



Taking the long view

Francis Fulford reflects opportunities won and lost

The First World War was a ‘timber war’; everything that moved and flew was made of wood and the power which drove industry came from coal which had an insatiable thirst for pit props. Like every estate in the land ours was ‘raped and pillaged’ to supply this demand. Sadly, my grandfather failed to replant after the war because, as my father wrote: ‘between the wars forestry was not considered an economic propositionit was easier to buy foreign timber fit for building as it was cheaper.’

When my father came back from World War II he was inspired by the profits being reaped by estates which had replanted. To give you an idea, a friend of his bought a rundown farm on Exmoor and paid for it by selling the hedge row timber! My father then became an enthusiastic forester as did many of his friends; between 1948 and 1968 all over the land woods which had gone to pot like ours were replanted mainly with coniferous trees. Of course mistakes were made. My father initially planted Scots pine mixed in with beech as Scots pine was then the most valuable soft wood timber. However, wisely advised by a forestry great, Brian Howell the founder of Fountain Forestry, he also fortunately planted Douglas fir, although the species wasn’t a fashionable timber then among saw millers!

Of course, landowners like my father had the prospect of a pot of gold before their eyes. The predecessor of Confor –The Timber Growers Organisation - used

to produce a brilliant annual booklet called *Mensuration Marketing and Costs*. The 1974 edition states, for example, that for standing coniferous timber in excess of 0.424m³ per tree the average price was £11.50 (£160 at today’s prices) per cubic metre. It had doubled from its previous year average of £5.48/m³. Wow! No wonder people like my father and his friends were convinced that in forestry they had found the solution to the survival of their estates. With a friendly taxation regime they had now a chance to ‘lay down’ untaxed riches for their sons to use on such essentials such as paying Death Duties and school fees without selling land to do so.

Such boom prices did not last of course. The 30-odd years between Nigel Lawson’s budget which altered the forestry tax regime and 2016 were a deeply depressing time for committed foresters like me. How many times did I hear fellow landowners, whose father’s had been mustard keen on their woods repeat what had become a mantra, “there is no money in trees”. Things thankfully are different now. The biomass market has given us the most important incentive yet to manage our woods, a profitable market for rubbish timber, while exciting developments in timber engineering promise to take wood and wood products into areas our fathers never dreamed of.

Forests are the ultimate long-term investment. I am fond of saying that when I cut down an oak tree I know it was planted by my ancestor around 1820 to be eventually used to help build a ship to fight the French and that now ships are made of steel and the French are a protected species and my oak probably goes to make a

Above: Land girls operating portable Liner saw at Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk - 1945 (Courtesy Forestry Commission)

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THE FORESTRY CENTURY

>> kitchen. It is a similar story with other species. After the Great War a landowner was pondering over what to replant in his devastated woods when a friend said "Plant ash". "Why?" asked the landowner. "Because aeroplanes are the future. Five years ago aeroplanes could only just get across the channel now they can fly across the Atlantic. Aeroplanes are the future and what are aeroplanes made of - ash." Inspired, the landowner duly planted up his woodlands with ash only to find that within a very short time aeroplanes were all being made of aluminium and now I daresay his descendant is heartily cursing him as he looks at those ash woods now being devastated by *Chalara*, courtesy of Dutch nurseries.

My woods are littered with such mistake as my father was a sucker for every new 'wonder species' idea. So, we have small plots of southern beech, poplar, western hemlock and now finally fashionable and in demand, western red cedar. In my turn, I have planted European walnut, black walnut and hybrid walnut on the principle that if you are going to plant a tree why not plant one which may end up being valuable rather than something which will probably end up being firewood. I am though not sure about the hybrid walnut, it grows straight, but so do Turkey oak and I have a lot of magnificent 200-year old Turkey oaks which, if only they were English oak would be worth several thousand pounds a tree. I suspect they were a 'wonder tree' once and are now beautiful to look at but only good for biomass.

So what other species am I thinking of planting to add to the diversity of woods? Well, West coast red wood *Semper virens* is tempting me. It grows fast, looks magnificent, lives forever so even if, like my Turkey oak, they end up, for some reason, valueless they will still give pleasure to future generations. Next year I am going to plant a few and as I stand back and admire my handiwork I will say to myself: "In 20 years these tree will look pretty good". Then I will remember that in 20 years I will be 86! But that is the joy of forestry and planting trees - it is the only occupation which makes you look forward to getting old.

A working horse at Eggesford Forest - 1919
(Courtesy Forestry Commission)



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