

# MARK BEACH

Forestry engineer



*Life's pace accelerated when Lancaster based Mark Beach established his own business as a forestry engineer in autumn 2012.*

*"Starting up my own business is something that I had been wanting to do for a number of years, but with the economic climate being the way it was, I held off until I felt the time was right, and finally took the plunge in September last year. I must admit I have never looked back. I really thrive on the varied workload I have – it really is something different every day."*

I joined Mark and his fourteen-year-old son Jordan at the Muirton Farm Estate, Longformacus, in the Scottish Borders region, where he was working on a Valmet 941 harvester belonging to Longtown based contractor and haulier Robert Tweddle. Driving the scenically stunning climb out of the town of Duns to the riverside village, I paused at a viewpoint once appreciated by the Scottish farmer/poet Robert Burns. Touched by early morning sunshine, it offered panoramic views across the heather-clad Cheviot and Lammermuir hills and over the county of Berwickshire. What the eighteenth century Burns will not have seen are the shelter belts of North American exotic species, such as the well-known Sitka spruce or the less common Noble fir.

Described by Mark as 'a very stable and highly productive machine', the Valmet 941 was cutting Noble fir with no effort whatsoever.

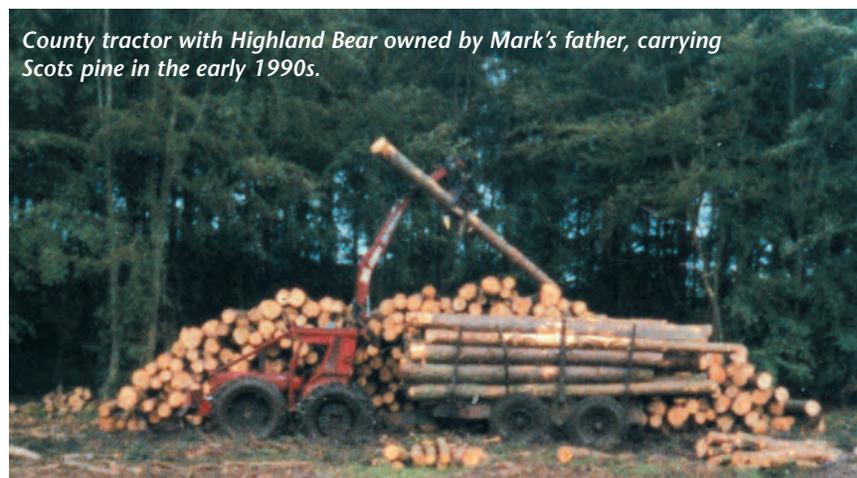
Martin Holliday, the machine operator, has worked for Robert Tweddle for many years. Mark and Martin are good friends and have worked closely over the past 16 years. Observing Martin's skilful manipulations of the trees, Mark remarked: "Some operators feed the tree through the head and back again, but there should be no need to do this. If the knives are sharp and the profile is right to begin with, one pass should be enough. It's essential for both the operator and contractor to ensure that the machine is set up correctly and all pressures on the head and base are tuned to the varied tree species. This ensures maximum production, less fatigue on the machine and cost-effective fuel consumption, which are all vital factors when it comes to running the machines cost effectively."

Now experienced in many aspects of forestry, it was, perhaps, inevitable that Mark Beach found himself

falling timber in the forests of north-west England as a teenager. He explained: "Dad started contracting for Cumbria-based Sheffields in the 1970s, and my twin brother Wayne and I regularly accompanied him into the woods from a very young age. By the time we reached our early teens, my brother and I were operating chainsaws and skidding timber for Dad. You couldn't get away with that these days! My interest in forestry wasn't particularly strong at that time. Living and growing up in Orton, Cumbria, I much preferred the idea of farming."

ber for Dad with a County 754. Dad also had two Volvo 868 forwarders, a County forwarder and three Zetor tractors with trailers. One Zetor was coupled with one of the first hydrostatically axle-driven Patu timber trailers; another had a Nokka drag trailer and the third had an FMG drive trailer. We also had two shire horses that were used to extract timber on certain sites. Over the six years I worked for Dad, I became very passionate about the forestry industry and I gained a vast knowledge and experience in all aspects of the trade. I learned how to repair and maintain

*County tractor with Highland Bear owned by Mark's father, carrying Scots pine in the early 1990s.*



Even so, Mark's attention was caught when forestry machines began their rise to prominence in the UK's woodlands in the late 1980s. Aged just sixteen, Mark and Wayne both opted to become involved in their operation and maintenance through employment with their father.

"Wayne and I were skidding tim-

our own machines and was also responsible for running different sites all over the country. Forestry was well and truly in my blood!

"In 1993 Dad undertook work for Nottinghamshire sawmiller Jeffrey Walker and was contracted to cut Corsican pine at Clipstone Colliery. He arranged for me to move down



*Mark works on the wagon cranes for Settle haulier Alistair Askew.*

country where, supported by half a dozen self-employed hand cutters, I operated the forwarder. I spent a lot of time in the Nottinghamshire area, Delamere Forest in Cheshire and Ladybower in the Peak District."

