

Stirring it up

Tim Mack and Mark Crichton Maitland of Elderslie Estates believe that taking forestry beyond the woodland gate is the way forward.

Tim Mack and Mark Crichton Maitland have been forestry professionals and close friends for the best part of 40 years and their latest collaboration is breathing new life into the Elderslie Estates woodlands at Houston in near Glasgow.

Both Mark and Tim were infected by forestry at Cirencester by the inspirational John Josephi, the much loved and long serving forestry lecturer and protégé of the great Cyril Hart. The enthusiasm they took from those days continues, and the fact that Mark and Tim have remained close friends and shot and stalked together for virtually every year since has only enhanced it.

After Cirencester they professionally went their separate ways. Mark became a land agent in Scotland and then Herefordshire, before becoming a full-time forestry consultant in the 1980s, while Tim went to Merrist Wood and became an arboricultural contractor in the south east of England, then moving to Kintyre as a forestry contractor. At some stage during Mark's move south and Tim's move north they met in a pub on Hadrian's Wall and swapped north/south forestry knowledge over several pints of beer.

"We know each other so well", says Mark, "that we hardly need to discuss things. We went on a really good boys' stalking holiday in the far north a couple of years ago and hardly spoke for two weeks, other than to say, 'I agree, take the second stag from the right' or 'I don't mind if I do have a drop more'."

Elderslie Estates extend to around 1600ha, a little over 400 of which are forestry. It is a good example of a diversified working estate; it doesn't have a big house or a big shoot or big mountains, but it does have a respectable portfolio of residential property, a fair amount of commercial property, farming – both let and in hand – and forestry, some woodcock shooting and is home to a pack of foxhounds. It has been factored by Chris Addison-Scott of Galbraith



for over 30 years. Chris is only the fourth factor since 1905. "We really value first class advice and continuity is really important, you need to know where the bodies are buried" says Mark.

The land is rolling lowland hill country, a bit like North Devon but with lots more wind and rain. There are three tiers of forestry: Sitka in the upland hills, a conifer-hardwood mix in the middle hills and mostly hardwood in the lowlands.

Advocates of change

"It's time that we rethink what we do with our land, and Brexit and the future shape of the forest products market will be a powerful determinant in that process. Forestry has to be taken out of its woodland box and properly integrated into the land use mix."

It's evident that the pair of them like to stir things up. And that's what the sector needs these days. They have been pushing the Forestry Commission, politicians and the farming lobby to take forestry outside of woodlands into the farms and have been challenging the sector to use alien species in different ways (some of them currently banned or deemed unrealistic for use in this country).

Above, Tim Mack in 12 month *Eucalyptus glaucesens* at Elderslie and, right, Mark Crichton Maitland



Mark says that we live in what he calls the 'post-agricultural landscape'. Traditionally, the estate consisted of small family worked dairy farms, but they are all history now. As tenants have retired and the land has come back in hand, the challenge is what best to do with it.

Creating more resilient and diverse woodlands

Current silvicultural options are really becoming too limited. "What we need are new silvicultural approaches and more integrated and efficient landuse strategies", Tim stresses. "With Brexit and the end of the current grant harvesting, land owners will be forced to think outside the box."

At Elderslie, Sitka has been the banker for nearly a hundred years; high yield class, usually non-thin and normally succumbing to windblow every 30-40 years. "That has been all well and good, but I have felt for many years that perhaps we could do something better. I think we are now on the cusp of doing something better, although we are slightly groping in the murk still", says Tim

Monocrop rotations are not good for plant health and we are increasingly seeing issues like progres-



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sive butt rot in the conifers ruling out NS and SS on some sites after about four rotations. We all know the plant health issues with larch and ash, add the spruce ones and suddenly you have lost four important weapons in your armoury.

Mark believes that we need to go back to old fashioned and rather out of date forestry, such as practiced by Cyril Hart. There are lots of species out there that have been all but forgotten but which have a role to play.

"Not only do we need to look at alternative conifers, but we also need to look at spruce and other conifer mixtures, using species like western hemlock, noble fir or Pacific silver fir (*Abies amabilis*). There is an opportunity here to try something quite radical, like a Sitka/*A amabilis* row mixture and there is certainly scope for selection and shelterwood systems. Tim and I have constant arguments over whether to thin or not to thin. Historically we always got caught out by windblow, but nothing ventured, nothing gained, and we have started thinning again where we can and wait to see if this is another case of hubris and will the wind blow it all over. What has made the option possible are good harvesting contractors, markets for thinning products for biomass and Tim's excellent timber marketing that has meant we can thin at break-even at worst."

Going back to thinning has allowed them to create a more mixed and structurally more resilient forest in the middle hills, whereas the hardwoods of the lowlands have been their experimenting ground to explore a transition towards a semi-natural woodland.

It is a difficult job to move towards a forest with multiple canopy layers, but it increases the resilience to strong winds. They recognise that the conditions in Scotland don't necessarily favour European-style silviculture approaches but with commitment and the right people on the ground it can be done.

"For future resilience, we also need to up our game on forest products", adds Tim. "With an increasing cost base resulting from the requirements of long-term forest plans (excellent, but what was wrong with Dedication) and the unfortunate need to duplicate standards by having to comply with FC requirements and FSC certification, not to mention the whole supervisory and management apparatus, we need a greater volume of more valuable product to sell.

"Maybe we are on to something," says Tim "or maybe we are just a couple of dinosaurs mumbling in our beards about going back to the future. And we don't always agree with each other. Actually, it was the third stag from the right, not the second that was shootable."

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