John Owen formed Top Log Forestry, based in Devon, in 1993 with the basic essentials; he has worked his way through, and fabricated, a variety of different machines up to the present day, and now owns the first Konrad Highlander high performance harvester to be brought into the UK.

When John was just four years old, his father dumped a load of firewood at the front door of the family home. John moved the whole lot round to the back of the house using just his pedal power tractor and trailer. Maybe even at that young age his interest in timber and machinery was already beginning to develop... Certainly, firewood went on to become a constant throughout his working life.

From the age of thirteen John could be found at weekends and during holidays helping out a local firewood dealer, splitting the wood and learning to drive tractors. John also spent time watching him working with the chainsaws, which gave him a good education on what was involved. John’s part-time work led to the offer of a full-time job, which enabled him to leave school early at fifteen. This suited John fine as, in his words, “Exams were not my thing.” He started out in his working life with nothing. It was quite hard to get started in the late seventies/early eighties, and at sixteen he had to borrow the money from a friend’s mum to buy his first chainsaw.

John stayed in that job for a while and then worked for an agricultural engineer for a further six months before going to work cutting timber for his uncle, who had a forestry business.

So at seventeen he was working with a team cutting timber (big spruce) by hand on a large clearfell job at Ottery St Mary, near Exeter. His previous experience and willingness to watch and learn had paid off. As John was working his first tree, the foreman who was in charge of his training came to watch him. As John legged the tree and put the gob in, the foreman tapped him on the shoulder and said, “I’ll see you later.” John was really pleased that the foreman thought he was doing well enough to be left to get on with it, especially as he was a well respected cutter.

John didn’t really have any more tuition and picked up everything he knows from doing the job; he now has ‘more tickets than you can shake a stick at’.

John stayed in this job for two years, but never got to work on harvesters; he’d shot himself in the foot because he was too good on the chainsaws!

Still keeping his firewood business ticking over, John then made a total change in direction for a couple of years, driving big plant. This involved some seriously big kit, some over 600 tonnes for Glendinning Quarry where, at nineteen, he became an instructor for the quarry training board. This is where his interest in machinery really started, as he found he had a natural ability with machines.

After two years, in 1989 John went back cutting for his uncle on a storm damage job in Sussex. Working for his uncle was not to last as, due to continued ill health, his uncle decided to give up the business, so it was decision time for John again. I asked John why he had left the job at the quarry, when it offered a good salary and regular employment. His answer? “The boredom. Even huge machines are only huge for a while; then you get used to them. Being in the same place every day with nothing changing wasn’t for me. I looked at what I was doing and thought, ‘This till I am sixty-five? No!’”

It was just by chance, through contacts made whilst working with his uncle, that John ended up taking a clearing up job for Brian Smith of Euroforest; a site with roughly 300 tonnes of conifer to be fetched out. After he completed that first job, Euroforest offered...
John more and more work and he pretty much continued to contract for them for the next six years.

John found he was doing more and more firewood, but with just a couple of tractors and a log splitter. One of the main sources of his wood was the National Trust, with the rest coming from local farmers and landowners. John was carrying out thinning and clearing up jobs, though keeping the wood that came out as firewood was worth nothing really back then – about £28 a tonne. He also managed to get work with some local estates and has continued to work for them for the last twenty-five years. He is flexible enough to be able to do any job that comes along because of the equipment he now has and the experience he has gained.

The first estate to give him full-time work was Berry Pomeroy, one of the Duke of Somerset’s estates, which kept him going very well. John also did a lot of work for George Seager Berry who worked for Michelmore Hughes, a local land and property agent. George kept John busy with work because John did exactly what George wanted him to do. With George there was no in-between; you did the work how he wanted it done. In the area that John works he feels that George is a bit of an unsung hero, as he managed 7,500 hectares on his own, which is incredible. John told me, “We used to call him the gazelle. You would see him going through the woods and say, ‘There goes George’. He would be up the banks and everywhere, no stopping.”

