

# Direct to the Mill

**Ross Cook's most recent acquisition of a DAF 95XF truck – and his own welding and engineering skills in making a log trailer to run with it – now mean that he can run his timber direct to the mills he supplies, cutting out the need to rely on anyone else. It is just the latest of his business development ideas that have enabled this 26-year-old Aberdeenshire contractor to continue to expand his business, R Cook Forestry.**

I met up with Ross at his Alford base. Ross grew up in a forestry environment, helping his uncle, Iain McRitchie, who had his own County tractor and skidder. Although his family is involved in farming in the area, it seems that working in the woods held a greater appeal to Ross. That said, he did not immediately enter forestry, instead joining Bardon Aggregates as an apprentice diesel mechanic when he left school at 15.

Engineering had always fascinated Ross, and the chance to learn how to repair and maintain all forms of quarry machinery and vehicles felt like a great opportunity, and one that, now that he is in business for himself, has really been worthwhile. Ross says, "It was the best thing I ever did. I can now repair and maintain all of my forest machinery. I do 99% of the work myself, and that is a major bonus when it comes to cost!"

Ross worked three days a week in the quarry and studied two days a week at Clinterty College in Aberdeen for an HNC in service engineering, which he gained, as well as an HND in welding. After four years he moved to work with Scania Trucks in Aberdeen as a mechanic before trying his hand for a short time working in the oil industry. "I did not like that industry; for me it lacked a work ethic. It

was not like that in the forestry game that I had been used to," he said.

Ross left and decided to set up for himself working in the woods, supplying firewood in Aberdeenshire. Perhaps because of his experience working with his uncle Iain, he purchased a second-hand County 1184 with an FMV 360 crane. Having gained his chainsaw tickets, Ross initially did most of the cutting and collection work himself, aided by Iain.

The timber came mostly from wind-blow sites in the surrounding vicinity, with Ross using his local knowledge and contacts with the farming and estate community to identify opportunities. Working mainly with elm and beech, and splitting the logs into firewood with his self-designed and built vertical log splitter, he advertised in the local newspapers and gained clients through word of mouth. "I delivered all over, even driving the Land Rover to Peterhead with a load of firewood! It seems crazy now looking back, but I was establishing my name and the business," he laughed.

An opportunity then arose to carry out contract work for Tilhill. It was at this stage that Ross realised that he would need to make a major capital investment in the business.



His first buy was a Ponsse Ergo HS16 harvester with an H73 head, which he got from Ponsse UK at Lockerbie. Apart from the fact that this machine was available, the other major plus in Ross's eyes was that it had a Caterpillar engine, meaning that he would be able to maintain and repair it himself.

Ross with the HS16 harvester.

He worked on thinning jobs in the area for Tilhill and soon purchased an FMG 678 Mini Bruunett eight-wheeled forwarder to pull the wood out. Roy Valentine, who had worked with him at Scania, and who was a former harvester operator with Alf Roberts, drove the forwarder on a self-employed basis. As well as work from Tilhill, there was also work from local estates that needed small-scale thinnings and some clearfell jobs carried out.

Ross decided that, with a lot of work available, it made sense to consider dealing direct with customers rather than operating a business model that required the involvement of third parties. "I felt that I could offer estates and woodland owners the full range of services that they needed, and effectively cut out the middleman." Since then he has bought stands of timber and worked with a number of local sawmills.



The FMG 678 Mini Bruunett working on a landing site.



The Ponsse Ergo HS16 harvester operating in the woods near Aboyne in Aberdeenshire, with its H73 'bullet-proof' head.

Currently he delivers wood direct to Cordiners at Banchory and Gordons at Peterhead as well as 3-metre pulp logs to Jenkinsons at Huntly and Norbord at Inverness. He has also been able to source elm trees at good lengths and quality which he runs down to A&J Scott at Wooperton near Alnwick. Many of these are eventually exported and used to produce veneer.

I wondered how he managed to get enough standing timber to keep his machines fully employed. "I bid for timber through land agents, but many of the trees I source come from word of mouth and people approaching me. I know a lot of farmers and estate owners, but also, perhaps surprisingly up here, there are a lot of woodlands owned by oil industry workers, and these have been a source for me."

The DAF 95XF lorry only arrived on the scene in the last few months, and as well as allowing Ross to transport the logs, it has also given him the challenge of making his own log trailer. He explained that he and his mate Ronnie Beaton had worked on cutting down a curtain-sider trailer right to the chassis before fitting on a crane, head-board, and bolsters to complete it.