In 1996 Mark started going his own way, contracting for other people, and began driving a Silvatec harvester for Gavin Aris in the Scottish Borders. He was then approached by Geoff Proud of Ainstable in Cumbria's Eden Valley, who offered him a position operating a four-wheeled Valmet 901 harvester with a Viking 520 head in Kielder Forest.

Mark enjoyed operating harvesters and forwarders for Geoff Proud, and in October 2001 he was delighted when Geoff bought a brand new 911.1 Valmet with the very first 360 head in the country and made him responsible for operating it. He enjoyed putting it through its paces and felt this was a huge breakthrough in the design and performance of Valmet heads with.

Mark worked for Geoff Proud until 2003 and remembers those as 'the best' years working in the woods.

Mark Beach had a great interest in Valmet machines and an increasing desire to build on his knowledge of Valmet harvesters and forwarders. By the time he left Geoff Proud, he had taken part in forestry demonstrations for Valmet at Spadeadam in 2002 and later that year at the APF in Lockerbie where he demonstrated a Valmet 911.1. Fostered by years spent operating harvesters, his interest in the mechanical side of forest machines had also burgeoned.

Christmas 2003 found Mark in the Scottish Borders where he drove the second Valmet 941 to arrive in the British Isles, for contractor Stewart Booth. "This was an agreement with Valmet to allow me to gain experience on the capabilities of the new 941 before I started full-time mechanical and training activities with them. Whilst with the company I was not only responsible for driver training, but my role also involved fixing machines and demonstrating across the UK and in Ireland. In this way I accumulated a lot of insight into the machines' intricacies and made a lot of acquaintances. Every day was a learning curve, but when you can sort out a machine quickly that's

been playing up and costing the contractor money, you're given a lot of respect."

In 2004 Mark demonstrated the Valmet 911.3 X3M Snake at the Valmet show in Eldrig. This was by far Mark's favourite harvester at the time due to its extreme climbing abilities and stability.

In 2005 Sweden experienced a severe late winter storm which devastated a significant proportion of its coniferous resource. Touched by a spirit of adventure and the prospect of good rewards for their services, numerous British and Irish forestry contractors took their machines to the country in an attempt to salvage as much of the windblown crop as was possible. Mark too was obliged by Komatsu to visit the Land of the Midnight Sun. "Colin Robertson (MD) telephoned and asked if I'd sorted out a passport. The company had been trying to persuade me to get one for some time but I was reluctant to do so as I don't enjoy flying. Biting the bullet, I applied for one and was soon on my way. I loved Sweden. An altogether different world, it was my kind of place."

Mark's purpose in Sweden was to set up a new Valmet 911.3 for an Irish enterprise. However, he quickly discovered that setting up a harvester in that country is very different from doing the job in the UK. "When there's no snow in Britain, a conifer's branches point upright, but in Sweden, where snow is a regular winter occurrence, the branches tend to drop to a more horizontal angle, which changes the knife and roller pressures. The trees go through the head so much faster – there isn't the friction in the head because the pressures can be released."

Mark travelled extensively throughout the UK and Ireland repairing, maintaining and servicing machines for Komatsu, which he thoroughly enjoyed, but after three years of doing this and finding time away from his family increasingly difficult, he decided he needed to be closer to home. "I'd really enjoyed my time with Komatsu and learnt a lot, but it was a single man's lifestyle. I had a young family, but was rarely at home."

The next three years were spent back on a John Deere 1470D harvester in the Yorkshire area before he was taken on at Irving's Sawmill at Hutton Roof in Cumbria as an engineer, where he stayed until starting up on his own last year.



Mark demonstrating the X3M Snake at the Valmet show in Eldrig in 2004.

Since becoming his own boss, Mark still repairs and maintains everything at Irving's, including all the sawmilling equipment, from the huge quad AKE saw to the conveyors, crosscuts and stacking machine, as well as doing all the site plant machinery such as forklifts, loading shovel, a 'rubber duck' 360 wheeled machine and the wagon and trailers, keeping them serviced and inspected as required. He also does their fabrication work, including making walkways and installing machinery.

Another place where Mark can often be found is at TreeStation Biomass in West Gorton, Manchester, where he looks after their Heizohack chipper and two Timberwolf chippers, as well as taking care of their fabrication needs and their wagons and Valmet tractor.

Aware that in his field it is important to be an all-rounder, Mark Beach has also recently become involved in timber wagon crane maintenance and repairs. He is now looking after a fleet of timber wagon cranes in both Cumbria and North Yorkshire, and this is something that he is particularly keen to expand upon. Mark has also recently designed and created a

huge log splitter to fit on the back of an artic wagon for a local haulier for splitting oversized logs.

Mark prides himself on offering a genuine 24-hour call-out service, as he understands the need to be flexible and reliable within the forestry trade. "Time is money, and if a machine is broken down, it can have a massive financial impact on a company."

Due to his increasing workload, Mark now has occasional help from local mechanic John Budden, who works alongside him, helping out in all areas, which is proving to be a great asset to the business. Although based in the Lancaster area, Mark still travels extensively across the UK. His service van is fully kitted out with everything he needs to ensure jobs can be completed efficiently and without delay.

Mark feels confident that the 25 years extensive experience he has gained within the forestry trade, and his passion for business, can only ensure that Mark Beach Forestry goes from strength to strength in the future.

Susan Burke

