

In for the long haul

Extracting timber where others fear to tread

The trial site at South Laggan where Calum and his team recently extracted 1,200 tons of timber 180 metres uphill and 1,800 tons 340 metres downhill, viewed from the other side of Loch Lochy.

It should not be much of a surprise that Calum Duffy from Mull is passionate about timber extraction using skylining techniques; after all, he started skylining when he was only seventeen for his father's island based logging business.

Back then, he and his best friend and foreman, David Macfarlane, operated a Chapelhall winch. Today he has just invested in a bespoke Volvo 360 BLC excavator base with Koller carriage, which he believes will allow him to take skylining to a different level. "When I drive around Scotland I see enough skylining work to last my lifetime. Steep-ground extraction is difficult to achieve, but with the right equipment there is money to be made, and this new machine will allow us to be much more productive and to deal with bigger timber with ease," Calum told me.

Calum and his brother Iain were involved in forestry from an early age. Their father Hugh not only had his own contracting business, but also was twice British chainsaw champion. Calum, it seems, was always in and around the woods and chainsaws, and their operation became second nature to him as a youngster. Yet he initially started his career in mechanics, away from the family business, before joining his father and brother as a forwarder operator. "I started brashing, felling and snedding the bigger trees that the processor could not manage. I eventually got on the processor and worked it for a few

years along with another operator," Calum told me.

The business employed ten woodcutters and Calum remembers that it was a tough working environment, but one that gave him a lasting grounding in forestry work. "The guys that I worked with in these early days worked and partied hard. They had an unbelievable work ethic. As the business developed, so too did the opportunities to work on jobs that required skylining techniques to be used."

Calum's father hired a Chapelhall Ford 4000 cable crane from the Forestry Commission, and it seems Calum and his mate David Macfarlane, with no previous experience of winching, were soon

required to become expert operators of what he told me was a machine that was coming to the end of its useful life. "It was okay for what it did, but it broke down a lot. What I do remember about it was that the skyline had to be raised by hand using a Tirfor winch. But the knowledge we gained operating it stood David and me in good stead for the future."

Having gained a taste for skylining, Calum branched out for himself at the age of twenty-one, buying a Timbermaster skyline winch from A&B Services at Killin, Perthshire. This started a business relationship that has lasted to the present day. "They are good to deal with. If they do not stock a part, they will

make it. They are very good engineers and in my experience they go the extra mile for their customers," Calum told me.

Calum financed this major purchase at the time with a £5,000 grant from the Prince's Trust and a low interest loan from Highlands and Islands Enterprise. He fondly remembers being interviewed to get his Prince's Trust grant and having to attend a week-long business course – and paying back the loan over his first four years.

It seems the Timbermaster met with more approval from Calum than the Chapelhall. It represented new technology, with a clutch system that meant raising and lowering the main line was much easier. The fact that it could operate both



The Cat 320CL processing with its 758HD head.



The team. From left to right – Donald Halbert, Calum Duffy, Michal Poprawa (kneeling), James Strachan, Shaun Olsen and David Macfarlane, with their favourite saw – the Stihl MS 441 with 25-inch bar.

on and off road offered the opportunity to deliver a much higher level of productivity, a major requirement for Calum and his fledgling business, with Calum operating as a subcontractor on very tight margins.

But as we know all too well, in the mid 1990s the market for timber changed, rates plummeted and skylining work dried up. He returned to working for his father, but he still feels aggrieved at what happened and the impact it had. "A lot of experience was lost in skylining back then, and in many respects the industry has never quite recovered; it is hard nowadays to find knowledgeable crew members," he told me.

By 2005 he was back skylining, working in tandem with David, operating his father's skyline, an EX350 excavator conversion, again by A&B Services. Calum remembers that it was quite revolutionary at the time, being a machine that could excavate, skyline, and harvest, all in a productive manner. "There were no guy wires, it was quick to set up and all the drums were hydraulic and not clutch operated – so there was a lot less that could go wrong with this machine," observed Calum.

Being an excavator, the EX350 could also be used to create the landing area. Calum told me he got a real kick out of operating the winch, clearing many a hillside in the west of Scotland. "We could drag a 'bing' of trees (40 or 50 tons) with ease and then move

onto the next. This machine was fast and productive."

Only a year later, the desire to branch out on his own once more saw Calum buy the EX350 and a Cat 320CL harvester from his father, and to these two machines he added a 1210A Timberjack forwarder. His father had been carrying out some skylining work for Iggesund Forestry and Calum took over this work which was mostly in areas with difficult access.

He employed David, and with only the two of them working, the overheads were low and production was okay. Initially, the work was tidying up after other conventional contractors, but as time has moved on, the jobs have become much bigger and more lucrative.

Calum has worked hard to build up the business, and carries out work mainly for Iggesund and the Forestry Commission. Given his feelings about the lack of experience in the industry it is perhaps not much of a surprise that Calum has invested in recruiting, training

and developing his own young skyline team.

