



Steven Laing.



As well as being used for extraction work, the Valmet 890.3 is used in the yard to move wood around.



The Wood-Mizer LT-15 sawmill was added in 2017 in order to develop another source of income. Steven readily admits that they are still learning how best to use it to tap into new markets.



LOCATED just off the A9 Inverness road at Inveralmond in Perth, Logs'n'Stuff was founded by Ronald Laing in 1950; back then as a company involved in hardwood felling. His son Martin joined in the mid 1960s as the business moved from felling hardwoods with axes and using horses for extraction into one that used new, mechanical technology in the form of harvesting machines. Martin's son Steven then became the third generation of the family to join the business, which by 1989 had invested in more machinery.

James Hendrie met up with Steven at their yard at Bertha Park Farm to hear more about where the business had come from, and where it was now heading. "When my father joined the business, wood cutting by axe and chainsaw and extraction of the timber using a two-wheel-drive Nuffield tractor was the order of the day, but by the end of the 1980s harvesting machines were coming more into use. Visiting Sweden to see these harvesters in action, he decided to purchase a Rottne Blondin harvester. He felt it was the best machine available and I believe that this machine may have been the first of its kind brought into the UK."

To this, at around the same time, a six-wheeled Valmet 832 forwarder was added, so that Logs'n'Stuff could cope with both felling and extraction work in what at that time was becoming a highly competitive market place. The 832 was then replaced with a brand-new Valmet 840 forwarder. The purchase of the Rottne Blondin harvester coincided with Steven coming into the business and he enjoyed several years operating it, saying that it was a very reliable and highly productive machine in its day, especially on clearfell sites.

However, by the mid 1990s a decision was

Logs 'n' Stuff

Three generations of Perthshire foresters.

taken by the family to exit the felling side of the business, as the economics just did not stack up.

Given that firewood had always formed part of Logs'n'Stuff's business, they decided to focus more on that, while still carrying on some extraction work. Steven did dabble for a brief time in the buying and selling of antiques, before deciding that he needed to get back into an active working environment.

"In the early days, our firewood production was achieved simply, using an axe and a Stihl 090 chainsaw - hard going and, in fact, not very productive. It soon became apparent to my father and I, as my grandfather Ron had died three years before, that we needed to mechanise things just as he and my grandfather had done before.

"Having looked at several log splitters we plumped for Posch machines, a SplitMaster 30 horizontal splitter and a HydroCombi 20-tonne vertical splitter, which certainly upped our firewood production. Prior to investing in these splitters it was hard going splitting semi-seasoned oak, which we processed a lot of, sometimes requiring a wedge and a sledgehammer. Once we had

these splitters all it took was the push of a lever and bang, the logs were split."

Both splitters were purchased from Jas P Wilson at Dalbeattie and that started a business relationship that has continued ever since. "All that has gone wrong with the splitters has been one seal on a ram, such is the reliability of these machines. They are a great company to do business with; if we need spare parts they arrive the next day. They have always been able to give us what we need and on top of that they are a friendly company to deal with."

Another forwarder, this time a Rottne SMV Rapid, was purchased. They had considered another Valmet, but were equally happy choosing a Rottne machine as they knew this manufacturer produced good machines and they had the harvester which had given them good service with few issues.

Logs'n'Stuff manage and maintain the woodland at Bertha Park Farm and, as a result, have a ready supply of timber on hand. Bertha Wood is 300 acres and much of the timber they extract comes from either wind blow or through planned thinnings. They also source through Euroforest,

Tilhill, and Scottish Woodlands, and from local estates and landowners, and they occasionally get calls with offers of timber for sale.

Steven's current saws include a Husqvarna 562XP with 18-inch bar and a 575XP with 24-inch bar. "I was brought up using Husqvarna saws. I find them to be more agile. There is, however, always the eternal debate about which is better, Husqvarna or Stihl. We do actually use both, as they each have their pros and cons."

Their yard at Inveralmond is two acres, giving them the ability to store timber. After a couple of years, it soon became clear to both Steven and his father Martin that, with demand for firewood increasing, they needed to think about investing in a firewood processor.

In 2007, they once more sought advice from Jas P Wilson and invested in a Posch 3200 processor. "We have only recently traded that machine back in. It was great because it allowed us to process 12-inch diameter wood. Using the splitters we could produce ten or twelve 90 x 90 x 90 bags of logs. With the 3200 processor we were able to virtually double that, achieving easily 22 bags in a day's production. Operating it was also a dream; less physically demanding than using the splitters."

Things were looking good for Logs'n'Stuff, with demand up and customers increasing... until disaster struck in June 2014 when vandals set fire to their Rottne forwarder. "Given our location on a farm, off the beaten track, we didn't bother insuring the Rottne as we never thought we'd have any issues. A random act of vandalism destroyed the forwarder, and for a while it was touch and go for the business. The machine was valued at £70,000 and I even tried a crowdfunding page to see if we could raise some money,

but it only brought in £50. Somehow we managed to get through it by hard work and effort and by chopping up lots of firewood logs!"

It took a long haul to get back on their feet but they did, and at the end of 2015 Logs'n'Stuff were able to invest once again, this time in a Posch S-375 processor. "We wanted to have a bigger processor but one with a circular saw as opposed to a chainsaw. Having worked with chainsaws on harvesting machines I was well used to the issues of teeth going blunt and the need to sharpen or replace them. The circular saw in my experience requires much less maintenance. Indeed, overall, this processor

has required little or no maintenance; greasing once a day into easily accessible grease nipples and that is about it. It is easy to operate with a simple joystick control, and the conveyor feed makes it quite easy to process logs quickly."

