

David at his Bala, North Wales, desk. He has another desk in Llandovery, South Wales.



Mid Wales Harvesting, owned by Huw Jones of Tywyn, near Machynlleth on a felling job.

Left: Behind the processing machine early into a mainly larch felling job near Machynlleth. Machine operator Chris Warn in the yellow high viz and chainsaw feller Dave Griffiths in orange.

Right: David and the machine operator trying to work out how to reach a leaking oil pipe in the harvesting head.



DAVID says, "It is often hard to differentiate why I am asked to do something. I see most invitations as a way of representing the private sector generally and do so with the full backing of my employers."

How he finds time to speak about 'A Day in the Working Life', one of an occasional series of features looking at roles in forestry, is a bit of a mystery. Taking place as it does during planting season, the busiest time of his working year, understandably much of our conversation centres on planting issues.

By March 2018, in excess of two million trees will have been planted by hand across the Wales and Marches District, "including restocking our own properties, ground preparation and planting under contract for others (including restocking for Natural Resources Wales (NRW) who provide their own trees) and 160 hectares of woodland creation, three new schemes (roughly 70 ha (50% broadleaf), 30 ha and 50 ha) on farmland. These sites are the largest new plantings we have carried out in one season for 15 years."

From his office overlooking the busy main street of Llandovery in Carmarthenshire, South Wales, David explains what the role of District Manager encompasses. "I look after the 'forest management' business unit of Tilhill's operations. We will get involved with third party harvesting on client properties, but site supervision and timber marketing of Tilhill Forestry's operations is run by our harvesting colleagues."

The Wales and Marches District is everything west of a notional line drawn by the M6 to the M5 and across to the Severn Estuary. Split between two offices, Llandovery and an area office in Bala (North Wales), forest managers, landscape contracts managers, an investment and property manager (all with technical forestry backgrounds and qualifications) and a team of administrative staff manage forests

Building the business

Tilhill Forestry's District Manager for Wales and the Marches, David V. Edwards FICFor, is also the current President of the Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF), and sits on Confor's Regional Committee for Wales and on a number of steering groups and panels. Carlyne Locher caught up with him recently to speak about an average day in his working life.

spread over 100+ properties (10 hectares to 2,000 hectares), for private individuals and institutional investor clients whose primary motives for ownership are commercial.

A team of harvesting managers and supervisors co-share both offices, bringing to market (in a normal year) harvested volumes in excess of 500,000 tonnes of conifer from Welsh upland plantations and conifer and commercial hardwoods from the Marches.

Managing the 'business unit', the administration and making commercial decisions, David makes sure client properties run profitably and that they (and company shareholders) are happy with the service provided. Managing the managers, the largest of Tilhill Forestry's eight District teams in terms of staff numbers, he gets out into the forest - "the underlying reason why I do this job," - when he can. "In the forest, I have contact time with my managers, giving

them an opportunity to talk over issues; I am there as a sounding board - and I get to meet the contractors, [approximately 60 on the forest management side]."

Driving 20,000+ business miles a year, this week David is mostly desk-bound with a large calculator for company. He is preparing business unit budgets to be filed with head office in Dumfries (and parent company BSW) next week.

"I don't have an average week," he says. He does not have an average month if January's diary commitments are anything to go by. Last week, he attended quarterly 'face-to-face' meetings with colleagues from England and Scotland. Following 'finance', 'technical' covered research and development without the use of chemicals to control weevils (the main pest for restocking), and finally 'business development'.

"Tilhill is always looking to expand the

Work at Gwernybwich, near Llanbrynmair, felled in 2017. Currently being machine-prepared for planting by brush raking and mounding. The kit is owned by John Morgan of Llandinam. Mounding gets the trees off to a good start in weed-free, raised and cultivated soil. Two machines are on site working together to provide safety cover and speed up the operation.



Right: Laughing with driver Cliff Haymer, standing on his excavator.

Left: David 'taking time to care'. Carrying out a periodic safety and assurance (AMS) inspection; for safety, work quality, environmental compliance and machinery maintenance. Notice typical mid Wales scenery behind and sloping site.



