

A Voice from the Woods

And in the beginning...

The first chainsaw I ever used was a big old McCulloch and the occasion remains vivid. It was not one of those early primitive prototypes, nor was it one of the current toy varieties, but something in between. I don't know, but I can only guess that this big old beast had been used as a competition saw. The rakers on the chain had been ground off and, as I soon discovered, it used fuel as ravenously as a jet engine. I was 13 years old. Alone. The nearest village was at least a mile away. And there before me lay an old wind-blown ash tree.

As with many things, first impressions are lasting impressions and this was no exception. My main memory was one of sweat and sawdust and, of course, adrenalin.

Like many boys of that age I was fascinated with anything mechanical and as this beast cut through the helpless ash I was approaching Nirvana. You're probably thinking at this stage that the sweat was due to the physical exertion of wielding this monster but alas this was not the case. The McCulloch was using more than a gallon an hour and the constant running back and forwards to the village for fuel meant I was permanently soaked in sweat.

My introduction to the cutting of timber had begun some years earlier. We lived on a remote farm in Upper Weardale in a small collection of buildings; an assortment of stone and timber. For whatever reason – which still remains a bit of a mystery to this day – my father, somewhat an eccentric, decided in his wisdom to knock down the stone farmhouse and use the wooden shed as the main dwelling. Shortly prior to this he had been declared bankrupt and, being both stubborn and proud, and probably a little mad, he had decided upon this course of action.

Amidst this chaos he had somehow managed to retain possession of a small petrol station and a couple of haulage vehicles about 30 miles away. This meant he spent increasingly large amounts of time at the petrol station and less at the farm and he began to rely more and more on my mother and older siblings to help him. Me, being the youngest, stayed at home to look after the animals.

It was now the late 70s and I was 11 years old. Just then we had a terrible winter. The only heating in the

shed was from a small Calor cooker. On one unforgettable night the wind was blowing so violently that the snow was actually being blown through small cracks in the wooden boards. No one had visited all day and there was no food. I remember actually feeling weak with hunger and I hunted around for something to eat. It seems incredible today but I actually washed out empty sugar packets to try to get some energy and when this failed I broke an old jam jar to try and reach the remnants of jam under the rim. I even tried to make porridge from the rolled oats we fed the animals – not a dish I'd recommend and one I doubt you'll find on the menus of the great restaurants. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

The night was long, cold and bitter and when I finally awoke the following morning a snowdrift had formed across the middle of the room. It arced its way beautifully from the bottom of the bed to the far side of the cabin.

When I ventured outside the snow had obliterated the landscape. The cows, which I was supposed to be looking after, had vanished. A few days before, my brother had managed to deposit some bales of hay at the village. This was the closest he had been able to reach on account of the snow, and only then because the local mine's loading shovel had helped to keep the village road open. Over those few days I had worked hard to ferry bales of hay from the village to the farmhouse.

Despite my efforts the animals were clearly starving and had exhausted the food supply I had carried to the farm. Rather cleverly they had followed my footsteps in the snow to the main food depot in the village, whereupon the entire herd of Highland and Galloway cattle were feeding off the main stack of bales in the centre of the village.

For those of you used to the luxury of modern bathroom facilities you may be surprised to know that most pub urinals in those days were outdoors. Quite often they were also uncovered. As I later learned it must have been quite a shock to one of the locals when he went to relieve himself only to find himself confronted by a Highland bull in the gents! Incredible, methinks – a bull that could read!

Despite being only 11 years old, I

had come through one of the hardest winters for years, and largely by myself. These are essential lessons in life which were to stand me in good stead in the future.

A few months before the winter I had started the local secondary school. The catchment area for the school was largely rural and as such a high proportion of my fellow students were from wealthy backgrounds. Sarcasm and humiliation were essential components of the curriculum in those days from the teachers and this in turn resulted in the constant teasing from other students.

My homework books were regularly held aloft to display thumb prints and candle wax much to the amusement of the teacher and other members of the class. I was generally barred from woodwork classes (can you believe!!) on the grounds that my hands were too dirty, and was duly banished to the stock room. Obviously with working on the farm at home I had developed the hands of a farmer and no amount of scrubbing was going to turn them into those of an office worker.

Please don't think at this point that I was wandering around looking like some ragamuffin or street urchin because I wasn't. What they didn't know is that, in my attempt not to stand out, I was actually washing my own shirts on a daily basis and making every attempt to look presentable. Maybe in hindsight the DIY haircut was a step too far, although it might have helped in some audition for a role in Hamlet in the local theatrical society!

Being banished to the stock cupboard suited me fine. Here I was given a task, a project. I was given the plans of a cassette rack which I was expected to produce. (Some of you reading will recognise this particular task and there will be those of a slightly older age who probably spent several months on the forerunner to the cassette rack – the pipe rack! This is not to be confused with the metalwork department where the copper ashtray still dominated.)

To assist me with this task the woodwork master kindly provided a blunt handsaw, sandless sandpaper and a plane that was split in half. The situation seemed hopeless. I'd love to tell you at this stage that despite these impediments I had not only completed the said task but had gone on to produce a dining room suite of Chippendale quality, but alas fate, as it often does, intervened...

