

# Scrub clearance in Cornwall

“Not all forestry is large-scale harvesting,” says Julian Burchby MICFor of Pryor & Rickett Silviculture. “We have an interesting project nearing completion in the South West. Come down and take a look.”

That is how Carlyne Locher finds herself standing on a Cornish hillside in a privately owned woodland, mildly concerned that the smoke from burning cherry laurel brash, currently drifting through tangles of windrows and up through the recently revealed mature moss-covered stems of oak, mature sweet chestnut, ash beech and a handful of mature Japanese maples, could contain cyanide gas.<sup>1</sup>

**J**ULIAN offers reassurance that this smoke poses no danger to health. His colleague Keira Tedd is unaffected, two teams of hand-cutting contractors working this site for three months are unaffected, and neither is he. He did a lot of pre-project research to make sure.

This 44-hectare ASNW runs roughly east to west across steep, south- and north-facing slopes. The slopes meet in a damp and narrow valley bottom where the stream is designated a SSSI for its abundant wildlife. The project involves scrub clearance over 14.6 hectares, of thick and often impenetrable unmanaged 100+-year-old cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*).

Julian, now 41, joined Pryor & Rickett Silviculture (PRS) in 2012, taking on the management of the South West office two years ago. With colleagues Keira Tedd, Charles Dutton FICFor and administrator Louise Knightley, they manage around 6,000 hectares of woodlands, bringing 32,000 tonnes of timber to market a year. It is unlikely that this site will contribute any productive timber volume to the Exeter office's statistics, as the site is being cleared for 'conservation and biodiversity objectives and development of the commercial forestry potential'.

Little is known historically of these woods. Possibly once part of a larger estate, they certainly received attention in Victorian

times, with the planting of the non-native invasive species cherry laurel, probably for pheasant cover.

Put up for sale in 2014, this woodland was snapped up by an anonymous buyer. PRS was engaged and plans for management began in 2015, when Julian's predecessor experimented with a one-acre laurel-clearance area, which is now beginning to show the first signs of recovery.

To replicate this experimental success across the site, the area was mapped and the extent of the laurel ascertained. Julian says, “You could not see beyond three metres from the path. I have never seen laurel as dense; removing it was a key priority and first stage of a wider plan of woodland restoration. Keira walked the perimeter, digitally mapping the laurel's footprint with GPS. We then applied for an initial 'scrub clearance of an invasive species for habitat restoration' grant and follow-on treatment for one year under Countryside Stewardship (CS).”

The application was onerous. “A clients' land must be registered and they must then grant us permission to act on their behalf. With the application in the system, we required a



Keira Tedd, Julian Burchby, Matt Camps, Toby Tomlinson and Mark Jones on the much wider vehicle access ride just inside the woods' main entrance.

Below: Dan Williams of DRM Williams.

minimum of three quotes. I drafted a tender, detailing the site difficulties and constraints, inviting six reputable contractors to site on the same day. They came back with a variety of costs, from £96,000 to £175,000. Natural England awarded the contract to DRM Williams (Honiton) [who offered the best value for money] and worked in conjunction with Mark Jones (east Devon) to reduce the overall duration. Our contractors have applied a sensitive approach, essential on a site like this. They have not used large machinery and are very good with the neighbours. Dan knows the site and will call me if he has any concerns. We do not have to visit the site as often (typically once a week), which saves our client money.”

At this juncture,



Julian mentions that PRS has had a busy year, establishing new offices in Sussex and Oxfordshire. For the first time they are opening an office in Perth, Scotland, headed up by PRS Director, Ian Barrington FICFor, “where we can bring our expertise in both investment and estate forestry to a Scottish context.”

All parties to this scrub-clearance project expected Natural England to award the contract (80% grant funding, 20% client funding) in December 2016, with work starting on 1 Jan 2017. Delays in issuing the contract (most likely due to public sector cutbacks) meant that, with bird nesting season, works were delayed until August. Both contractors have been on site for three months, (provisionally) completing by the end of November.