Above: David with operator Steve Price. On this steeper ground Steve is 'bench mounding', digging a rough track across the slope and then backfilling it with mounds either side. Completed ground prep (and Cliff's machine) in the distant background.

business; there is no place for standing still," he says. Next week, Monday's site meeting sees David signing his District's first large-scale landscaping contract (grass seeding and planting trees and shrubs on a new bypass) in Wales. "We reintroduced landscaping last year, building up by recruiting a contracts manager and getting onto infrastructure project tender lists (roading and big development sites) and submitting tenders. Our South East of England District recruited their contracts manager before we did and they are now reaping the rewards with a healthy order book."

On Tuesday, the annual 'customer views'

meeting with NRW will be spent discussing what happened last year and what is coming this year. "Last year, NRW began selling standing sale felling coups as 'all inclusive' - the contractor undertaking roading works, felling and marketing the timber and the restocking. We put in combined bids ('forest management' and 'harvesting') and have a number of these projects on the go."

Following the District's monthly meeting in Bala, on Thursday David travels to Aberystwyth to meet first with the *Phytophthora* Outbreak Response Team, then the Tree and Plant Health Steering Group (Wales). Discussing and anticipating future forest issues - Forest Research

(Wales) has concerns for green spruce aphid (*Elatobium abietinum*) - they advise the Minister accordingly.

Last year, the spread of *Phytophthora ramorum* increased noticeably. NRW already has a backlog of restocking across sites where hectares of *P. ramorum*-infected larch have been removed. "The majority of the disease is on Welsh government land managed by NRW. NRW are the Plant Health Regulator, so serving notices on themselves. We are finishing a NRW contract for stem-injecting infected larch standing over 400 ha on difficult sites, where diffuse pollution could be a problem where sites can easily become muddy. Using an axe to notch

A DAY IN THE WORKING LIFE

the bark, a tree is then injected with neat herbicide. Ideally, trees treated this season will not come into leaf and sporulate in the spring." This gives NRW two to three years to fell and utilise the timber.

All grant applications for new planting are submitted to Welsh Government (WG) and verified by NRW. Grant funding comes directly from WG (part of the agricultural grant system). "NRW can (apparently) restock only as much as WG give them money for and restocking shortfalls have implications for certification because of the obligation to restock areas felled. NRW has a derogation because of *P. ramorum*, but they have to clear this land bank." David would like a commitment from WG to replant at least 2,000 ha annually, speeding up the replacement of over 20,000 ha of productive forestry lost since 2000.

Tilhill's Dumfries office centrally buys in home-grown Sitka spruce stocks for planting out in all districts, leaving each district to source additional species separately. NRW is planting with 37 species. In addition to the main Sitka crop, David is sourcing Douglas fir, Norway spruce and western red cedar for productive plantings, and other minor conifers for diversity along with significant numbers of native broadleaves. The vast majority of all plants used in the district come from Maelor Nurseries in Oswestry.

The application process for new planting projects can be arduous (one year or more). "Contracts were starting to be awarded just before Christmas. Many are yet to come through. Completing all works by the end of March is a tall order. We have experienced shortages of certain species and have had to import Norway spruce from Ireland. The idea that government-funded schemes have to rely on imported plants to meet their deadlines is bonkers from the point of view of biosecurity. We want to be planting only home-grown plants."

This issue has been raised with new Minister for the Environment Hannah Blythyn, the fifth Minister in the last five years. "Once, we had a morning meeting with a Minister. By lunchtime, they were gone."

Gaining a forestry degree from Aberdeen University, David, now 58, worked first for Fountains, moving between Northern Scotland (managing woodland creation, harvesting, contracting and landscaping works) and Wales and West Midlands (utility arboriculture and railways contracts). He joined Tilhill Forestry as district manager in 2003.

With 35 years of sector experience, part of David's role is to recruit graduates for Tilhill's two-year graduate training programme. "Three of my managers are nearing the end of their training. Recruiting experienced foresters is difficult. By training

our own and putting them in supervisory forestry operations roles as they develop, we build our own resource."

David is current President of the Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF). Backed by Chief Executive Shireen Chambers and Development and Membership Directors, he chairs the Executive Committee and the Council (governing body). "Representing professional foresters throughout the UK, the Council is currently working to improve communications between regions and the quality of CPD training delivered. This year we have 42 new professional members and 1,700 members in total, an all-time high."

Nearly 50 per cent of Tilhill managers are professional members of the ICF. Since the break-up of the Forestry Commission, David thinks Tilhill Forestry is the largest single organisation represented.