John’s eyes light up when talking about machinery and kit, but getting from chainsaws to the kind of equipment he has now has only been achieved through hard work and determination, and I think a touch of that pioneer spirit which is often seen in our industry. It never fails to amaze me that men can remember every detail of a machine they had way back when... but often not the wife’s birthday!

At the beginning, John started out with just firewood machinery. Then he fabricated his first forwarding unit from a County 1124. He bought a second-hand 5050 Botex crane and made the frame and trailer which ran for two years. John slowly started building up other equipment. The first was a Ford 7710 tractor with a Nokia 400 processor. The second was a County 1164 with Nokia 400RS processor with three-point linkage, which could do 25 tonnes a day, but not a lot more. Then, in 2000, John bought his first excavator. The Daewoo 130 was converted by Caledonian Forestry, who put all the guarding on and fitted a Foresteri RH25 head. John still has this head in the workshop and, at fifteen years old, it’s hardly got a crack on it – a good testament to the quality. John also built his first forwarder from a Volvo 860 dump truck. He cut the back off it, put bolsters on and fitted a timber crane and band tracks. The machine is 4WD but has six wheels – going downhill, six wheels brake, but uphill only four wheels drive.

John looks back at some of the sites and the terrain it has worked and thinks, “How did I do that?” – but he did. The machine extracted a huge amount of timber over its nine years, giving very little trouble. It was one of the best machines he has ever had and very quick across the ground. The Volvo conversion and the Daewoo combined to really lift production.

Eventually, John got another Volvo, a 971 forwarder, which was a huge machine; apparently the only forwarder that was rated to carry more than it weighed, due its build construction. At this time the Forestry Commission were using a lot of this model. John has since changed onto Rottne, from Jas P Wilson in Scotland.

When the original Daewoo was getting tired, John changed to a newer Daewoo (Doosan) 140, which he converted himself. Over the years John has done some interesting projects and thinks he may be the first to have put an Igland winch up on the boom of a digger, all remote controlled. When I asked him why, he explained that it was purely because of the height. “It enabled me to pull up into the air rather than into the ground, which is much better, especially when you are working on terrain that is pretty rough and nasty.” John has since converted the winch back to three-point linkage operation simply for the manoeuvrability. As it is remote controlled, it can be worked by one man. The winch has had several lives since it was bought in 2002, and has certainly earned its keep.

John continued to progress onto other machines including his first purpose-built harvester, a Timberjack 1270D with a 758 head, which he still has. I asked John what made him make that leap. “Basically it was a time of growth. We couldn’t keep up production. We were struggling to keep up with requirements, so it was the right time to do it. Contracts and timber were getting bigger and we were getting out of the size of timber that the Foresteri could cope with, so we needed a bigger capacity head. For a while John ran both the Daewoo and the Timberjack. He then decided to take the head off the Daewoo, which then went to work on brash raking, digging and clearing rides. Wherever possible John keeps every element of a job in-house, including tracks, extraction and clearing up after the job.

At present John has five contracts open, more than he would usually have. This has come about due to weather conditions and jobs not being able to be worked. He normally works within a fifty mile radius of home.

Euroforest provides 80% of the work John takes on and the site we are on is managed by them and owned by the Woodland Trust. The site is a preservation area and is littered with remnants of walls from ancient buildings, now at ground level and below and not easy to pick out. John is supplied with a map which shows all of the archaeological features on the site which he needs to protect. It is important that John knows where
The Highlander is nothing if not versatile.

everything is before he starts work to ensure that he is not felling over them and can get the wood out without damaging anything. John is required to place brush rows around the edges of these old walls to ensure they are not planted on again. John is to clearfell some spruce and thin the Douglas fir whilst protecting the remnants. He expects to extract around 2,200 tonnes of timber. John is also working the boundary of this area for another customer, clearing 1,000 tonnes of shelter belt which was planted in the sixties.

