



ALAN now works with his nephew, Geoff Roberts, who, when Alan does eventually decide to retire, is set to take the reins. Geoff has high hopes that at some point in the future his own son may join him as a fourth generation in the family business.

Established in 1955, H C Robinson and Son are a timber-harvesting and woodland-maintenance company based in Hampshire who work on sites across the south and south-west of England.

Geoff himself has been working in the family business for 30 years. He is always looking for new ways to expand the business, most recently adding a Ventura swipe to their growing list of equipment, enabling them to clear scrub and woodland rides.

# A hard day's work

**A**SKING Alan Robinson about his retirement is just about the most pointless question you'll ever ask.

He pauses, gently shakes his head and comes back with a question of his own: "Why would I want to do that? I just enjoy it so much still. It's all I can think about. Come Saturday morning, when I can't work, I can always do the books and get some maintenance done, then just look forward to Monday when I can start again." And that at aged 74!

Since he started in the business aged 11, helping his dad produce pea sticks and bean rods, it means he's been in the forestry business for 63 years. Some sort of record, you ask? He grins, "Well, I certainly don't remember doing a lot of school work and I'm not sure I've ever had a proper job in my life - and our work certainly got a lot easier when chainsaws became more common."

While chainsaws sped up production there was, however, a downside. "What happened was that as more people got chainsaws, the rate for the job went down. Before, it was a shilling a cubic foot - no metres in those days - but soon it was down to seven pence - 7d - and that's all we'd get."

Alan spent his teenage years helping his father, Henry, on a Hampshire farm, and at 21 became a fully fledged partner, though that didn't mean more money. "At 21, I had to have a man's wages, but he couldn't afford it, so he got around it by making me a partner."

Back then the work in the woods was hard. Before lorry cranes came along timber often had to be shifted by hand - a tough chore which took its toll on many foresters.



Alan remembers his father always said hard work never killed anyone and, says Alan, "He should know, he worked plenty hard and lived to the good old age of 94."

Over the years, the work expanded to include cutting rustic poles, then logs, all delivered in an old Bedford Model O lorry once Alan had a licence.

Gradually the business, like farming, became more and more mechanised, such as with the introduction of hydra tongs, an early mobile grab, used on their first tractor for handling small logs. Alan's father also built their own drive trailer for timber extraction.

Top: Henry C Robinson extracting timber with Zetor 5011 tractor, 1973.

Above: Gordon Roberts and Alan Robinson hand-loading timber onto trailer and Zetor 5011 tractor, 1973.

Soon they were working for larger firms such as Tilhill, EFG (now EuroForest), Mendip Forestry, and later, Wessex Woodland Management. Nowadays, when extracting with machines, Alan tries to alternate the track lines he uses along the rides to avoid what he calls 'tramline ruts' that quickly fill with water. Alan explained that some contractors now use horses on sensitive sites to protect the flora and fauna, and he remembered his father telling him of horses being used for extraction during the Second World War. "The horses were used to pull out large oak, with deep mud up to their bellies, probably damaging their feet and legs." But Alan knows that extracting with horses is now a lot kinder, "It just wouldn't be allowed today."

What hasn't changed for Alan is the downside of the year - the period from October to February when work is harder to come by. As he points out, many estates switch over to shoots in October and stay closed until February and, increasingly, the Forestry Commission has no wood to dispose of.

Another bugbear for Alan is the lack of knowledge of forestry exhibited by many new contractors diversifying into the industry. He explained, "They just don't have the experience and training in forestry. You talk to the transport boys who expect to collect a load of timber cut to the right size only to find it's all different lengths and sizes, and not stacked properly."

For Alan, the answer is more training. "It needs to go back to the old apprenticeship system. I just used to carry the wedges when I worked with my father. Youngsters need to learn gradually and learn well, and they can do

Geoff (left) and Alan.

Henry Robinson unloading larch poles with FMV960 crane on Zetor tractor, July 1989.

Vimek TP5-40 thinning processor on Belarus Progress 862 tractor, July 1989.



# MEMORY LANE



FOR the youngsters among you, we thought we should explain pre-decimal currency:

Prior to decimalisation in 1971, UK currency worked in a pounds, shillings and pence system. There were 20 shillings per pound and 12 pence per shilling; therefore there were 240 pence in a pound.

At decimalisation in 1971, the shilling coin was superseded by the new five-pence piece, which initially was of identical size and weight and had the same value – so Alan's shilling was the same as your 5p today!



that by working with an experienced forester."

Meanwhile, there's an encouraging upward trend in the market for chip used for biofuel. "In one case an estate kept the timber outside for 12 months, then chipped it and stored it in a barn to be used to heat two or three houses and a swimming pool. And they were big houses too.

"There's still a good market for logs and bars, but there's a real need for plantations to be replanted as soon as possible."

Pointing out a picture of a harvester hard at work, he joked, "Just look at it – it looks like a dinosaur eating itself to death.

"All the time nowadays we keep hearing about plastic and all the damage that's doing, when if we just grew more timber we could replace a lot of it with paper. Doesn't that make sense?"

And, he argues, it's not just the UK. "A chap I know is the director of a company that buys sawn timber. He went to Scandinavia and found huge areas all bare with no trees, and he said it was the same in Canada – that it was all brown where the trees had got diseases. So... where's it all going to end? Who's got the answers?"

And back to that question about retirement? Should I have asked again? Probably not!

**Graham Mole**



Above: Timberjack 1270C harvester, August 2013.

Above left: Timberjack 1110C forwarder, June 2015.

Geoffrey Roberts offloading timber with FMV 960 crane on Zetor tractor, August 1996.