Access to the woodland is across two wet fields, typical of the woods in the West Country. At the main entrance, once a hunting gate at the east end of this valley, we find Mark Jones and his team of hand-cutters. Their worksite, the 3.6-hectare ‘SSSI valley bottom’, is separated from the 11-hectare ‘upper slopes’ by two woodland tracks running parallel along the length of the south and north slopes, converging at a



Above: Oak standards on the upper south slope released by Dan Williams, with windrows of cleared cherry laurel below.



Left: Looking back up the path to the main entrance, Keira shows an image of what this footpath used to look like.



Left: Cherry laurel regrowth.

bridge to the west. Mark and his team have completed their SSSI clearance, turning an area ‘in unfavourable condition’ to its present ‘unfavourable recovery stage’. They are currently

installing a vehicle access gate and fencing for 3 x 3-metre deer-exclusion boxes (both grant-funded) and burning the remaining laurel brash.

Giving the fire a wider-than-usual berth, we walk down the much-expanded access track, Keira showing an image illustrating how this footpath once looked. Mark Jones says, “When we started it was a dark footpath. We (both teams) were like pit ponies, cutting our way in from the edges. The laurel was tangled and knotted, in some places averaging 25 foot high. Where it had fallen, it had rooted and started again. In other areas, it had rooted aerially in tree branch unions. Some of the terrain was a swamp where we would disappear up to our knees. Other areas were steep with ditches. We used a small Igland 6-tonne, double-drum winch to remove the cherry laurel up to the path and kept a really hot fire.”

Julian says, “I did a lot of research when we set the project up. I found no evidence

to say that if you are burning [cherry laurel leaves] in an open area, it poses a health risk. Burning laurel in your living room, the smoke could be a concern. The guys take care when lighting the fire not to inhale the smoke and not to burn on days when the wind is blowing in the wrong direction. Once the fire is hot, it is fine.” Unable to burn on the ground in the SSSI, they were to use the corner of a bordering field. For convenience, they opted for a mobile burning platform towed around the site by a tractor.

Further along the track, beneath mossy-stemmed oak standards growing across the upper southern slopes - which Julian suspects might react to the extra light by putting on a lot of epicormic growth - lie windrows of laurel laid down five years ago. Julian says, “The previous owners did some work but they did not treat the regrowth. These piles made it harder for DRM Williams to work in this area, but we got through it.” Looking closely, trackside laurel stumps cut within the last three months are already showing signs of regrowth, even though they were treated at the time of cutting with blue dye.

Close to the bridge, signs of recovery in the experimental plot (cleared 2015) include the growth of ferns, willowherb and other characteristic woodland flora. Looking to the northern slope, all that is visible at this end is an imposing, massive wall of yet-to-be-cleared green.

# GROUND CLEARANCE

Crossing the bridge, an enormous windblown broadleaf stem and stump, previously blocking the narrow northern path, have been winched into the SSSI and left for habitat. Filing through a narrow gap in the foliage gives an idea of what this site must have been like pre-clearance.

Above us, DRM Williams' four hand-cutters are busy clearing laurel. For some reason, the stems of cherry laurel on this northern slope are thicker (8-12 inches diameter) than those on the south. All arisings will be windrowed, in ridges at 10-15 metre spacings, to desiccate over the next decade.

Julian and Keira agree that this contract was potentially risky for both contractors, because they were unable to walk within the site to get a true idea of what needed removing.

Today, Dan's team has so far cleared an area the size of two tennis courts. "Sometimes it is more, sometimes less," he says. "Last week was brutal. We found a stream. We knew the stream was there, we knew the gully was there. We didn't know about the bog either side. I got soaked. Dead trees that have gone over also slow us down. You have to get in amongst the branches to cut out the laurel." On balance, he thinks Mark's team has probably had the worst of it.

