

Scottish Sawmilling Services



Furniture maker and restorer Jim Stott (left) with Dennis Anderson and his son Neil.

Dennis Anderson started cutting timber in the plantations of Tentsmuir Forest on the eastern extremity of the Kingdom of Fife in the 1960s. Using Yankee and Stenner saws, the product was mining timber – pit props and chock-wood – for the National Coal Board’s Fife collieries. He has now crossed the Kingdom and mills locally grown hardwoods and softwoods at the Den of Lindores near the Perthshire border. The timber Dennis handles now is considerably larger than the pine thinnings harvested by the Forestry Commission in Tentsmuir all those years ago, but he is convinced that the Serra Bavaria mobile sawmill is the perfect machine for producing the top quality timber his customers demand.

The German sawmill is more than capable of cutting beams from Douglas fir and boards of fine-grained ‘boatskin’ larch. Dennis, however, is one of an ever decreasing number of sawmillers prepared to spend the time and effort quarter-sawing the largest oaks. The cut of the Serra Bavaria is accurate and clean enough to produce premium quality boards.

Dennis Anderson’s journey from one side of Fife to the other took him across the globe by way of Europe, Canada and Australia. When not working in timber he was never far from it. Down Under, for example, he was involved in mineral prospecting on the Cape York Peninsula. The Aussie timber fallers went ahead of his bulldozers, and, between them, he now admits, they may have made a few holes in the Queensland rainforest.

The return to Fife in 1992 saw a move to more sustainable development with the purchase of Denmylne Farm near the Tayside town of Newburgh. The farming was soon complemented by sawmilling with various mobile sawmills. The ethos of the venture was to add value to the local timber found in farm woodlands and local estates; a resource that often failed to attract the interest of the larger sawmills and forestry contractors.

Dennis’s wife Ele could manage the farm side of the business while the sawmill was out on site, but it soon became apparent that bringing the timber to the Den of Lindores was a more convenient option. The demand for timber from furniture makers and craftsmen was on the increase and having Dennis on hand to help them discuss their requirements had distinct advantages.

As it happens, Scottish Sawmilling Services has built up quite a network of customers, large and small, and a decision to concentrate mainly on flooring and furniture grade timber has proven justified. A willingness to take up the challenge of milling big timber has meant that customers are assured of a wide range of products – including quarter-sawn Scottish oak with its decorative silver banding.



Two quarters of this oak butt are on their way to the sawbench. A chainsaw has been used to make the initial cuts and it has revealed the silver banding that Dennis is looking for.

Of the softwoods, Dennis prefers to cut Douglas fir and is quite prepared to produce flooring for customers from the species. Neighbouring Perthshire is, after all, ‘Big Tree Country’ and many of the tallest specimens are Douglas firs. The Kingdom of Fife, on the other hand, is not known for its extensive forests. The sixteenth century chronicler Robert Lindsay of Pitscottie reported that the building of the Scottish flagship the Great Michael had consumed ‘...all the timbers of Fife’.

Dennis Anderson’s ancestors lived around about his present locality so he is well versed in its history: “In the days of William Wallace, Blackearnside was said to be a dense, dark oakwood.” Wallace defeated the Earl of Pembroke at this place just east of Newburgh on the banks of the Firth of Tay in 1298. “Later, a lot of timber was said to have been felled for the navy, but some older trees do remain. I have felled one that had an age of around 350 years according to the ring count. When it was down the butt was towering above me.”

A more recent arrival in Scottish Sawmilling Services’ yard was an oak from Rankeilour Estate near Ladybank that weighed in at about eight tons.



Dennis Anderson mills a couple of boards from one cut side of one of the quarters of the big butt. Prominent silver patterning will only be produced by a few cuts at this setting as the angle between the blade and the timber’s grain is gradually changing.



Dennis carefully considers whether he can take another board. The blade will have to cut more or less in the direction of the drying cracks that have appeared on the butt end to make the most of the timber’s properties.

Cutting into three sections for transport did not, in this case, decrease the value of the big stem. Its huge girth meant that quarter-sawing would produce a large number of superior, silver patterned boards for flooring, panelling or furniture construction. Should oak structural timbers be required, smaller oak stems could be delivered straight onto the bed of the Serra and milled in the normal fashion.

