

A business steeped in history keeping pace with change

In the first of a series of articles this year celebrating The Forestry Century, **Norman Maitland** traces the history of Charles Ransford and Son

In 1876, a timber and coal yard was set up on our present site at Station Street, Bishop's Castle by one Stanley Gwilt, almost 10 years after the opening of the railway line in 1865 – a development which no doubt made the timber business viable. Charles Ransford took over the Station Street timber business in 1936 and in the early 1970s it was in turn taken over by his son John. By 1978, the business was in financial trouble and, on the brink of bankruptcy, it was taken over by the Evans family, themselves local to Bishop's Castle. It is still in their ownership.

When the Evans family took over the mill, it employed over 120 people, all of them local. Had it gone under, all of those jobs would have gone with it. On the face of it the purchase was a bargain: the price was £100, but along with the purchase came £1.5million of debts incurred by the previous owners. This was a huge sum in those days – but every penny of it was paid off over the following few years. By 1982 the family were investing in the mill with the installation of what was then a state of the art Swedish sawing line. Further substantial investment came later and continues to take place. In the 40 years since taking over, around £25 million has gone into improving capacity and efficiency including £10 million on plant which incorporates 3D laser scanning and optimising technology, combined with sophisticated re-sawing, board recovery and product handling systems. In addition, a new Timber Treatment Centre built at a cost of £2.75 million will shortly be completed and this will dramatically increase both the efficiency and efficacy of our timber treatment processes. All of this makes ours one of the most accurate and efficient operations in the UK in which no part of the log is wasted and every effort is made to reduce our environmental impact.

The Forestry Century we are now celebrating falls just seven years short of us marking 150 years since our original establishment – 40 years before the passing of

the 1919 Forestry Act. In the time since its first days the milling operation has been transformed. Logs that were cut, first, by hand, then steam power, then rapidly changing technologies now pass through a sawmill that is, in part, solar powered. Think of it: the same energy that made the trees grow is now harnessed to process the logs.

Rural economy

The business is still an important part of its local rural economy. Whilst the number directly employed is smaller at 60, employment is also still supported indirectly in the forest and in haulage and other local businesses with whom we have close and long-standing relationships: as a family business, we are part of a family of businesses creating work in our area. Working conditions and wages have improved dramatically and the skills required at every stage of the operation from harvesting, through production to sales and logistics have changed in ways that the founders could never have imagined.

In addition to continuous investment, the mill's success has been achieved by better use of co-products, and the creation

of added value products. Bark is processed to become growing medium through Melcourt Industries, chips are dried to power boilers on nearby farms, wood fibre is used on gallops that train some of the world's most famous thoroughbreds. We have moved from being a mere producer of commodities like pit props to, in many cases, a supply partner to long-standing customers for whom we produce tried and tested products like acoustic fencing panels to consistently high, measurable and recognised standards.

This is all well and good: but despite the passing of Forestry Acts and the publication of more reports on the need for the creation of more forests than you could shake a stick at, not enough new forests have been planted. The plain fact is that log supply may well be as big a threat in 2019 as it was in 1919. Perhaps, as a nation, it is time for us to see the wood for the trees on this matter.



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