

# Straight from the horse's mouth

Trying to make a living by relying on horses can have its drawbacks. But for Toby Hoad, it's a winner. In fact, he couldn't do without his two French fillies... and now they're so well trained in shifting timber that they don't even need his instructions. Graham Mole tells us more.



**T**OBY explained, "It sounds ridiculous, but now they know their job so well if they see a log on the ground they'll know it has to be moved and they'll position themselves to get ready to shift it. You can just see them thinking about how to deal with it."

Originally, Toby worked in woods he had rented near his home on the Dorset coast, restoring coppice and making charcoal, using the skills learned on a college course in woodland management. Gradually the business grew and then, one day, he went on a course which demonstrated horse logging.

He recalled, "I just absolutely fell in love with it. I knew straight away that this was how I wanted to work the woodland and I bought a horse that hadn't been broken in to work."

With help from others he got the horse trained and over the next four or five years the work increased to the extent that he needed another horse. That was Fleur, the horse he still has today, working now with another horse called Celine. Together they give the operation an international feel. The two current horses, each of a breed called Comtois, come from the Jura mountains on the French-Swiss border, while their kit comes from the Amish region of North America.

Said Toby, "They're bred in Europe for forestry and vineyard work, with short legs and large chests so they're incredibly muscular with a low centre of gravity – just ideal for forestry work."

He added, "I was lucky that I had access to a woodland, so I was able to work them regularly and build up trust in each other."

"Gradually I just got more and more work, so that was good but still, what gives me a real buzz is watching the horses work, seeing their power and then at the end of the job seeing how little disturbance or damage you've made to the ground. And then next year you go back and the ground and the flowers are all restored."

Nowadays, Toby's work isn't just restricted to his home patch. Recently he teamed up with five other horse loggers who between them had ten horses working a site for Natural Resources Wales.

"In ten days we extracted to roadside around 300 cubic metres. The extraction route was in narrow, steep-sided valleys, incredibly wet and muddy – a task which could only have been achieved with horses."

Said Toby, "Using horses in forestry offers a low-impact option that minimises damage to stools and standing timber. It doesn't leave behind ruts or compaction of soil; if anything it scarifies the woodland floor encouraging regeneration. On public sites you don't usually have to close off areas and the horses pulling out timber are a peaceful attraction."

As horse logging has grown, so too has the kit to go with it. The size of the timber, what the timber is going to be used for and the extraction route determine the type of kit the horse will pull it out with. A swingle tree is used when extracting through narrow woodlands. He explained, "You put a chain round the log, then attach it to the swingle tree (a bar) which is connected to the horse's collar; the horse can then pull the log out along the ground."



**TOBY RUNS WOODLAND COURSES, MAKES CHARCOAL, SUPPLIES FIREWOOD AND PRODUCES NATURAL FURNITURE.**

He also uses a device known as a Scandinavian arch, which has shafts, two wheels and an arch that ratchets one end of the timber off the ground so that only that tip of the timber is on the ground. Said Toby, "I use that on most jobs I go to, that way it also keeps the logs clean and stable when going along slopes."

The final piece of kit is an 8-wheel forwarder – and now the horses are even trained to pull the timber up the ramp and onto it before moving it all away.

Intriguingly, while the machines can vary, so can the horses. Toby explained, "They're quite different because while Celine is bigger, she's much more laid back, while Fleur has a much more headstrong and determined sort of attitude."

Above, top: Toby with Fleur and Celine.

Above: Getting the timber ready.

# HORSE LOGGING

The horses normally work in two-hour shifts, responding largely to voice commands such as 'step over', 'get away' and 'come over'.

Said Toby, "Eventually they get to recognise these calls and do it without any contact on the reins."

The horses, by working regularly, keep fit thanks to all that exercise and Toby has found it's best for them to be without shoes. He explained, "I'm fortunate that they have good hard feet. On the ground they have to work on, they could easily lose a shoe."

One regular summer job the horses now have is an operation called bracken rolling. On one part of the local area there are acres of bracken to be dealt with. That is now done by the horses pulling a roller which has five bars on it which bruise the bracken. That job has to be done over three summers to sort the problem. As Toby explained, "Again, it's a really low-impact way to deal with bracken and it keeps the horses fit during the quieter summer months."

Clients include the National Trust, RSPB, Butterfly Conservation, private woodland owners and even a local oil company. All of which has led to a doubling of work in the last two years.

Apart from his work with horses, Toby now runs woodland courses, makes charcoal, supplies firewood and produces natural furniture. Recently he has teamed up with a local tree surgeon to offer a fell-and-extract service. Having signed a new three year lease on 40 acres of local woodland he plans to develop his courses during the summer months.

He explained, "I think there's a market for it in that people spend so much time during the week now looking at screens, that at weekends they want to get out into nature and create something. It gives a great sense of achievement and a positive connection with nature."

And that's straight from the horse's mouth...



The Scandinavian arch assists in lifting the butt off the ground.

Right: Keeping the timber off the ground keeps it clean.

Below: Heading for the stack site.

