

SWAMP OAK OF THE DEEP SOUTH

(South Wales that is!)

For some time a local area of oak woodland has suffered from poor drainage. The access nearby was regularly flooded, so the land owners, in their wisdom, instead of cleaning out some ditches and improving the drainage, took the more expensive option of raising the road level by about 4 feet. The raised road then, in effect, formed a dam to hold back all the water, which drained into the oak woodlands from surrounding fields.

In the past, although considerable water entered the wood, it generally dried out quite fast. This is no longer the case. Now bulrushes have started to grow in the wood, and wild duck breed there. Almost 12 years ago about 20 trees were taken out as the waterlogged condition was having a severe effect on them. In the meantime a new batch of trees had died.

The trees concerned were of mixed quality, but, due to the soil and certain characteristics, I was fairly certain that they would be sound inside. Volumes ranged from about 30 cube to 300 cube hoppus. Some of the larger trees were up to 4 feet butt diameter, with good, clean cutting first lengths – traditional good quality estate-grown timber, but as usual there were problems to overcome.

In certain areas the water was over 4 feet deep, as the monsoon season had started early in Wales last summer. Despite regular visits to check on the water levels, due to the heavy rains, the water level did not recede. Eventually by late October the level did recede by about a foot. As can be imagined it would be a fun site to work. We were only to fell trees which were fully dead. All live, storm damaged or even half live trees were to be retained.

What should we write on the risk assessment? 'Cutter needs to wear snorkel at all times!' Basically many of the trees could be safely got at as the water around them ranged from ankle depth to crotch level. A sure sign of water depth was to observe the swamp grass. Generally it would grow in water which was up to crotch level, and thus any areas of water with no swamp grass were to be avoided as these areas were quite deep.

Just prior to starting here we had been working on a site taking

out some oak and ash, and there was an instructor on site, training some pupils in the neighbouring plantation so that they could become 'fully qualified chainsaw operators'(?). Some trainers have limited access to large trees as they rarely cut any themselves. Therefore sometimes they are on the look out for such trees, especially when they have students who want to progress to the large tree module. In my naïveté I asked if he was looking for large trees to fell with his students. My thinking has always been learn how to do a job under difficult circumstances and it helps you to become more proficient. He asked as to their situation, then said bluntly that they were too hard for his students, and he only wanted easy trees. That made his life easier and he would get the students through their test. Enough said!

Despite waiting for the water to recede, it didn't go down quite as much as I hoped, so we started in late October to fell those trees in the shallows. We carried on until the water was up to crotch level. It was at this point, whilst retreating as a back cut was opening up, that my saw was drowned. Fortunately it hadn't swallowed too much water, and after removing the spark plug and air filter, swishing about some petrol and leaving it upside down, to drain and dry out, I was able to start it up. But I had had enough, and I wasn't going to cut any more under such conditions.

In early January, when everybody was moaning about the cold spell, we couldn't get up onto the nearby steep banks that we had been working on due to the ice. It turned out that somebody up high above must have been smiling on me, as the water around the last remaining five trees was frozen solid. I don't know of any Lantra or NPTC module or certificate which covers working on ice. I was therefore at a disadvantage, in that I could only draw on my experience of skating on ponds as a child, and of course any tips that I could get from 'Ice Road Truckers'. As this was fairly new territory, no doubt it would be highly educational. I wore logging boots with new studs fitted, as they would hopefully help with grip whilst walking up the stems. I didn't know how the ice would react and break. Therefore the back



The author, his Husky 372 and the 'cowboy cut' stump.

cuts were bored behind the hinge and cut backwards until a little bit remained, holding the tree in place. Then, standing as far back as possible from the tree, I would cut this section at arm's length and trip the tree over. Of course, once the back cuts opened, it was a quick retreat. Surprisingly, with all of the remaining five trees, the ice behind them remained sound, whilst that in front was smashed to pieces.

In my experience of cutting trees close to waterways, there always seems to be a fine grit present on their lower bark, generally deposited as sediment. This tends to have a detrimental effect on the chain cutters, so, when I was felling these trees, I didn't use the large saw; instead I used the Husky 372 with a 24" bar. It is a much lighter saw, my reasoning being that, why put more weight than necessary on the ice?

Likewise, although I could see how the ice reacted to the individual trees that were felled, we had no idea as how the whole area of ice would react between trees. Some thought was therefore needed as to decide the order for the trees to be felled. None of them were to be rounded out; it was just a case of getting them down as fast as possible, minimising travel over the ice and ensuring safety.

All trees were to be felled according to their natural lean – no fancy directional felling. Thus I was able to fell with just the saw, with no need for a sledge and wedge.

