

# Duncombe Sawmill

**D**UNCOMBE Sawmill's 2.5-acre yard lies at the end of Sawmill Lane in Helmsley, North Yorkshire. From the car park, the customer walks through a gated display area showcasing a range of pergolas, log stores, outdoor seating and garden planters. The reception area or 'trade counter', as sawmill owner Emma Woods MBE calls it, is a light, warm and airy building, a bespoke 10-metre by 6-metre timber-framed, larch-clad structure milled and joined by sawmill staff and opened two years ago.

The reception's interior walls are lined with the tools and hardware needed to install the sawmill's bespoke fences and gates. Various surfaces display business highlights: 'Best Forestry Stand' award received at the Yorkshire Show (2017) and a picture of Emma with TV personality Tony Robinson, whose visit for the programme *Coast to Coast* was aired in April 2017.

Back in 2003, Emma was an unlikely sawmill owner. Originally from Liverpool, she trained as a design historian specialising in silver and her work included cataloguing the Queen's silver collection at Buckingham Palace. When her husband was offered a land agent role in Yorkshire, they moved with their young family to

Helmsley. Fourteen years ago, completely new to the world of forestry, Emma Woods saved a run-down sawmill from closure. Over a decade later, the business is thriving. Carlyne Locher visited Emma to learn the secret to her success.

Helmsley.

"There has been a sawmill here for 120 years," says Emma. "Between the 1960s and 1980s there were four in the area. We received a letter saying this one was about to close. If it went, this milling heritage would be lost." With absolutely no knowledge of sawmilling, she bought the business.

To take on an ailing business on a site where most of the buildings are redundant (and where not all staff welcome change) is a challenge. Emma elaborates: "Prices of many products had not gone up in fifteen years and they were costing us more to manufacture than they were selling for. The invoicing was done off-site. The same customer would come in for the same product twice a week and either get charged different prices, or not get charged at all. All timber was cut in the mill, but

the way our saw is set up, it is very labour-intensive and meant we could not compete with the big timber mills. We took things slowly."

With support from her father, an accountant, Emma brought the financial administration in-house and implemented a new computerised accounting system. Support on the milling side came from Chris Storey, a freelance forester and former mechanic who had previously worked on the sawmill machines. Chris began his role as mill manager on the same day that Emma started, and introduced her to timber and its inherent terminology, which she admits was quite a shock.

With a new price list established, they stopped trying to compete with the big timber mills, instead buying in British-grown post-and-rail fencing in standard sizes, leaving the mill free to cut the FSC-certified

timbers needed to make the larch gates and small bespoke orders that people cannot get elsewhere. Within a year, the mill broke even.

In 2006, a flash flood from the River Rye 300 yards away left the yard and timbers covered in silt and mud, destroying the motors of the laser-guided, 48-inch Armentia bandsaw and 36-inch Stenner resaw, and most of the machinery in the joinery shop. Ten weeks later, the joinery shop

reopened, having had most of its machinery upgraded in the process. "How the team dealt with the situation, staying positive and organising the clear-up operation, really opened my eyes," says Emma.

Today, Duncombe Sawmill sustains a team of eight. "Everyone has different skill-sets. Chris knows timber: he buys our roundwood; he understands all the machinery and can



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advise on installing gates. Dave Spence has worked in sawmilling most of his life and understands timber. He knows what to look for, how to store it and how to keep it. Joiner Eddie Garbutt has been here for 28 years. He understands working with timber. Steve Shepherd, our other joiner, started here when he was 16. He went away and came back. He has a passion for timber too."

Four staff, including Emma, work on the administrative side. "Anna Foots and Angela Storey - the third generation of Storeys to work here - share customer service. Jacki Shepherd manages the accounts. Between them, they have built up a wealth of timber knowledge and can advise our customers."

The sawmill building and offices occupy the centre of the yard. 200 tonnes of roundwood sawlogs (larch, cedar and oak), sourced from within a 25-mile radius, pass through the mill each year. Bespoke timbers are sawn three days a week. Pre-cut timbers are sourced from Scotland and Northumberland. Iroko (hardwood) comes pre-planked and is used to make some of Duncombe Sawmill's gates, benches and planters.

On the far side of the roundwood stacks, a local timber merchant unloads planks for tanalising in the mill's treatment cabin. Sawyer David Spence, driving the yard Manitou forklift, loads a larch sawlog onto the log loading deck. From the sawmill cab, he fires up the bandmill and removes the slabwood from what will become fortified sleepers.

At the far end of the mill building, the

substantial pile of chip will be sold to local farmers. Joinery shavings go for horse bedding. Slabwood is sold for firewood to private homeowners and to paintball companies. What these companies do with the slabwood remains a mystery.

Emma says: "We were lucky. We inherited some very loyal trade customers, fencing contractors, farmers and government bodies. The North York Moors National Park and the Forestry Commission order regularly, mainly our standard gates or barrier gates, waymarker posts or bridge components."

Bespoke products - gates, non-standard-sized fencing panels and other items - account for 30% of Duncombe Sawmill's sales and all are cut to order. Depending on the season, they do mill larger batches of larch, leaving the boards to air-dry for three months before cutting into components for use in the joinery shop and tanalising them.