Dan continues, "During the summer holidays, we travelled in every day from east Devon, because accommodation in Cornwall is so expensive and hard to find." The delayed commencement of the contract resulted in an increase in Dan's costs. "Now, we are staying near to site. This job has kept the team busy during a quiet period and that is the main thing. Planting season started today (this season planting 150,000 trees for a PRS client in Dorset, part of the 500,000 trees DRM plant a year). Now we are getting busy I could do without it. We are about two weeks behind. If we go hard, we should probably finish in a week."

On this northern slope, Dan's team mist-sprayed along the track edge to kill the foliage so that they can see into the remaining compartments. Next year, it will take two weeks to spray the entire 14.6 hectares to treat the regrowth and inevitable seedlings. It could take several years for total eradication. Beyond the funding for 2018, the owner will absorb the cost.

What this 14.6-hectare clearance has revealed is, as Mark Jones said earlier, "Spectacular!" Along the valley bottom they have found ornamental trees (*Acers*) and specimen trees: a cathedral grove of sequoia and metasequoia and one 36-metre Wellingtonia. Julian is determined to keep them all, despite the site's designations. They have additionally uncovered a mine entrance, an old, walled, Victorian fern garden, and in the stream a leat and weir



36-metre Wellingtonia. Keira and Julian stand at the bottom to give a sense of just how tall it is.

marked by granite gateposts. "No one quite understands what went on in these woods and we want to bring in an archaeologist for that reason."

Clearance of the upper slopes has revealed a small monkey puzzle tree, waiting for perhaps 50 years to get some light, an Indian bean tree, and a snapshot of woodland management from 50 years ago. The southern slopes are covered with thicker-stemmed, 100-year-old oak standards. The northern slopes are covered in smaller coppice-grown oak, most likely managed for charcoal production.

With most of the 14.6 hectares revealed, Julian is firming up woodland-management plans and considering the next phase of reinstatement works. "It was a damp valley. The airflow will dry it out. The forest floor is a very sterile environment; the leaves dropping over the years will have created

toxic ground conditions, so I am not sure how much regeneration we can expect. I hope that suppressed ground flora will include ferns, dog's mercury and bluebells. We are going to plant understorey species, principally shade-tolerant hazel, in dense clumps. Over the next ten years, we will restore the Victorian fern garden, renovate and reinstate the pond, and improve the woodland infrastructure with track widening, some thinning and some coupe felling (0.25 of a hectare) to diversify the even-aged structure. We will do some harvesting, [most likely] initially leaving the timber in there for habitat."

Managing this site for future commercial timber production would be premature and too challenging at this stage. "The oak is of low-to-medium quality and we are not building a track. Access (across two wet fields) does not in its current state lend itself to commercial management, but will be upgraded in due course when timber is to be extracted."

Everyone involved in this project has been

supportive, from the tenant farmer allowing access across his fields and carrying out digger work, and the neighbours who are now on board, to the FC and Natural England, who has been trying to get this done for years. "They are very happy."

Julian and Keira enjoy professional satisfaction from their involvement in this project. Keira says, "To see what we came from to where we are now is interesting." Julian says, "I came here six weeks ago and could not believe the difference. To facilitate it and to oversee a job that has gone relatively smoothly is very satisfying. Because the woods have been left for so long, and now have an owner that is passionate to do the work, it is probably the most rewarding contract I have ever done."

[www.silviculture.co.uk](http://www.silviculture.co.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Cherry laurel leaves (and fruit pips) contain 1.5% cyanogenic glycosides, which become glucose, hydrogen cyanide (prussic acid) and benzaldehyde, and when chewed, chipped or burnt (smoke from a low heat when starting a burn) can release the bitter almond smell associated with cyanide. Cyanide starves the central nervous system of oxygen, causing death.



Dan's team of hand-cutters on the northern slope, clearing and windrowing cherry laurel. The stems on this side are thicker, 8-12 inches in diameter.



Looking down the northern slope with windrows of cherry laurel.

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