All of this site has been worked by just John himself using his pièce de résistance – the Konrad Highlander harvester. John said, “This machine makes it possible to have just one man and one machine on site and get the whole job done, and there are some really seriously big, hairy spruce here. It has felled everything. It has a huge capacity, and nothing is a problem to it.”

Basically, the Highlander is a harvester/forwarder combination that can extract full length trees. John has worked with it in some very steep sites, including Holbean Forest, where even motocross bikes couldn’t get up the banks, but the Highlander had no trouble. The Highlander has continuous 360° rotation on the cab and the crane; John can spin around all day long if he wants to. The Woody H61 head again has 360° continuous rotation, unlike a normal harvester with pipes running down to the head which would restrict this. The head acts as a grapple as well. The back of the head and the sawbox fold up and the knives form the grapple. The head has four rollers, two at the back and two underneath. The head is unique and very versatile as you can position and twist it in any direction you want. It also has a top saw to cut off the tops of trees. The head will handle diameters of almost a metre, while the grapple will handle 1.2 metres. It is capable of felling at height, cutting the top off a tree and leaving the stem standing.

I asked John how he came to be aware of the Highlander. “I saw the machine being advertised by Exc@v8 – Total Plant Solutions Ltd on the front cover of Forestry Journal and thought, ‘That’s the machine I need’. At the time my forwarder had gone wrong and I didn’t want to buy another forwarder and then later another harvester. I thought this was the machine to do it all.”

John’s next move was to go to Austria and see the capability of the machine; when he did, it put the machine in a very different light. He told me, “I knew it was a unique machine, but that was just the start of it; there was so much more to see on it. What Josef Konrad – who built the machine – has thought of and incorporated into the machine is very clever. With its 10-metre boom the machine is very stable and has all the advantages of an excavator together with all the advantages of a purpose built forwarder.”

John went on to buy the first Konrad Highlander to come into the UK. When the machine is in harvesting position with the suspension down, the suspension acts all the time to keep the machine stable. Using the suspension, John can lift the machine up and down, extend the wheels out independently and steer the wheels independently. It also steers from the bogie wheels as well, so has two steering points. This makes it very manoeuvrable, even though it’s quite long.

The machine can lift up to 6 tonnes close in and 2 tonnes at full reach. On top of all these features, it also has a 12 tonne winch with 100m of cable which drives at the same speed as the tyres, so you can anchor it to another machine or a tree at the top of a hill and winch yourself up or down. The idea is that it doesn’t spin the wheels, so you shouldn’t get much, if any, ground damage.

When John is working with the Highlander, he cuts a path down to the bottom, fells the trees, swings them over and drops them into the clambox. He keeps doing this all the way up the path, then takes the timber off and stacks it. The biggest load that John has had in the clambox is 21 cubic metres, but his average load is around 12 cubic metres. On his best day John has done 200 tonnes, cut and stacked. He has done more with a conventional harvester, but someone else would be extracting and stacking.

John’s Highlander weighs 23.5 tonnes and his forwarder weighs 19.5 tonnes, but with the forwarder, if he is carrying out 15 tonnes, that’s putting the total weight to 35 tonnes. With the Highlander, if he is bringing out 12 tonnes, yes he has 12 tonnes, but most of the weight is on the ground at the back, not sat on the wheels, so ground compaction is halved.

The second site we visited had previously been worked by a harvester and forwarder which were getting bogged down to their middles. John came in with the Highlander and drove the whole site on tyres – no tracks or chains – and didn’t have any problems.

It seems that John is really sold on the Highlander. I have to say it is one impressive machine. It reminds me of a sort of cross between a Swiss army knife and the Transformer toys my kids had. Bits come out of everywhere, and so many variables are possible.

John hasn’t stopped at the Highlander; he is awaiting the delivery of a brand new Valtra Versu T183 tractor with reverse drive and forestry cab, and a new timber trailer should be turning up at the same time.

Anne Berry

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