Smaller stems too could also be cut 'through and through' to produce run of the mill oak boards. The angle at which the bandsaw cuts across the growth rings varies across each board, apart from at the centre, and the tensions set up in the seasoning process can cause distortion and warping. Quartering the log and milling at all times in the direction of the core produces a far more stable board.

In the case of some timbers, especially oak, the radial medullary rays appear to full effect when the blade remains at right angles to the growth rings across the cut, as happens when the cut is directed at all times towards the centre of the heartwood. It is this effect that was used so well by Pugin in the interior design of the Palace of Westminster and was so fashionable with the Arts and Crafts Movement.

In the Denmylne timber yard Dennis Anderson uses a chainsaw to quarter, or at least halve, the oak butts before they can be loaded aboard the bed of the bandsaw. It is hard work, but skill and experience enable Dennis to achieve a remarkably fine and level cut with the old Stihl chainsaw. Once the section is set as straight as possible on the bandsaw, removal of a thin wafer perfects the levelling and forms the top surface of the first board.

A few boards may then be cut, but the blade will soon be starting to run at an oblique angle to the grain and the desired effect will begin to be lost. The process then becomes a little more difficult. The oak will need to be repositioned for the next few boards and then angled again to keep the blade cutting as close as possible to the centre... It is a time consuming and highly skilled process.

"The Serra Bavaria is the biggest mill in the range with a nominal cut width of 1m, although we can get up to about 1.4m," says Dennis. "It can cut timber up to 7m in length, but we have found ways to increase this if necessary. I've had it for five years and it still runs as it did the day it was delivered. I bought it second hand directly from a chap in France and he came over and trained me in its use. He stayed here a while and we had great fun!

"The French," he told me, "use a lot of poplar for interior building work

and it can last for up to 300 years. We had poplar in the yard and he cut a 12ft 2x2 and proceeded to walk the tightrope along it. It started to bounce and wobble when he got to the middle, but he assured me that that was just proof of how elastic and strong the poplar I had was! The Frenchman assured me that the species has the same woody fibres as oak, but it does not like the rain... It just needs to be kept dry."

The model of sawmill Dennis Anderson has opted for is by no means the cheapest on the market – he admits that it is three or four times the price of some of its competitors. Yet having had only to replace a few bearings to keep it cutting perfectly, he feels he has made a good investment. As well as supplying timber for Jordan Boats in Leven, Fife, the mill has cut an elm keel for a boatyard in Devonshire.

Dennis remembers one contract for the opposite end of the country that gave him great satisfaction. Four 220-year-old European larches were cut as 'boatskin' for the Shetland Isles. There was not a single knot in the timber.

Hilary Burke

Scottish Sawmilling Services supplies air dried and kiln dried locally grown timber to a wide range of customers.

Frank Nichols (below left) of Minnesota, USA, was a millwright working on power plants and in heavy construction. Seven years into retirement he got bored and bought a plane ticket. He came across Dennis and the Denmylne sawmill by accident. He had always loved wood and spent the winter helping out at the mill and crafting pieces from Scottish timber. Frank has since moved on, probably to Ireland.

Jim Stott (below right) of Auchtermuchty is a furniture maker and restorer. A designer of 'one off' pieces, he insists on using Scottish timber. David Campbell's sawmill in Auchtermuchty is one source of his raw material, but he will often be found at Denmylne searching out anything that fits the work in progress. He also supports another local craftsperson, glassmaker Kathryn Neale, who lives in the Lomond Hills. "Fused glass works well with wood," says Jim.

Ian Grant (bottom) of Fife Wheelwrights relies on Dennis Anderson to furnish him with those species that have been traditionally used for the various components in wheelmaking and carriage building. He is a regular visitor to Denmylne and knows that Dennis has the contacts to source, mill and season the timbers he needs for future projects.



He has decided to turn the piece with the loader to take a few boards from the other flat side. It is a time consuming procedure that enables the maximum return of top quality boards with minimum waste.



Neil and Dennis remove a high quality board which already shows the distinctive markings of quarter-sawn oak. The medullary rays that give rise to the pattern are cellular structures through which the living wood transmits preservatives to protect the heartwood from decay.