All the trees dropped as planned without tear-out or felling shake – that is, until the last one, by which time the grit was beginning to take effect on the cutters, and the morning sun was beginning to heat up. As I didn't want to walk unnecessarily over the ice, and I could hear

the occasional effect of the sun's rays, speed was of the essence. As this tree contained over 300 feet hoppus, it was noticeable how the saw's exhaust, which was directed against the ice, was causing localised melting. Although the tree was felled cleanly, due to the poor state of the cutters, the stump was somewhat ugly. No doubt somebody will come across the stump in years to come, and state that some cowboy felled the tree.

We had waited some time for the ice to thicken. Eventually it was about 8" thick, but after it had been broken up, the weather warmed up and once again the wood was fully flooded. We decided to leave it until the warmer weather, when either the water would recede or at least it wouldn't be so cold!

After some time I received a call from the farm manager, wanting to know whether I could get on with the timber extraction, as he was fed up. It seems that everybody and their dog had been knocking on his door asking what was happening to the oak trees, as their crowns could all be seen above the floodwaters. So we went to have a look at the downed oak, and nearby was a swan, eyeing us up. He was quite a handsome chap. Giving it no further thought we went to see how high the water level was. To our surprise, amongst the crown of one of the trees and its surrounding water was a large pile of carefully placed reeds and grass, on top of which was Mrs Swan, carefully sitting on a clutch of eggs.

Immediately the brakes were on the project, as firstly I'm not into breaking happy homes. Secondly swans can be rather nasty, and although I've kept geese, I had no intentions to tangle with Mr and

Mrs Swan. Thirdly swans are similar to the sturgeon, in that they are owned by her Majesty the Queen, and I didn't fancy spending a spell in the Tower.

The water level was still high, but in actual fact the swans had proved to be a blessing. I wanted the water levels to recede, and the farm manager wanted an answer to annoying busybodies, so the trees would be left as they were until the eggs had hatched, and the young cygnets were of an age when the timber extractions would be of no consequence. I am happy to announce that Mr and Mrs Swan became the proud parents of five rather busy cygnets.

By the end of July the water level had gone down by at least two feet, which was much more than last year. There had been a hot spell from June to July, so we moved the skidder to the site on a Friday to start on the Monday. During the weekend we had torrential rain and thunderstorms, and by the Monday morning the water level was as high as it had ever been. "Oh bother!" Water or no water, the oak was going to come out – patience was wearing thin. A quick look over eBay, and I ordered a set of neoprene chest waders.

When we started extracting, things went fine; the first tree measured some 100 feet hoppus in total. Only the butt and two main limbs were extracted. Basically all the trees were going to follow a similar pattern. All cordwood would be left where they lay, mostly underwater, and big limbs were only extracted

when they could be pulled out with the butts or large second lengths. To go to the effort of extracting large limbs was generally not viable, due to the difficulties involved.

As already mentioned there was quite some water to navigate. Prior to the woodland being flooded it was grazed by cattle, and had been divided by barbed wire fences. That very wire zigzagged underwater ready to trip somebody up. Likewise there were stumps situated underwater, also ready to trip you up, or foul the winch line and logs whilst being extracted.

But at least the water wasn't as cold as when I first started felling some of the trees. Unfortunately with heat you get mosquitoes, and they lived here in their thousands. A sure-fire deterrent is to put some geranium oil on your clothes, as it smells, as one person so clearly put it years ago, of rotten sweet potato.

So here we were, having just extracted the first tree, moving on to tree number two, which was over 300 feet hoppus in two pieces, the first 18 feet being a prime planking butt, with the second piece being a combination of planking and beam. I was beginning to feel smug and happy with myself, both of which are sure danger signals. I had extracted the first tree, the sun was shining, the birds were singing, I was dry in my waders. I was smelling of rotten sweet potato, and in the distance I could hear 'Guns N' Roses' blaring in the cattle sheds. It's funny how cattle enjoy rock music.

But things quickly turned for the



Echo 600 saw being used to round out a swamp oak.

worst. Due to the hidden stumps we couldn't pull the timber out directly, and the only anchor points were some seriously iffy willow trees. So I needed to take the snatch block to the willow trees. As the snatch block is quite a sizable piece of metal, you need to ensure good footing, and, as is to be expected, halfway towards the willows, a small branch underwater 'decided' to trip me up, with a resulting belly flop into three feet of water. Funny how thoughts of E. coli sprang to mind as I descended into the murky water, especially considering all the swan and duck muck plastered on any dry surface. Taking a bath generally cleans you, and this was surely the case where the water had washed off all the geranium oil. The net result was that a few hundred

mosquitoes descended on me, and in their affection gave me many love bites all over my arms.

Eventually that log was extracted, though only after breaking several sets of chokers, resetting the snatch block several times and trimming existing stumps to assist timber to slide over them. After this the extraction continued at a steady pace, although in certain areas we could only winch from a tarmac road (not to be damaged!) which didn't have any verge capable of holding spraggs.

Since last year a few more trees had died. These were dealt with, and no doubt more trees will die there in the future, when it will be time to do some more swamp logging.

Arwyn Morgan



(Left) Starting the back cut, which has started to open in the next picture. (Right) The first three trees felled.