

Stef Kaiser talks to Laurent Bienfait, a key figure in Scottish woodland creation and an advocate of investing in people and quality

Laurent started as a sole trader back in 1989, when Laurent Bienfait Harvesting offered a mix of planting and harvesting services, with a focus on skyline harvesting for thinnings. The year 2000 saw the start of a harvesting boom and a golden opportunity for Laurent to expand the business, investing heavily in machinery. Activity was concentrated on the West Coast of Scotland and a lot of timber was shifted via maritime routes to the Irish processors. Business was going well.

But then one day, everything collapsed. Laurent remembers that fateful Friday afternoon in early Spring 2009, when he received a phonecall that would change everything. "On that 'Black Friday', both Glennons and Balcas totally cut us down. I first thought, 'there won't be any Irish timber orders next week'. But the following week, the situation became clear - there was no more import of Scottish timber from Ireland. It was over for my harvesting business."

Laurent needed to change the direction of his business and felt that the next opportunity would lie in woodland creation. Planting was also more in line with his preference for managing people, rather than machinery. The obstacle at the time was that he had taken up substantial loans to purchase his harvesting machinery; but by applying boat loads of entrepreneurial skills and foresight, creativity and hard work, he managed to liquidate his machinery fleet and, together with David Farrow, create Laurent Bienfait Woodland Services Ltd (LBWS) in 2009. The new company focused on planting, woodland maintenance and the eradication of rhododendron, and has, despite an extremely difficult start, flourished ever since - thanks to a woodland creation boom that exceeded Laurent's early vision. Today, LBWS aims to keep a market share of approximately 10%, with 10 million trees planted last year.

Promoting a brand of forestry well done

But for Laurent, when talking about his business, what matters most is not scale, but quality. He promotes a company 'brand' that has quality service, diversity, reliability and efficiency at its core. Maintaining strong client relationships and applying

Forward focus

Laurent Bienfait and, below, the team ready for planting

long-term thinking are central to his team's working philosophy.

"We do sometimes come across woodland creations where a lot of mistakes have been made. We as contractors pride ourselves of having a well informed team that

can critically think on the job and be in constant dialogue with the forest management company to ensure the job is being done in the best possible way. This is how we are going to sell forestry - by not making mistakes."





LBWS are keen not to be associated with one kind of forestry, such as commercial sitka plantations. Last year, they completed 22 woodland creation projects that varied in scale from one million trees to 22,000 trees. “We can cater for all kinds of woodland creations, big or small – from broad leaved schemes with a focus on conservation, to planting mountain species, to commercial restocks. The small-scale agroforestry projects are, by comparison, more labour intensive and less profitable for us; however, creating a good woodland that we can see appear in the landscape over the next years – that in itself is a strong incentive and motivation for us.”

Investing in people

“My business is a success because I can count on a team of reliable, dedicated and devoted people, such as my forestry management assistant, Indre Trunce (far left in picture on the left), who was very instrumental in how the business developed and grew.”

In the field, Laurent has a backbone of 11

key foremen backed up by another 40 people, and he believes in the benefit of providing job security for his workers: “Employing workers long-term results in labour continuity and translates to a better trained and committed workforce.”

He believes that the forestry sector needs to stop its approach of hiring seasonal workers. This summer, he clocked 2330 man days of maintenance and is convinced that in woodland creation there is enough year-round maintenance work to justify a move towards better, longer-term contracts for workers. “Forestry can’t continue to work ‘on the cheap and cutting corners’ – it’s not good for our image and it’s not good if we want to secure a future workforce.”

Ensuring a quality workforce post-Brexit

Traditionally, parts of the forestry sector have heavily relied on migrant labour – this might now have to change. With Brexit fast approaching, we might face a gap in supply of EU workforce for labour-intensive oper-

ations such as woodland planting.

Retaining the long-standing existing workforce won’t be the main problem, although Laurent has seen that approval times for settled or pre-settled status applications have been inconsistent within his work team. The challenge will be to hire new staff from January onwards. The new points-based immigration system will put lower-skilled workers at a disadvantage, and many prospective planters might not qualify for reasons such as poor English skills.

There are some desperate options to secure new staff for 2021 before the gate shuts: “I could secure 20 flight tickets for the 30 December and bring interested workers in before the end of the year – this would allow them to apply for pre-settled status. But is our work offer interesting enough to get them to commit at such short notice, amidst corona and the seasonal holidays? In addition, I might not have a need for these extra workers until later in spring.” At this point, Laurent reiterates the importance of offering good employment packages and contracts to attract much needed foreign labour: “The labour market in Europe is very strong at the moment – in many countries, there is a lot of demand for labourers. A three-months seasonal contract in the UK wouldn’t be competitive for them.

With increasing unemployment due to Covid-19, it seems a no-brainer to fill the foreign labour gap with local workers. But a prospective domestic workforce, with little wood culture running in their blood and a good benefits system to fall back on, might find it hard to muster up the same motivation and work ethic as their seasoned Eastern European counterparts. Laurent remembers that on numerous occasions, he tried to engage workers from the surrounding areas, but says that most of them lost interest fairly quickly. “So far, I only have one Scottish contractor who has stayed with us after going through all the initial training. It remains to be seen if, as a result of Covid-19, there will be an increased regional pool of workers who don’t shy away from physical labour and crave a move to more outdoors-based work.”

“Next year, we’ll have to be inventive and build uncertainty into our business model. When quoting for a tender, we’ll have to give a quote with the added clause ‘subject to labour availability’. And it will be the same for other business in the landuse sector.

Laurent Bienfait Woodland Services Ltd. would like to thank Confor’s Jamie Farquar for his help in driving the Industry forward.