David feels that retaining a national set of objectives in the wake of devolution is important. In Scotland, following changes to FC structures and in the wake of the Mackinnon Report, the ICF has a role to play in the Report's recommendation of 'accelerated applications', applications for new plantings that come from foresters that have attained professional qualifications, or

'earned recognition'.

"I have contributed to our response on how the FCS takes this forward. Non-members of the ICF should undergo the same procedures and processes as those applying for professional ICF membership before they qualify for 'earned recognition'. Going through the process, why not become a full member? – it is recognition of those foresters that are qualified. Our members can be taken to task if they do not deliver at the level [of professionalism] required. The role of the ICF is to professionalise and maintain standards, promoting the industry via our outreach work with higher education institutions and with our interaction with clients. Operating to a Code of Ethics makes us accountable beyond our day job."

On Friday, alongside the other members of the Welsh Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel (WSAP) David will continue to contribute to the revision of the draft strategy for 'Woodlands for Wales'. "My key contribution to the draft will be pushing increasing productive capacity and suggesting holding people to account to deliver the strategy. In Scotland, forestry comes under the Rural Business Minister. In Wales, under 'environment', they still do not

Even in the 21st century, plants are still carried out and planted by hand. Supplying captions for his photographs, Simon Graham, had originally mis-typed Mid Wales as Mud Wales, which it is at this time of year!



recognise what the sector can contribute to the rural economy. Government have limits on what they can spend on woodland creation and are looking for money from investors. Investors only invest if they can see woodland creation on a reasonable scale. Money continues to go into Scotland just now."

Although England-centric, Confor's Westminster Conference (December 2017) offered David the opportunity to meet his local MP Chris Davies, who himself made reference to a local group vociferously

protesting against a proposed new planting scheme near Llanwrtyd Wells, a town famed for its annual Bog Snorkelling Championships. David says, "The town projects itself on 'green' events, making use of the backdrop of neighbouring forests. It a mystery as to why they were so opposed. At the organised drop-in session, the majority of locals supported tree planting and were apologetic for the opposition raised." Resolution has now been found, and the scheme approved. "The proportion of commercial conifers has unfortunately been drastically reduced and replaced with a higher proportion of broadleaves."

Less than impressed with English Minister Dr Thérèse Coffey's non-announcement of the Doddington North Moor new planting scheme's approval (announced one day later), he says, "The tortuous process Doddington went through reflects the difficulties we have in Wales of getting schemes through of any size. Representing Tilhill Forestry (and the sector) to Welsh Ministers, I regularly experience opposition (from regulators and NGOs). It always lists the reasons why not to plant trees: land unavailable because of restrictions, vegetation or priority habitats. There is no

one to make the judgement call on what is best for a piece of land, whether a modern forest on that site is better than what there is now. If marginal land (currently farmed for sheep with great subsidy) became available for planting, Ministers could get closer to meeting their targets."

For a district manager, a sense of humour is useful, as is the coaching (in general management skills) he received. "If you recognise that it is not your perception of yourself, but other people's perception of you that is important, you can work on how you behave to better and more positively reflect how you are perceived." This knowledge is helpful for problem solving, currently with NRW on contract phraseology, how it reads and how it is being interpreted. "We are having robust discussions. There is no animosity; business is business."

David enjoys building Tilhill's business within Wales. With challenging growth targets to 2020, his district has seen year-on-year increases. "More woodland creation is where our expansion lies and where we will contribute to the rural economy, ensuring that towns and villages don't just become retirement villages for people from elsewhere."

Number-crunching 2017's district budget vs. 2016's district budget determines the district's forecasts and budgets for 2018. "Do we need more staff? Yes, we probably do. Do we have the budget? How much more work do we have to do to justify the extra spend? I have to make sure what we do is profitable and efficient. Weather pending, sales taking place between now and March will determine whether this is a good or an excellent year."

www.tilhill.com/contact-us/wales-and-the-marches/
www.charteredforesters.org
<http://www.confor.org.uk/>

Work on an upland restock site near Llanbrynmair, Powys, in Mid Wales.

Arriving on site at break time, when it's not worth the long trek back to the van for shelter. David enjoying a day out of the office 'at the coal face' of the business.



David with planting team leader Emrys Jones, checking tree quality. Sitka spruce A17 improved plants, seed orchard grown.

All photographs and captions kindly supplied by Simon Graham, Senior Forest Manager, Tilhill Forestry.