes to the building trade which has inevitably seen a downturn. Markets for hardwood sawlogs tend to centre on oak, with ash and beech going for firewood. "I don't think we've seen any beech go as sawlogs for over ten years," Donald said.

There are five hardwood sawmills in the area, and a market for good oak is an important part of the annual harvest. "Oak customers are very competitive and will pay good money to get their hands

on the right timber as each log in each parcel is unique," explained Donald, "and they'll pay top prices for the right wood with the right character."

But is Cowdray alone in the efforts it is making to run the estate? "We, along with a number of other large estates in the South East, are trying to operate forests in the way it should be done – not simply cashing in by returning the area to heath and then running purely leisure facilities. That makes absolutely no sense in the long term."

So long-term planning and a belief in sustainable forestry are what is keeping the business alive at Cowdray. It seems a shame that nationalised areas have such difficulty keeping trees profitably in the way the private sector can. Perhaps it comes down to that age-old attribute; patience. If you see yourself as a link in a chain that stretches back to the earliest British woodsmen, then perhaps the legacy you leave for those who follow is of equal, or maybe more, importance to you than the short-term profit margin.

Thinking forward into the livelihood of the next generation, rather than the budget following the next election, is a lesson the foresters who planted the trees at Cowdray probably never thought they would need to teach foresters of the 21st century.

It's just as well woodsmen such as Donald MacDonald and his team have been willing to listen to those voices from the past.

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