During WW2, armed forces were barracked in the joinery shop building. The building itself was moved down from Duncombe Park Estate to the sawmill site

Above: The mill building, with offices at this end.

Above right: Duncombe Sawmill owner Emma Woods MBE. After 14 years of running the business Emma says, "It still amazes me, even now, seeing these beautiful gates and pieces of furniture come out from those sawlogs. I get a 'wow' moment when I see these things created."

Left: Mill Manager Chris Storey.

# SAWMILLS

(once part of the estate) in the late 1940s. Aside from new windows and toilets, the building remains much the same.

Joiner Eddie Garbutt has spent ten hours working on one bespoke three-bar, 12-foot by 4-foot larch Wessex gate for a customer's driveway. This style is one of the mill's most popular, and driveway gates are one product area that has grown significantly in popularity under Emma's stewardship, prompting her to spend time researching additional historic styles at the Victoria and Albert Museum's National Art Library in London.

More unusual bespoke orders include a 9-foot-high, five-bar gate made to keep in some particularly athletic dogs. "We did have to scale that up, it was massive. We made an 18-foot trebuchet and an Indian fort for a customer in Yorkshire. They wanted the fort to include wooden spikes pointing out of the top. We advised that this was not wise for children, but they wanted them anyway," explains Emma.

Between the joinery shop and trade counter building, four open-sided compartments display different styles of bespoke fence panels. Some are purely for display, others wear delivery notes. Customers brought two objects, a beehive-shaped bin and an open-fronted 'bug-house' into the yard, the customers asking Emma, "Can your joiners make something like this?" They could and did.

Attending local shows and sending out targeted mailshots each time a new product line is launched reinvigorates interest in the mill. In addition to their in-house range of products, the mill is distributor for a range of children's play equipment. "Taking stands at shows allows potential customers to see the quality of our products, and then they know what we are about," Emma says. "All the products made in our joiners' shop are guaranteed for 5 or 10 years. From the Yorkshire Show, we sold some seating, received some gate orders and one order for a timber-framed building, [a product line added soon after the trade counter was built]. Being a distributor is not hugely lucrative, but the footfall does mean that a customer might see something else."

Up to 50% of Duncombe Sawmill's customers are now retail customers coming in wanting items for their garden. "This was not the case before. Building our trade counter has increased this. It is a more approachable place, less intimidating than our last office. Sales of the items displayed - tools, gate hinges and the like - have increased. We have always stocked them, but they were tucked away."

The sawmill supplies customers further afield, in the South of England and in Europe. "We have a regular customer in Scandinavia who only sells products made



with British timber. He buys sheep hurdles and gates a few times a year. A customer in Holland buys gates by the lorryload and we send fencing to homeowners in France." Via the FSC, Duncombe Sawmill was commissioned to make a gate for a fashion show as part of London Fashion Week in 2014. They found out afterwards the client was Stella McCartney!

Emma admits that she has not worked on the machines. She oversees the business, finances and marketing, keeping an eye on daily sales and writing quotes for timber-framed building orders. "When I started here, I had very little business knowledge. I had run my own silver business, trading, cataloguing, but it was very small, just me. I knew how to use a computerised accounts system, which was helpful for setting up the basics and getting the finances running. Five years ago, I attended some courses in marketing. Last month, I began my first business course, the 'Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses' (run in conjunction with Oxford and Leeds Universities), advising small businesses how to grow."



Above: Sawyer David Spence, driving the yard Manitou forklift, loads a larch sawlog onto the log loading deck.

Left: The laser-guided 48-inch Armentia bandsaw (and the 36-inch Stenner resaw) in the mill building.

That this is Emma's first 'business' course comes as a surprise. She won Yorkshire Entrepreneur of the Year in 2009, received a nomination for Yorkshire Business Woman of the Year in 2016, and in January of the same year was awarded an MBE for 'Services to Rural Business and Skills in North Yorkshire'.

Since 2013, she has been a member of 'Helmsley in Business' - the group was instrumental in a campaign that saw the town win the Great British High Street's 'Best Market Town' award. "Our yard is tucked away. Having a network of people that can tell me what is going on in the area is great. A PR professional affiliated with the group generates press for us. If I have a problem, I have sixty people I can email asking if they can recommend anyone to help with the issue. I am just about to write to them about how to join the '10,000 Small Businesses' course."

Over the last 14 years, sawmill business has increased by 50%. "I would like to grow the business by another 30% I think," says Emma. "We do sell products nationally,



Left: Eddie Garbutt in the joinery shop.

Right: A Duncombe-style fence panel.

but most of our market is still in Yorkshire. We have a courier firm next door, so the systems are in place to sell throughout the UK. In the spring, we hope to launch a new high-end lifestyle product utilising two types of timbers. The course makes sure that before we invest, we have researched the competition and that we market to the right people. Next year, we may also invest in some new machinery for the joinery shop."

Running this mill remains a team effort. Now a seasoned business professional, Emma says that she is still learning, mainly

about managing people and recruitment. Her advice to anyone starting out in timber, as she did 14 years ago, is, "Be fair. Treat everyone as you would want to be treated - customers, suppliers and your team."

Emma concludes, "My daughter, now 17, is studying Business at A level. She worked here during the summer holidays and loved it. I overheard her saying the other day that she might be interested in coming to work in the sawmill. If she did, she would be bossing me about in days."

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