

# Gaddesden



Nick Halsey

**Straddling the Chiltern Hills 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' in West Hertfordshire, the 730-hectare Gaddesden Estate has been stewarded by the Halsey family since 1544**

Nowadays, estate operations are run from Home Farm, a complex of large, open-sided barns housing tractors and equipment, and 20,000 square feet of farm buildings converted, or being converted, into rented commercial business units. From the estate office, current owner Nick Halsey manages a range of estate-related businesses, including a pastureland and livery business (Halsey and Partners), let fields and a fishing concession on the River Gade.

If his name sounds familiar, Nick is the current President of the educational charity the Royal Forestry Society (RFS). Over the last three years, with the help of woodland adviser Rod Pass (based near Newmarket) and contractor Will Brush (Essex Arb), Nick has seen new life breathed into his 105 hectares of broadleaf (70%) and commercial conifer (30%) woodlands.

Gaddesden's woodlands have been managed for commercial timber

production for generations. Records from the 16th century show that estate timber was used to build barns. The first evidence of marking trees for sale is that found in a diary written by Nick's ancestor Henshaw Halsey in 1717.

Nick (now 65) was born in Hertfordshire and raised in Somerset. He spent part of his gap year working as a student woodman at the Crichel Estate (where the resident agent Major William Seymour enrolled him as a member of the RFS), before studying at the Royal Agricultural College at Cirencester, graduating as a land agent (chartered surveyor). Returning to Hertfordshire in 1971, he worked for Savills in London and Chelmsford before taking over the stewardship of Gaddesden in 1976. Nick says, "When I came back to Gaddesden, the woods, having been managed under a Forestry Commission approved grant since 1957, were in good shape. What was different was that

the markets were better then in relation to the cost of living. While by no means the biggest commercial interest on the estate (the farm is), the woods are my personal interest."

Since 1976, these woodlands have suffered drought (1976), disease (Dutch elm) and storm damage (1976, 1987, 1990). After suffering from years of depressed timber markets (local furniture makers closing down), whilst never completely out of management, these woods have been revitalised, thanks to a new woodland management plan and new timber markets. Nick says, "It is fair to say that halfway through our last management plan, with the old felling licences expiring, there was a pause in thinning the woods, because of a lack of markets."

In 2012, with the aid of a Forestry Commission Woodland Planning Grant, Rod Pass prepared a woodland management plan to run from 2012 to 2032. Nick says,

"Under previous plans, we clear-felled whole compartments, replanting under the matrix system, with nine broadleaves surrounded by a conifer nurse." Rod continues, "Under the new plan, the aim is to achieve uneven-aged, multi-storeyed stands, so that we always have something to replace what is taken out. By practising continuous cover forestry (CCF), the hope is that we will never have to clearfell. We will accept any regeneration and manage it. The only replanting we do is enrichment planting of English oak."

Will Brush joined Gaddesden's management team three years ago, bringing a harvester onto the estate for the first time. Under the new plan he began an intensive programme of thinning, removing 30 to 35% in both the broadleaf and conifer. Nick says, "Under the current plan, we are cutting 600 cubic metres a year for the next five years."

In the estate yard, Nick, Rod and



(Left) The first recorded mention of marking trees at Gaddesden is made in a diary written by Nick Halsey's ancestor Henshaw Halsey in 1717. It reads, "Marked timber is sold my wood for 16 shillings and 6 pence per 'tod' to Canham." Nick says, "Who knows what 'tod' is?" (Right) Contractor Will Brush (Essex Arb) and his new eight-wheeler lorry, a Volvo FM 13 with Jonsered 1020 crane and aluminium body. The back is filled with 16.65 tonnes of firewood going to Flint Cross. It has a Loadmaster weigher on the crane and can take up to 17 tonnes. There is a drawbar on the back for a trailer.



(Above) The final crop of oak in Ables Grove, after being thinned by Will Brush. Nick Halsey has title deeds for this wood going back to the 1300s. (Right) Will Brush's new Robex 145 with AFM head in Pollen Farm plantation, which he is thinning to favour the hardwoods.