Alongside David Macfarlane, Calum has Donald Halbert as faller, Michal Poprawa, his brother-in-law, and James Strachan as chokermen, and finally Shaun Olsen as his forwarder driver. "I hand picked young people to train and paid them well, and as a result I now have team trained in the different roles required for a successful skylining operation," Calum told me. All of the team are trained chokermen and chainsaw operators, and two have full forwarding qualifications – the training all financed by Calum himself.

Calum explained to me how they operate after a job has been agreed. His fallers fell racks which have been marked by the winch man. The front face of the job (up to a maximum of 50 yards) are dealt with by the harvester. Once the racks are open, the skyline is set up and the winch starts dragging, before the process starts again with the fallers felling new racks. Duffy Skylining provides

what Calum describes as an 'all-in service'. "We can do the whole job without the requirement for subcontractors, and I believe it is this that sets us apart from our competitors."

The main area of operation is the west coast of Scotland, although Calum was quick to point out that they will go where the work is. At the time I met up with him, his company was in the middle of a steep-ground harvesting project in South Laggan Forest, in the Forestry Commission Scotland's Lochaber Forest District. This project was looking to gather data and information on steep-ground operations, specifically looking at technology, site organisation and the management of harvesting and restocking operations.

On this job, Calum employed his Daewoo 220 Solar excavator-based skyline with its hydraulic Igland 8000 winch, which offers a 350-metre pulling distance and a direct lift capacity of two tons. He told me that they use quick-release chokers and 10mm steel cord Certex rope, although on this trial they have been using Dyneema fibre rope, which offers the advantage of being five times lighter than steel, but has the downside of being three times more expensive. "It is an unknown quantity at the moment; it is easier to operate, aids setup, and we can get more rope on the drum, but we just don't know its limits, so we are a



The Daewoo 220 Solar excavator skyline moved back to allow the Cat 320CL harvester to operate.

bit wary about what might happen."

Calum's Koller USKA 1.5 carriage was employed on this trial. "Although heavier than the locking carriage, it speeds up uphill extraction, and on long, downhill racks its payout system helps the speed of chokering." He also told me that it was really coming into its own, for although the site they were working on was on an 85% slope and they were skylining 320 metres downhill, rechokering is much quicker, and the combination of the new fibre rope and two chokermen sharing the load, meant that they were producing an increased number of drags.

Other machinery employed on this job. His 1410D Timberjack forwarder was operating without tracks to reduce ground damage. (This has since been replaced by 1710D.) His Caterpillar 320CL with a John Deere 758HD harvesting head was employed as the processor. Calum likes this machine. "It's a good unit for processing bings due to its slewing power and fast, accurate head," he told me.

Calum believes that this trial can lead to more work for his business, and can also prove the worth of using skylining for timber extraction on steeper ground. He is criti-

cal of the lack of government support for this part of the forestry industry. "In the UK it seems to me that skylining is dying on its feet, yet in Europe it is subsidised and booming." He has seen evidence of this at first hand on a field trip to Austria, with members of the Forestry Commission, and supported by the Highlands and Islands Forestry Cluster.

He saw a lot of high value machinery being used, but achieving lower production levels than he would have expected.

Nevertheless, there was a clamour for people to join the industry to carry out skylining!

"I went on the trip as it involved looking at steep-ground working. I learned a few things and I bought the payout carriage on the strength of the visit," said Calum, adding that he made a number of contacts, many of whom he is still in touch with, as they share his interest in steep-ground working.

He has also visited Norway by invitation and saw the severe damage caused by the winter storms which have left a lot of windblown timber on steep ground – a perfect scenario for skylining!

"The Norwegians are looking for a contractor with a winch with no guy ropes, and mobile enough to work in the woods or from the road. It could be a source of future



The Daewoo 220 Solar excavator skyline and the Cat 320CL harvester working in tandem at Glen Creran.

work for us and it is certainly an exciting prospect to be involved at an early stage." But eventually the opportunity was declined, due mainly to high shipping costs.

Calum has once again entrusted A&B Services with the conversion of his new Volvo 360 BLC, which he believes will allow the extraction of bigger timber than is possible with his existing machinery. "It will be more productive and I am sure

that it will not suffer the downtime that other machines do," Calum enthusiastically told me.

All the drums (haul-in, haul-back and main line) have their own Poclair pump on the new Volvo. With the Koller carriage it will be able to haul timber over 600 metres. The haul-in drum will have a 6-ton main lift capacity, and when fully kitted out, the whole machine will weigh 45 tonnes, which Calum believes will make it the biggest excavator-based skyline in the UK.



Everything in harmony on the landing – the Daewoo 220 Solar excavator skyline with the Koller USKA 1.5 carriage, the Cat 320CL harvester and the John Deere 1410D forwarder.

As part of his drive to help his own business but also to publicise skylining, Calum has just set up a company website – www.duffyskylining.co.uk. He hopes this will demonstrate just what opportunities skylining offers for steep-ground timber extraction and at the same time showcase the capabilities of the machines that he utilises.

Before I left Calum I asked him if he ever had any regrets about leaving a career in mechanics behind for forestry. He smiled when he told me, "No, I love the forest and will never leave her. Sometimes she angers me and brings in people who know nothing about her but they pass through. Daily she reminds me how dangerous she can be, but mostly she takes care of me and lets me live my dreams."

James Hendrie