

In the forefront of a new era



Eleanor Harris

interviewed Simon Hodgson, the new chief executive of Forestry and Land Scotland

Simon Hodgson is a man of people and of places. A graduate of Durham University in tourism and environment, in the 1980s he was Regional Manager for the Woodland Trust in the North of England and then Wales, and Director of Conservation for The Conservation Volunteers. In 1992 he became Regional Director South for the Rural Development Commission (RDC), also spending time as Head of Corporate Planning and Internal Audit; Head of Corporate Affairs and Internal Audit for the South West Regional Development Agency; and then Director of West Midlands Regional Assembly.

Simon joined the Forestry Commission in 2005 as Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise England managing all the public forests in England and their commercial activities. He took wider responsibilities as Chief Executive of Forestry Commission England 2011-2013 during the 'forest sell off row' but returned to Forest Enterprise fully in 2013.

He was Chair of the English Forest Industries Partnership for a number of years, sits on the Board of Grown in Britain – promoting home grown timber, and has a strong record of involvement as chair of community and voluntary sector bodies, including running a community shop and café in his village.

Forestry and Land Scotland replaced Forest Enterprise Scotland when the Scottish Forestry Act came into force on 1 April.

You've achieved significant success in your career and you haven't shied away from tough challenges: what drives and inspires you?

A concern for the environment; more specifically for forests, and the way people are able to benefit from all that forests have to offer. I have been interested in the environmental consequences of forest loss from college days and I've always wanted to do as much as I can to contribute to their management expansion and protection. Although my career has taken some interesting turns, I always wanted to make the largest contribution I could to environmental protection with forest woods and trees at the heart of my concern.

What is your biggest contribution to Forest Enterprise England?

I hope it has been bringing the concept of multi-purpose forestry to life. The importance of the nation's forests was really bought out during the 'sell-off' row in 2011. It demonstrated to me that it was Forest Enterprise England (FEE)'s job to ensure that all of society was able to access and benefit from the public forests. With 226 million visits per year to the Forestry Commission sites in England, I think FEE is really delivering on that promise. I have also been very focused on making Forest Enterprise sustainable from its trading activity, FEE is getting closer to that each year and as long as the economy remains sound, I think that trend can continue.

What excites you most about taking the reins at FLS?

Forestry legislation doesn't come along very often, so the chance to be at the forefront of a new era for forestry in Scotland is very exciting. If you look at what Forestry Commission achieved over the last 100 years in expanding our forests, you've got to hope it can all be done again but in a 21st Century context. It's a great honour to have such a role.

Forest Enterprise Scotland, soon to be FLS, is the biggest individual supplier of wood in the UK. How do you see that role developing over the next 5-10 years?

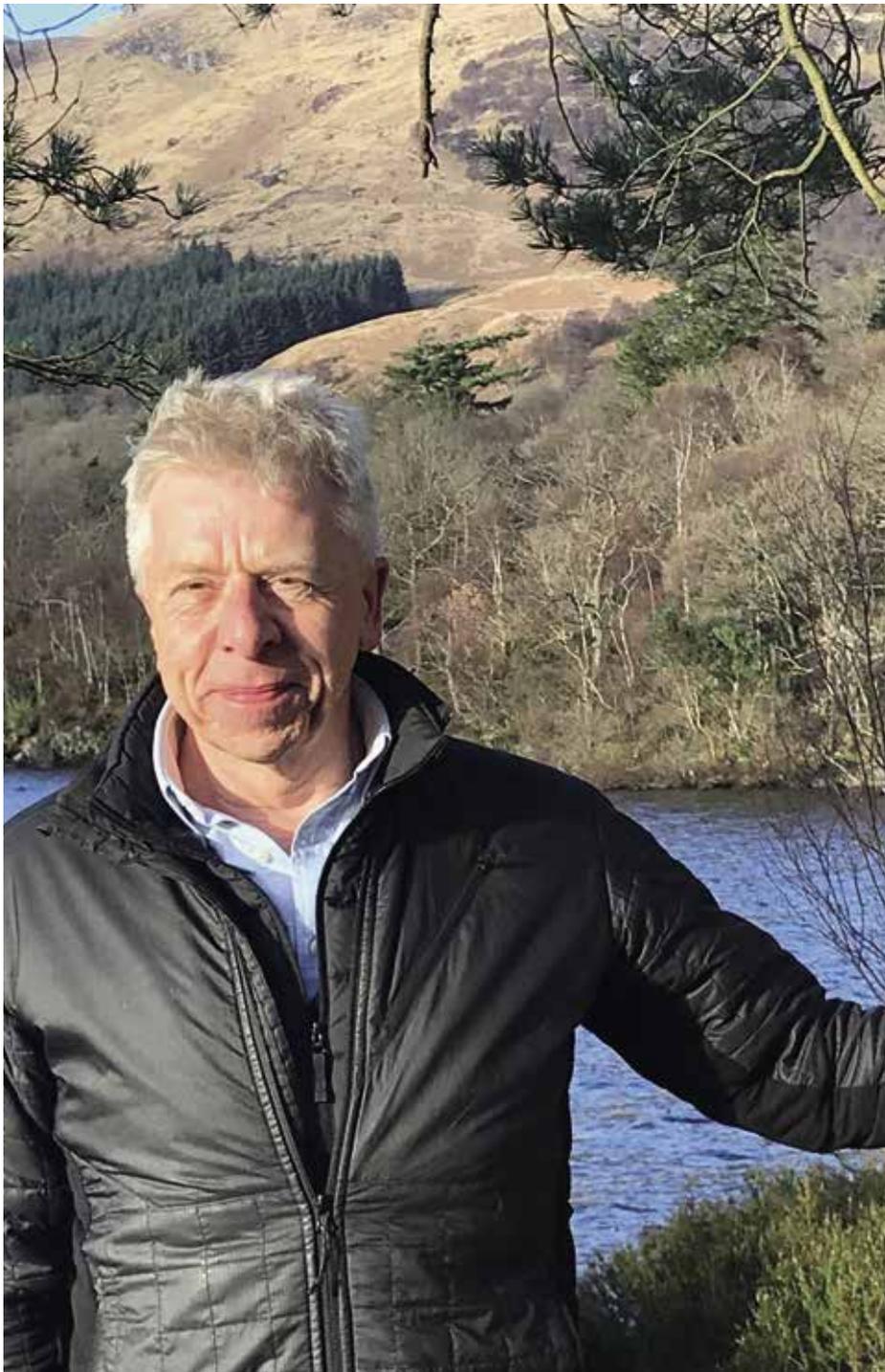
We are a very important part of the timber supply market in the UK and I take that responsibility very seriously. The opportunity to grow our supply beyond its current level is limited by our capacity to expand our forest area, but I hope that will change over the coming years. The private sector supported by grants from Scottish Government/ Forestry Commission Scotland is doing a great job of increasing the forest cover in Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing's ambition is to keep that going and if possible increase it.