Will stop to admire Will's new (used) Volvo FM 13 timber truck stacked with roundwood firewood earmarked for local firewood merchant Flint Cross. Nick points to the Golden Parsonage (his house) two fields away and says he considered installing a woodfuel biomass boiler, but, because of the high upfront costs (this year's 'renewables' investment has been in photovoltaic panels at Home Farm) the project has been put on hold.

Our first stop is Ables Grove, a mixed 2.73-hectare compartment planted in 1960 (yield class 8), earmarked for thinning in year two of the management plan. Nick points to an oak tree bearing traces of pink bathroom paint used to mark it up for the final crop in 1980. "The estate sits on the clay cap at the top of the Chiltern Hills chalk, so we grow mostly oak, ash and cherry. Where clay meets the chalk, beech grows well. Our prime hardwood timber trees are oak and sweet chestnut. Historically, our biggest market for oak was the fur-

niture trade in High Wycombe. When the last timber merchants in Berkhamsted (Wards of Bourne End) closed in the 1990s, we sold small amounts of oak to Latimer Sawmills and the beech went to Ercol. Recently we have sold quality oak to Titchmarsh & Goodwin, based in Ipswich."

Rod continues, "Today, with the exception of the high quality furniture-grade oak which I sell direct to the buyer, Will buys the timber standing and gives a return per tonne to the owner. Second-grade oak goes for beams and fencing, and the sweet chestnut goes to Vastern Timber. Along the River Gade there is a hectare of cricket bat willow, which is sold for export to Australia and Pakistan."

Alongside the forest track, ropes and helmets used by two of Will's arb team lie in neat piles. They are doing remedial pruning on five to six metre wide oak crowns, which were clipped during the removal of substantial larch trees. Rod says, "We judge each compartment on

its merits. We thin to favour the better stems and desired species. By having felling approval associated with the management plan, we can delay or bring forward thinning to take advantage of market conditions."

Will and two hand-cutters spend three or four weeks a year at Gaddesden. Precisely when is wholly weather dependent. Last year, wet weather delayed harvesting by three months. Will says, "Estate woodlands are diverse, and access [especially in adverse conditions] is always an issue, but do-able. On some sites it is not always appropriate to use a mechanised harvester and here we hand cut in most of the broadleaf. We have a new Robex 145 excavator-based harvester with an AFM head, bought from Forest Machine Services at Hexham. This machine gives us more flexibility for doing multiple tasks. We can remove the head and put a grapple on for large timber, or put on a rake to rake and burn

after ourselves and put rides back." Timber is forwarded out with a Rottne F12.

Will has already thinned his way through the two-hectare Teakettle plantation. Nick stops and looks around. He says, "It is amazing to see a wood go through a stropy teenager phase and suddenly you get something like this." Rod points to a group of Nothofagus and some rather regal larch, saying, "That is what we are trying to achieve (CCF). There is the understorey, the uneven-aged structure." Nick points to the ground beside us adding, "And here is some good natural ash regeneration. The more we get, the more diversity there will be and the more likelihood we have of a recovery from *Chalara*."

Quality larch, Douglas fir and Corsican grow at Gaddesden. Last year, Will cut beam-quality Douglas

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(for CR Jackson at Bedford). This year, both Ables Grove and Teakettle produced hybrid larch (fencing rails for Nelson Potter Sawmill at Woodbridge) freeing up the oak and Nothofagus.

In the 13.98-hectare Big Wood, we stride up Sir Walter's Ride (named after Nick's great uncle), between compartments 7K and L (planted with beech, poplar, larch, Norway spruce and *Thuja plicata* in 1970) and 7C (planted with oak, wild cherry and Norway Spruce in 1981). Will says, "This year in Big Wood, we cut second thinnings to favour the broadleaf. I went through with the harvester, cutting nurse crops and poorer hardwood for softwood fencing and firewood. Now the hand-cutters are removing non-timber broadleaves for firewood. In some compartments, we left Norway spruce because they were the best trees. In others, I removed stained poplar (growing in wet ground) for the value of the wood. With the biomass revival, this is now a possibility. By tonnage, two-thirds of what we cut goes for biofuel: the hardwood goes to local firewood merchants, the softwood goes to a local brickworks to dry the clay."