The S-375 can deal with 14.5-inch logs and processes wood much quicker, so much so that they had to step up the procurement of timber to keep a steady flow of wood to process. They work mostly with beech and oak, available in the woodland around them. They buy in softwood to process, though have found hardwood harder to come by.

In the yard, Stephen had constructed a simple method of collecting the processed

A RANDOM ACT OF VIOLENCE HAD DESTROYED THE FORWARDER... IT WAS TOUCH AND GO FOR A WHILE



The Valmet 890.3 on timber extraction duties.

FIREWOOD

logs into the delivery bags, using two builders' trestles, with pallets, to hold them in place. He places bags into this, with each bag cord being held in place using a bungee wire – as the bag fills and the weight pulls it down, the bungee wires stretch, allowing the bag cords to be easily removed when full.

They look to carry between 350 and 500 tonnes of timber in the yard and currently sell between 500 and 700 bags of logs per year. They are looking to raise this to between 1000 and 1500 bags. Logs'n'Stuff sell their logs in bags and while they do concentrate on the retail market, they also offer logs to wholesale customers and can supply customers across the UK using a pallet carrier service. However, most of the retail customers they supply are in the central belt, Perthshire and Fife.

"We do have customers as far away as Argyll, Mallaig, Wick, and Peterhead and just recently we have delivered pallets of firewood to the Channel Islands, Shetland, and Benbecula via a haulier. We used to deliver a lot to the east coast but as the number of firewood producers has grown, we have seen the demand here drop off. We also find the customers in the west of Scotland tend to prefer softwood logs but, increasingly, customers want hardwood logs, mainly because of the scare stories around softwood logs not burning as well."

Back in 2011 Steven and his father Martin took note of the firewood merchants there were in Angus, Perth, and Fife; at that time there were around 35 different companies. A short five years later, the number had increased fourfold to around 120.

For the last four years Logs'n'Stuff have been using a 90 ft x 30 ft polytunnel to air-dry their logs (having mainly used tarpaulins in the past). The rationale was simply that with the tarpaulins, the rain could still get into the side of the log stack enabling mould to grow in the centre of the stack as it sweats under the tarpaulins. They do still have a number of logs stored under tarpaulins, as a backup for the main polytunnel storage. "Given that we rent to yard, the large capital investment in kilns is not an option and we have found that our polytunnel can effectively get down to the 15-20% moisture content that our customers are looking for. The sunlight shining through gives a natural heat to dry the logs. We have a mesh around the bottom to help circulate the air. The tunnel can hold 500 90 x 90 x 90 bags and it takes roughly six months to get the logs to the moisture levels we require. The only downside so far has been the sunlight causing our biodegradable bags to 'waste' quicker than we would have expected, and it can be a very hot place to work on a sunny day!"

Logs'n'Stuff continue to offer contract extraction, with their Komatsu 890.3 18-tonne



Above: Rottne Blondin harvesters were likened by Steven to being 'prehistoric dinosaurs in the woods'.

Left: The burnt-out Rottne SMV Rapid forwarder.

forwarder. They have carried out contract work in the past for Forestry Commission, Scottish Woodlands, BSW, Euroforest, and James Jones. They have had this particular machine for two and half years and for Steven it continues their association with Komatsu, who they have always found to be reliable. The 3-tonne lifting capacity means it can lift the big oak logs that are frequently part of the wood that Logs'n'Stuff need to extract.

In 2017 a Wood-Mizer LT-15 sawmill was added to the list of machinery. "We get a lot of good-quality wood and our thinking was to try and see if we could produce items such as oak mantle beams, or oak slabs that could be used by 'hobbyist' furniture makers. The sawmill is manual rather than hydraulic, and has been a good machine to learn on; we are still trying to find more ways to develop this market for the business."

Steven also showed me the PTO-powered Posch tilting saw, which allows the processing of smaller-diameter wood, around 4-10 in. It is hand fed and delivers

round logs via a conveyor belt to bags. "It's a great machine and it allows us to process smaller wood to logs rather than just putting them to chip. It helps to give us something that we can sell rather than waste the wood." They also have one without the conveyor belt.

Before taking my leave, I chatted to Steven about how he saw the future for Logs'n'Stuff. Plans were to keep growing the business, albeit it perhaps with a smaller yard because of the development of a new road system around him and the new route of the A9, which could mean part of the land being used. "I am hoping that we will be able to stay at our present base, even if it is on a smaller scale. With the new road system it will make it easier for us to get out to deliver to our customers and also it will be easier for customers to find us and come to our yard. If we get customers coming to our yard we may need to go back into selling net bags of logs for customers to take away themselves, although I don't see us going into kindling as there are too many people doing that."



In addition, last year they had to buy in logs, so increasing their own production is another end goal. Business growth is certainly still very much the way he sees the company going. Referring to the previous 'dabble' in antiques, I asked if Steven was still enjoying working in forestry. Very quickly, I got an affirmative smile and an emphatic 'yes' to my question.

Above: The addition of the Posch S-375 processor has certainly helped Steven to step up production.

Below: The polytunnel holds around 500 bags but some logs still have to be stored outside under tarpaulins.

Bottom: Above right: Steven operating the Posch titling saw.



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