How will you ensure that FLS's responsibility for more than just forests will not result in a loss of focus on forestry and wood processing in Scotland?

The new organisation has been given a broader brief and we have a responsibility not only for the largest forest resource body in Scotland but also a large area of open land as well. Forest management, of course, remains at the core of what we do; however, FES, soon to be FLS, has long diversified into wider land management, renewables and recreation provision. Our responsibility to work with the sector to ensure a quality and consistent supply of timber to the market is undiminished; however, our responsibility is also to the people and visitors to Scotland who want to enjoy visiting their forests.

In the year of the centenary of the Forestry Act, what is it vital that we keep from the last 100 years of forestry in the UK, and what do we need to change?

The commitment to expand forest cover in Scotland, and in the UK, needs to stay. As one of the least forested countries in Europe, this must remain a priority. We will need to change our thinking and



How are you enjoying life in the north so far?

The welcome has been very warm and that has made settling in very easy. The genuine welcome and helpfulness of the Scottish Government and colleagues in FES, combined with the genuine commitment to work together to make Scotland a better place, is very energising.

Favourite film/ TV show?

Father Ted – without a doubt!

Favourite music?

Pretty varied to be honest but almost anything (with the exception of country and western!) that is well played I can enjoy in the right mood.

Favourite tree?

Scots Pine, as much on the Scottish hills as on the heaths of Dorset and Thetford.

Favourite forest walk?

The Forest of Dean and the Wye Valley.

Favourite holiday destination?

The Scilly Isles.

Favourite sport?

I'm a very keen cyclist: I was Chair of Bath Cycling Club in England and I've just joined the Ronde Club in Edinburgh

What advice would you give to someone starting out in a forestry career?

Make yourself useful in any capacity you can to gain experience, whether it's volunteering, office jobs, working with a contractor almost anything to get experience of the job on the ground. It will reward you when you come to take on more senior roles later.

Where do you see UK forestry in 30 years' time?

We are likely to see 1.5 degrees of warming by 2040, so I hope that by that time we will have developed more adaptable species to plant and more new techniques for managing forests in a warmer, windier, wetter climate. I think it is quite likely we will be growing trees in places that haven't been suitable for them for one or two thousand years. The world will be increasingly reliant on forests to help mitigate climate change, and I hope increased forest cover will be recognised as the most important mitigation we can make.

our practices as we learn more about climate change and the threat of pests and disease to our forest resources. This will be immensely challenging for foresters who have to work on long timescales and it seems that changes already evident in our environment are escalating ahead of the predictions of only a few years ago. We have a responsibility to use the best science and the best evidence to make the right judgements for the future.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing forestry in the UK, and how can we best tackle them?

Climate change, pests and diseases. Ensuring that people are able to use and enjoy our forests.

Increasing the volume of home-grown timber production and innovation in the

ways in which wood fibre can be used to provide society with the resources it needs. We also need to lock up carbon for the long term in timber products.

Tackling the challenge of safe working: a big one for the whole industry, which we need to get right.

What do you see as the biggest differences between forestry in Scotland and England?

In Scotland there is a very strong and welcome focus at government level on generating a regular and sustainable source of timber for the market: this is a stronger driver of policy than in England. There is also a strong Scottish Government and FLS commitment to on ensuring that all people can access forests for pleasure and recreation.