

Jonah and Jimmy



Jonah's home in Allendale, south-west Northumberland, is built from local timber he has milled himself. Horse logging, he believes, is a viable proposition for many small woodland owners if conditions are suitable, though both the logger and the horse need to be prepared to work hard to maintain production rates.

14-year-old Comtois stallion Jimmy shows the colouration in the 'points' – the mane and the tail are most noticeable – that nowadays makes the majority of the breed so recognisable. A bay horse always has a brown or chestnut coat and black points and the Comtois bays were no different up until the 1950s. A 'silver dominant' gene introduced by a single stallion named Questeur produced offspring with the striking silver/yellow manes and tails. At first seen as a bit of a freak, the 'silver bay' has now become the perfect conformation for breeders.

SENSITIVE silvicultural operations carried out in larger, accessible stands will be able to provide the owner and his/her heirs with a sustainable source of revenue; although, it has to be said, the income may be modest. Some of the smallest and most isolated woodlands may always be expected to remain well outside the envelope of financial viability. Other factors, however, may come into the equation. Heating a property with fuel grown in your own woodland will carry a certain 'non-financial' value to some landowners. To others, environmentally sensitive management of their small patch of forestry is of huge importance.

It was on one of these latter woodland contracts that Jimmy, a Comtois stallion, could prove his worth to horse-logger Jonah Maurice. From his base in the East Allen Valley in south Northumberland, Jonah was ready to travel north to the banks of the River North Tyne to regenerate a neglected woodland and provide the new owners with a sustainable fuel supply for the next few years.

Previous owners had tinkered with the woodland, but random lengths of sometimes sizeable timber littered the forest floor. Their intentions may have been good but one half of the wood slopes steeply up to the property. The other section was reached only by crossing the burn that divides the wood on a flimsy footbridge. Little of the potential fuel wood made its way up to the house.

An all-round woodsman, Jonah has his

Bringing neglected woodland back into management is currently very much in vogue. Using horse power, literally, even more so. Hilary Burke explains.

own patch of woodland down in the 'Dale', as it is called locally, and has even milled his own timber to build the family house. Work in the commercial woodlands of the local estates has been an important source of revenue. Steep ground and stands with difficult access tend to be the norm, but daily production at the roadside must still satisfy the forest works manager.

Up on the banks of the River North Tyne, the first task was to widen and strengthen the existing bridge to take the weight of Jimmy and a full horse-load of timber. It would be possible to haul the timber along the woodland edge through the adjoining

agricultural land to the property. The addition of 400 or so metres for each trip was just about possible, but Jimmy would be working, laden, up a steep gradient.

While Jonah has a horse-drawn self-loading timber trailer, uphill hauling reduces its capacity considerably. Work through the woodland to the field-edge landing would be most efficient with the Ulvins Combi-drag – a light but sturdy timber arch that can convert to a small hand-loaded trailer. With the previously felled timber extracted to the woodland edge, the tonnage would make secondary forwarding with a tractor and timber trailer a viable option.



Jonah ratchets up a second length of hornbeam onto the Ulvins timber arch. The equipment is light enough to be lifted over the tip or butt of a length of timber if the pull of the horse does not bounce the wheel over to the right position. Most logging horses learn to obey the "Come back!" command and can reverse the arch into position to allow the choker chains to be inserted into the ratchet winches.



Another small area of woodland has been reinvigorated. The understorey may appear a little sparse but within a few years natural regeneration should provide a third generation of tree growth. The woodland owners have a plan to burn most of the 'lop and top', but enough deadwood will remain to ensure that the woodland eco-structure will thrive.



Most of the branches have been snedded from this tree but the top had fallen right across the small burn running through the woodland. Jonah encourages Jimmy to put his back into it and shift the tree with the top still attached. Once it is well clear of the water the chainsaw operator can remove it and break it down while the timber length is skidded to the landing.

The story is told in France that one of the king's ministers once diverted considerable funds from the treasury into building a road to facilitate the transport of timber from the forests near his chateau. The road still exists and runs for 20 km in long straight sections along the top of a ridge high above the River Meuse. Very little timber used the road at all; the horsemen, of course, preferred to haul the timber down the slopes to the river bank. Nevertheless, it did serve one useful purpose. The minister found his journey time from Paris considerably reduced as his carriage sped along the fine gravel of the new road to his chateau perched high above the rolling countryside of Lorraine.

