

Elm Tree Products

Overcoming obstacles!

John McLeod explained that before an accident, unrelated to forestry, left him a paraplegic as a young man, he was well established felling and winching timber for local contractor George Langstaff in County Durham's woodlands. Characteristically, during the following years of recovery and rehabilitation, John embraced the motivational tenets of the 'Moving forward after disability' programme. In fact, such was his determination to succeed that eventually he was invited to speak on the subject to medical staff attending an NHS conference at the Spinal Injuries Unit, Middlesbrough.

A decade after misfortune struck, John had not only managed to build an attractive bungalow where he went on to establish a family, but had also assisted his brother at a garden centre where firewood was cut and sold. Keen by this time to get back into the woods, and confident enough to branch out for himself, John recognised his opportunity. "I noted the considerable amount of logs and sticks that went out from the garden centre and thought, why work at this for someone else when I could do it for myself and make money?"

Times had changed, however, since John had last worked in the

forestry industry. Before he could start up a business he found himself obliged to 'return to school' in order to gain the required certification. Pointing out that he now has all the necessary tickets and is fully insured through the NFU, John added, "I was, I admit, in a bit of a panic at the idea of going to college after leaving hospital in the 90s. I never really got up to speed with reading and writing because as a teenager I preferred to roam the countryside to sticking in at school. The staff at Durham's Houghall College were understanding in that respect and with their help I soon caught up. Eventually I became the first disabled student there to pass the Chainsaw Crosscut and Maintenance test. I was then entered for the National Training Awards which I won. I also qualified in quad use, spraying and pesticide application, grass cutting and vermin control."

A few miles off the A68 Darlington to Edinburgh link, John McLeod's home and premises at Witton Park overlook the meadows and woods of County Durham's beautiful Wear valley. His expanding company, Elm Tree Products, now supplies firewood and kindling to homes, retail outlets, garages and builders' merchants across the region. The busi-



John McLeod and contractor George Langstaff. Before his accident John regularly felled and winched timber for George in County Durham's woodlands. John maintains that when he was setting up his business his one-time boss offered him much appreciated advice and encouragement, and still does!

ness also undertakes small forestry contracts on estates as well as landscaping contracts. A range of timber units such as kennels and hen huts are constructed to order. John assured me that he enjoys nothing better than fettling the temperamental chainsaws of tree felling pals when there is time to spare.

He pointed out that whilst developing the firewood enterprise – the focus of his attention for the last five years or thereabouts – spare moments have been few and far between. "I started off with a chainsaw, a little International tractor and a PTO corkscrew log splitter, and gradually built up a reputation for supplying good quality, well seasoned hard and softwood logs amongst local householders.

I also made myself known to the local estates and undertook small forestry and gardening contracts. These included the felling of dangerous trees.

"For this job I employed as subcontractors professionals who I knew from past experience would do a good job. Over these last few years I feel I've built up a business I can be proud of."

Understanding that he would never be able to undertake the task of felling timber again, John still felt that there might be a possibility that he could get back into the woods at the controls of modern machinery. Was there, he considered, anyone who could supply Elm Tree Products with extraction equipment that could be adapted for his particular situation? He knew it was a tall order, but Botex supplier Jas P Wilson felt it was not an unreasonable demand. Adaptation of the controls of a forestry tractor would allow John McLeod to extract his own timber as well as any able-bodied operator. Getting into and out of the machine would need some innovation. The issue was solved by fitting a hoist that can lift John, wearing a harness, in and out of the cab. Control is by means of a hand-held command system.

When it came to choosing timber processing machinery, experience had taught John that he needed to carry out considerable research as to which products best lent themselves to adaptation to his unusual circumstances. "I had an old McConnell sawbench but I needed an assistant to hand start the engine on the thing." The McConnell still gets occasional use for splitting posts but John was determined to be able to work independently whenever



Rendered paraplegic as a young man, John McLeod was determined to return to hands-on forestry. However, it took some considerable time before this was possible. Thanks to the addition of a harness and hoist, he can manoeuvre himself in and out of the tractor's cab. The controls of his forestry tractor modified, John uses a hand-held command system to control the process, and now extracts timber sourced from his own harvesting contracts for use by his firewood processing business, Elm Tree Products.



(Left) John can easily manage the controls of the Spaltfix 3000 from his position in the wheelchair. The rate at which the processor delivers cut and split logs into a pick-up or trailer is 'fantastic' according to the County Durham firewood merchant. (Right) To allow John to process and pack kindling sticks unaided at his Witton yard, Dalbeattie based Jas P Wilson lowered the AutoSplit's legs and fitted extra handles.

it was possible and safe to do so. For firewood cutting, a Posch logging sawbench outclassed the old machine in terms of safety and ease of operation and the supplier, again Jas P Wilson, was able to fit the engine with a key start system. John remarked, "Posch machinery doesn't seem to need a lot of adaptation to help wheelchair-bound people. With the Spaltfix 3000 I can fill a transit load of logs in 15 minutes. That's fantastic!"

Some machinery used by Elm Tree Products has simply required the addition of supports to aid timber loading. On other machines, conveniently placed handles and a lowering of the supporting legs has made it possible for John to operate standard production models. A Posch vertical log splitter, when John finds the time to get over to Dalbeattie and collect it, will soon be joining the range of processing machinery in the tidy yard in central County Durham. Self-loading by means of a winch and timber tongs, the machine is ideally suited to John's requirements.

In the summer months Elm Tree Products also supplies a considerable amount of fencing posts – in the form of both 'splits' and 'rounds'. It came as no surprise to learn that the bulk of this work is carried out using a Posch Schälprofi peeler and pointer complemented by a circular saw attachment. To maximise the options, softwood coming through contracts is cut in the forest to standard lengths even though a proportion may end up being converted to firewood.

I joined John and tree feller Stephen Tempest a short distance north of Witton Park at the Minsteracres estate where they were felling and extracting larch and spruce on a site just off the A68. John pointed out that the larger part of the estate is owned by Cooksons of London and managed by the land agency of Smiths Gore, Corbridge. "A lot of my work comes through their intervention."

Lee Stillwell is Estate Foreman for the Minsteracres estate and he appreciates the services Elm Tree Products provides in the woods

and plantations for the landowner. "John's a keen and conscientious worker who just gets on with it. You wouldn't think he had a disability as he doesn't present any problems. He just lifts himself into the machine and cracks on with the job. He's a good worker; a really good worker." As John loaded the forwarding trailer, Stephen – who was once a machine owner himself but gave them up because he prefers hand cutting – explained that this was a return visit. "We've already extracted around 100 tons of firewood and fencing material but although it's pretty easy work it's not the best job. Most of the larch is dead or blown and the trees are small. We don't bring wagons in for the relatively short haul up to Witton Park; John leads it up on the trailer."

When it comes to sales of firewood for domestic use John told me, "Elm Tree Products' biggest demand is for hardwood logs. I think the boiler installers are telling people that softwoods will leave too many tar deposits."

John McLeod himself prefers to use softwood mixed with a little coal in his own heating system. "It's not generally understood that, when well seasoned, softwood logs can certainly produce a good quantity of heat." The hardwoods do have their place, of course, and command a small premium. However, according to John, they too can be variable in the way they burn and the treatment they require. "I've just brought in a load of ash that would burn perfectly well now, straight off the site."

As it happens, the ash will probably end up warming a hearth in County Durham some time next year. The purchaser, if he buys his fuel from one of the many retail outlets supplied by Elm Tree Products, will probably be quite unaware of the effort, commitment and single-minded determination that underpin the success of the business that brought the timber out of the woods.

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Susan Burke

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