In Big Wood, the rides have been opened up for environmental benefits and to maintain sight lines for managing deer. Until a month ago, 20 years had passed since roebuck were last seen at Gaddesden. The main threat to the woods comes from fallow and muntjac populations. A deer management plan has been produced and the estate and the stalker are working together to reduce numbers and the impact on the woodlands. To assist with this, Gaddesden receives an increased deer stalking grant and has just got approval for a chiller. Rod says, "By increasing the deer control and by opening up the woodlands to increase the light to the forest floor, we anticipate achieving an acceptable level of damage."

Rod feels very strongly about tree pests and diseases. As President of the RFS, Nick has spent much of his term educating the nearly 4,000 RFS members on the subject through the *Quarterly Journal* and the biennial conference. While Gaddesden has no signs of *Chalara*, Rod is keeping an eye on the larch (*Phytophthora*) and has found the D-shaped exit hole of the *Agrilus biguttatus* (oak jewel

beetle) in oaks growing in ancient semi-natural woodland at the far end of Big Wood.

Plunging through the chest-high bracken, Rod surfaces at the base of a substantial timber oak (standing since the 1830s) bearing the dark stains of bacterial stem bleed. He says, "It is my view that it is the *Agrilus* beetle which is responsible for the premature deaths of oak trees. It attacks trees that have been weakened by drought, root decaying fungus (such as *Collybia* and *Armillaria*), defoliating insects and stem bleed bacteria – two strains of which are completely new to science. Forest Research (Dr Sandra Denman in particular) has done an enormous amount of work on AOD and it is vital that they are adequately funded. However, I am seeing mature and veteran oaks throughout East Anglia succumbing to the *Agrilus* beetle. Two years ago, we removed six of the worst affected trees at Gaddesden to maximise their timber value before they were attacked and degraded by the oak pinhole borer."

Another subject occupying the RFS president's time is the Government's response to the independent panel's report on forestry. Nick says, "The report underlined the importance of creating a wood and forestry culture. In terms of the Government's response, most important is their desire for a specialist Forest Services. It is important that, within the whole circle of civil service and government bodies, there is forestry expertise and experience. The last



*It might look as if Rod Pass and Nick Halsey are enjoying a game of hide and seek, but it is the Agrilus beetle they are looking for – or rather, its D-shaped exit hole in a stem of oak. Rod says, "When a tree is weakened, it is susceptible to an Agrilus attack. The female lays eggs in the bark of the tree and the larvae feed in the cambium layer under the bark. In my view, it is this physical disruption, especially when linked with the dead tissue of a bacterial bleed, which girdles and kills the tree. It must be remembered that the D-shaped hole is where an adult has emerged, the larvae have been working away for two years before this."*



thing we want is for the FC, Forest Services and Forest Enterprise to be subsumed into some enormous environmental body that will lose its interest in forestry. Everything Rod says about pests and diseases and needing Forest Research is absolutely fundamental for any forestry future, especially with the endless cascade of diseases we are suffering from at the moment."

Nick steps down as RFS president in September. Throughout his career, not only has he been a

member of the RFS, he has been Confor's representative on the Forestry Safety and Training Council. He sat on the FC's Regional Advisory Committee for East England, is a member of the CLA Forestry and Woodland Subcommittee and he also sat on the National Trust Land Use and Access Panel and chaired the NT Ashridge Estate Management Committee. "On an estate, it is easy to be insular and stay at home. Not only is being involved fun, but also you can learn so much from people that you meet who are leaders in their field. The person that has inspired me most, I met at the beginning of my career – Major William Seymour (also an RFS president). He was a very distinguished forester."

Back in the estate yard, Nick says of his own woodlands, "Will talked about firewood putting a base in wood production. It's very true. For years, our woodland account was in the red. For some reason we carried on with it. With the Woodland Improvement Grant and the improving firewood market, we have been in the black for the past two years. Our woods are never going to make a fortune, but they do pay for themselves and a little bit on top. It makes management worthwhile."

*Carolyne Locher*