The cupboard into which I had been banished was deceptive. In fact it was almost the gateway to Narnia. I had been given strict instructions that under no circumstances was I to touch anything, as inside this hallowed sanctum were the teacher's pride and joy: shelves and shelves of model planes and boats, the residue of years of teaching. In the corner of the cupboard was a narrow entrance. I squeezed through into what was clearly the teacher's personal workshop.

It contained a sawbench, an electrical sander and a host of tools. I duly set about the construction of the cassette rack in record time and to a quality few others could match. In fact, from that moment onwards the quality of my work improved dramatically, and to be fair to the teacher so did my grades, so much so that by the end of that year I was top of the class!

Using the power tools obviously reduced the time I spent on a given task and in turn this gave me time to spare. This I used wisely and rewarded the teacher by sabotaging most of the models in the cupboard! I carefully and painstakingly glued the throttles open so that when the summer finally arrived and the time came for their annual outing a fine time should be had by all – and indeed it was!

It was probably one of the funniest times of my life. The tiny replicas of Spitfires and Sopwiths were presented to the watching crowds with the affection afforded to some Valentine sweetheart. One by one they spluttered into life, took off and then accelerated uncontrollably before smashing into a million pieces in the surrounding countryside. The crowd looked on in astonishment and amazement at this unfolding tragedy whilst the teacher appeared a broken man. Rarely can revenge have tasted so sweet!

Life at home was still very challenging. The long winter dragged on and at one point there was no heat in the hut because the gas in the bottles had frozen. Much of Upper Weardale bares the scars of its mining history and there were several disused and abandoned mines in the vicinity of the farm. In one there was some discarded 14" box section off-cuts. This gave me an idea.

I took one of the sections to a local blacksmith and, with my instruction, he constructed a wood-burning stove. At last I had heat!! Things were definitely on the up. With the stove up and running all



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I had to do now was feed it. With only the sheepdog for company, and no television for distraction, I started to pass the long winter nights by cutting up wood with a bushman.

Food was still scarce and it occurred to me one day that if I sold the wood in the village then I would have a little extra money with which to purchase other things. Having spent hours painstakingly cutting the sticks I would then place them in bags and go round knocking on doors in the local village. The money I earned was a very welcome addition and as well as supplementing my meagre supplies I was able to start squirrelling some away for an emerging plan!

Having missed most of the school term due to the weather, and having had no access to school dinners, my diet was dreadful and lacking in fresh fruit and vegetables. This began to affect my health and unknown to me I developed scurvy. This manifested itself as a rash on my arms which, although hidden from view, was nonetheless embarrassing. In my ignorance I thought this was caused through lack of washing and I tried to burn it off with petrol!

Progress with the bushman was desperately slow and it was taking

me hours to cut a couple of bags of sticks. I clearly needed something quicker and better. With my profits from the sticks I was able to buy a sawbench.

It's strange isn't it how past incidents in our lives become compressed into short phrases or even single words. For instance, in the previous paragraph I used the phrase, "And with the profits I bought a sawbench."

No one will ever know the sheer effort and hard work that went into the purchase of that saw; the hours and hours of toil and slog. But then I suppose as we get older we have more to look back on – I'm sure we all do it.

I loved the time I spent on the sawbench and I put in some pretty epic sessions. Much of the timber was discarded sawlogs left behind after a clearfell. On one occasion I remember cutting up five-foot lengths of timber which had been cut off and left due to butt rot. I had been given them in order to clean up the site.

I was so excited I was up and out at dawn and down to the wood. Having cut the wood and stacked it on the trailer I then towed the load back to the farm with my trusty Nuffield tractor. On the way I would pass the school bus heading in the

opposite direction. Yes – I should have been on it!

By now, however, I had developed a real desire to work as a woodman. I had lost so much schooling with the severe winter that it didn't even feel like truancy. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to head for the woods!

Cutting these larch butts was a real education. Being twice the size of the saw blade, the log had to be fed through and then carried round, turned over and then skillfully fed back through, taking great care to align the blade with the first cut. This is when the fun began. Anyone who has cut larch knows how it 'nips' on the blade.

The first cut wasn't the problem as the uncut top section held the first cut open. When it came to the second cut I usually ended up holding the sawbench with both hands and the trunk with my midriff. Once I had pushed the log part way through I would run round and place a wedge in the cut to keep it open before the blade threw the log off the bench. This wasn't a particularly successful production system and quality control was non-existent!

Due to the butt rot and the variable production methods I probably lost 50%. However, the great

day came when I had a sufficient enough quantity to take to a farm sale, whereupon I received the princely sum of £12. I was rich!

With my new found wealth and the onset of summer, I decided to invest some of my money in a Flymo. I quickly established some clients. At first all was well. However, more cynical clients were asking me to cut six foot high nettle beds and overgrown and out of control jungles!

On one occasion, and much to my annoyance, I could see them laughing from the upstairs windows. The purchase of a huge drive-on mower with a three-foot dish protruding from the front soon sorted that problem! Unfortunately this monster also had other talents. It could slice a breeze block clean in two and as it powered on through the nettles and any other dense foliage a stream of material was hurled out the back like the tail of a blazing comet. Instead of ionised particles being ejected harmlessly into space this beast hurled bricks, rocks, pieces of cast iron guttering and a host of other debris. Its speciality was greenhouses! None were safe.

The reputation of the company took a sudden downturn and I quickly found myself back on the sawbench... *To be continued...*