"Jim Watt, of Caledonian Forestry Services, sorted us out with a Foresteri crane which was in good condition. The rest of the materials we sourced ourselves." The project was so successful that Ross plans to refurbish his skeletal log trailer, which currently sits forlornly in the yard at Alford.

Business has been good and brisk throughout his time operating on his own. As a result Ross feels that he needs to change his forwarder to reflect this. "I needed to get more capacity; the FMG was only capable of carrying six or seven tons out of the wood, which wasn't really enough to justify having someone driving it. An opportunity arose to purchase a 1999 Ponsse Buffalo S16 from a local contractor, Donald McLarty. When I saw the machine, it was a credit to him; it was a no-brainer to buy it."

The machine had done 18,000 hours when he bought it and has meant that the capacity has doubled to around 14 tons, making Ross's operation much more economical. He has also spent a fair amount of money on his harvester to ensure that he has two machines

that can keep operating on all types of ground and conditions with minimal of downtime.

"The harvester is easy to repair, not over-complicated to maintain, and with both it and the forwarder having the same Caterpillar engine parts, this minimises the need to carry lots of spares and allows parts to be interchanged between the machines," said Ross.

He also described the H73 head as 'bullet-proof', saying he had had very little problem with it. "Its ability to process timber is excellent. We did a job at Gordonstoun School with twisted, crooked timber which I thought would cause problems, but the H73 just chewed it up and spat it out without any problems."

Ross still has his County tractor, which he describes as his pride and joy. It dates back to the early 1980s and though Ross works with it in the woods, he is also happy to show it off, as he is a member of the County Club. He had the choice at the time of its purchase of upgrading his car or buying a County, and for him there was no decision to be made other than to get the County!

Whilst many of the jobs Ross's company carries out are dealt with by the machines, he still does hand cutting. While he favours Stihl for clothing, his preference for chain-saws is with Husqvarna. He has an old 262 that has never let him down and he considers his best saw to have been a 576XPG. He did admit to being bemused by the fact that with some of the newer saws you need a laptop to carry out simple adjustments!

Ross's team comprises some experienced forestry workers, along with uncle Iain assisting in all areas. Sandy Muirden drives the forwarder, Sandy's brother Kenny drives the DAF a few days a week. Ross – accompanied by his two-and-a-half-year-old black Labrador Millie – operates the harvester. A very important member of the team is Alison, his partner of five years, who does all of the business's administration. "She is very much



*The County 1184 in action with a forwarding trailer.*

the brains of the paperwork side. She deals with the VAT, tax, all my accounts and invoicing, and keeps me on an even keel."

Ross is very much hands-on in the business that he is striving to expand. He saves a lot of money by utilising his mechanical and welding skills. Carrying out the servicing and repairs on all of his machines may save cash, but he does find his social time very much at a premium. I wondered how he dealt with the stress of being involved 24/7 in the business. He laughed as he told me that he works as a bouncer in the Butchers Arms, a local pub in Inverurie!

Ross is a young man in an industry which is looking to bring more of his kind into it, and I was very interested to understand from him what made him want to work in forestry. His reply was quite simple. He told me he loved working outdoors in the woods and that it was a simple decision to want to work in this game. That said, he also told me that it had been difficult getting started. "It is an industry with many established players. It can be hard to get the start to allow you to build your reputation, and get a name for being able to do a good job."

His plans for the future are very much to continue as he has done to date, with the upgrading of machinery in the next couple of years on the agenda. He also wants to become Forestry Stewardship Council certified so that he can demonstrate a chain of custody for the timber he is harvesting.

He also has plans to purchase his own low-loader trailer to allow him to transport his machines to sites on his own, once more reducing the need for third parties to be involved, and to keep costs down.

Before I left Ross I wondered if he had any advice for any other new young entrants to the forestry industry. "Looking back, I should have started out working for a contractor before starting out for myself. This would have given me more experience and allowed me to better understand the industry. I firmly believe that is the way for anyone else who is thinking about joining the industry."

He is clearly a man who has not let this become a problem to his own business development, but is open and honest enough to offer simple, but valuable, advice to others.

*James Hendrie*



*The DAF 95XF truck purchased recently, with the log trailer built by Ross and his friend.*