Rural wisdom in France has always had it that the Comtois is 'the horse that pulls a tonne'. When the minister built his road, the breed, despite being developed on the French/Swiss border, had become the dominant draught horse in many French regions. In Lorraine, it was regularly crossed with Ardennes horses from the north. Despite the legendary strength of the stocky animals, the horsemen knew the obvious: you build a bigger stack of timber far quicker when gravity is assisting you.

The Comtois is thought to be the first race of horse to be developed in France specifically for tractive power. Its origins are certainly German and there is a strong

HORSE LOGGING

The widening and strengthening of the footbridge to allow Jimmy to bring out a full load of timber was one of the first tasks to be completed. Easily visible corner posts on the inside of the curve ensure that the horse, the equipment and the handler remain safely on the decking. After operations were concluded the woodland owner would have the option to keep it or to return the crossing to foot access only.



change. Traditionally the true bay was common in the breed with various chestnut or brown colorations and black mane and tail. While breeders worked hard to favour the lighter coats now commonly seen on the animals, the most characteristic feature that makes the Comtois so recognisable came about by chance. A single stallion named Questeur introduced a silver dominant gene to the bloodline in the 1950s. The 'silver bays' are now by far the most common form of the horse with their striking light silvery yellow manes and tails.

The Ulvins system was designed in Scandinavia for medium-sized timber and can easily haul multiple stems or logs to maximise production. It is also easily dismantled for transportation. Traditionally, horse-drawn timber arches were built with large wheels to allow adequate ground clearance for larger timber, but they were invariably heavy and cumbersome. This dead log will be converted into firewood so Jonah has been able to reduce the diameter to allow it to fit under the arch and clear the ground.

suggestion that it may have arrived with the Burgundians – the nomadic Germanic tribe that established and held their independent dukedom in what is now French territory in the Middle Ages.

The breed originated in the region of Franche-Comté on the Swiss border and is recorded as being used widely as a war horse in the 16th century. The horses of that time appear to have been considerably smaller than Jimmy and even found use in cavalry squadrons and troops of dragoons. The following centuries saw the Comtois very much sought after for hauling artillery. Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign almost saw the extinction of the race.

Records of their work in the fields and woods are more sparse but royal stallions were sent in the 17th century to the peasant farmers of Franche-Comté to improve the breed and the National Stud at Besançon was established in 1754. Nevertheless, the breed that had at one time been one of the most well accepted heavy horses in France declined in numbers through the 19th century.

A concerted effort at reviving the Comtois working horse was initiated in the small town of Maiche in the conifer forests close to the Swiss border. The new Comtois horses were slightly larger than was traditional (judicious use of Ardennes stallions brought the change) but the improved breed was still perfect for working small- and medium-sized woods, especially in the mountains. The 'stud book', which was founded in 1919, prohibited further imports of foreign blood in 1936.

The mechanisation of farming saw another



Confidence in the handler is a key factor in helping a draught horse to work efficiently. Jonah can keep his feet dry on the top of the bank on the end of the long reins whilst Jimmy hauls the last lump of old timber along the bed of the burn. Both the Comtois horse and the Combi-drag system can cope with the large rounded boulders on the stream bed. Jonah bides his time and judges the right moment to persuade Jimmy to haul the load up the muddy bankside; Jimmy has to make three attempts, but the big butt stays aboard and is eventually delivered to the timber landing.

drastic decline in numbers, although the Comtois horse saw a brief revival as the replacement for oxen for draught work on the poorer holdings in the south of France. The selection and improvement of the breed by the agricultural authorities as the principal national horsemeat source ensured the purity

of the gene pool and the survival of the race. In 1969 the Comtois population had been estimated to be as low as 8,000; the Ardennes races were thought to number more than a quarter of a million.

As in the UK, horse logging has seen a small revival in France in recent decades. Jean-Baptiste Ricard of Le Mans has done much to publicise the role of animal traction in forestry, with his pair of Comtois regularly featuring in the media. Here in the UK, Jonah Maurice is keen to see the breed succeed and a Comtois mare would be a good addition to his team. Jimmy is now 14 years old, has done his duty before and should be able to sire another generation of logging horses.

Strangely enough, like the Timberjack machines' conversion from red to green, the Comtois working horse has had a livery

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