

Farming houses



Eleanor Harris talks to Confor member William Theed, owner of Combe Sydenham Country Park, Taunton, about why farmers should think timber.

I'm not growing trees, I'm growing houses," says William Theed. "The big mistake is planting trees without knowing what you're going to use them for."

With UK rural policy facing a generational shift - leaving the Common Agricultural Policy, setting targets for net-zero, and rising global demand for renewable commodities - William is passionate about getting farmers interested in growing timber. With sixty years of experience in timber growing on his historic estate on Exmoor, his experiences are gold.

"I've been passionate about trees since I was 13. I've tried all kinds of enterprises, made many mistakes and had my fingers burnt on many occasions - but I've never burnt my fingers on my trees.

"In the last few years I've been cutting down conifers I planted myself which are now 150 feet tall - seven sixteen-foot lengths sent to the mill from every tree. They covered the six-figure sum of re-roofing my historic house, and I'm now replacing my daughter's roof which was last done over a century ago by her family.

"I planted these trees around 1960. We had at that time a new CLAAS combine (one of the first in Britain!) and it made no sense to be running it up and down to the arable ground at 1100 feet. People said I was mad to plant Sitka spruce thereon, because it would devalue the land - but I had no intention of selling the land. It has proved very profitable. We have more to harvest

next year and will immediately re-plant with the best improved stock.

"Forestry can be profitable - but it must be approached properly, with a clear purpose, a clear management plan, and professional skill. I've employed two professional forest managers in the course of my career, my present one has worked with me for thirty years. It is investment which repays - although it does require patience."

William emphasises that thinning is essential for making forestry profitable, by providing ongoing cash flow in the south west. "My trees are at 1100 feet and it is essential to thin early to create wind resilience - around one row in five from around 12 years. We could supply far more sustainable biomass in this country if we thinned our woods frequently, and it is thinning that results in woods full of bluebells, bats and lovely to walk in."

His Douglas fir thinnings (see box) have generated over 700 tonnes of woodchip used in the estate RHI biomass boilers and sold to Exmoor Woodfuel Ltd.

Certificate of Merit

I was keen to hear more about this Douglas fir (*pictured*), which won a Certificate of Merit in the 2018 Royal Forestry Society Excellence in Forestry Silviculture Awards. It is planted on former horse fields high in Exmoor National Park, and William believes it could serve as a model for far more afforestation on marginal arable land.

"In the 1980s I was involved in



William Theed showing his Douglas fir to judges in the Royal Forestry Society Excellence in Forestry Silviculture Awards"

THE INGREDIENTS OF AWARD-WINNING DOUGLAS FIR

6.8 hectares

Deep mineral soil overlying sandstone

Yield class from 20-30.

Acoustic grading shows the trees are likely to produce high volumes of strong (C24) construction timber.

TIMELINE

1988 planting

1998 brashing

2007 first thinning (one row in 9)

2012 second thinning

2017 third thinning

2018 awarded a Certificate of Merit in the RFS Excellence in Forestry Silviculture Awards

2020s-40s - further thinnings

2050-60 harvest



an initiative to use historic properties as opportunities to educate children, and I went to York Minster to receive an award for my work in this. It was soon after the refurbishment of York Minster after the fire. I learned that, while hundreds of oak trees had been received from all over the country to refurbish the roof, they were short of one beam 90 foot long. They scoured England for a suitable tree, but none was tall enough, so they used Douglas fir as an alternative. That one Douglas fir timber in York Minster roof gave me the idea of growing Douglas fir for construction timber myself."

Affordable housing

William Theed's plans for his Douglas fir were not for cathedral beams. He had recently been involved in the foundation of West Somerset Rural Housing Association, now Falcon Rural Housing. This tackles the lack of affordable housing which threatens the viability of rural communities. Since its inception in 1985 it has built 292 homes in over 43 villages in Somerset and Devon. William's plan for his Douglas fir was to supply material to build and maintain these rural communities in future.

"Farmers are having to rethink how they farm: government is taking subsidies away from 'out of the bag' agriculture in favour of farmers who invest in their land. They are having to rediscover old techniques such as rotations, reducing tillage, and using animals to fertilize the soil. Forestry is the same: after decades of government policy incentivising trees and disincentivising proper silviculture, we are realising how important these techniques are. Farmers are having to work in new ways and try new things if they want to stay in business, so it is the perfect time for them to find out about growing timber.

"Trees on farms are essential for sustainable agriculture: Carthage was the bread-basket of the ancient world until it was deforested and the soil eroded and the Sahara encroached. The same could happen here. Forestry requires the kind of understanding of soil and nature which government is promoting. Meanwhile we are the biggest importer of timber in the world after China - a country as small as ours,

raping the world for timber which we could grow! The COP26 conference in Glasgow in November must be the point at which we acknowledge this and turn this situation around. Foresters need to make a nuisance of themselves!!"

Like Greta Thunberg? I suggested. 'Yes, exactly - it's wonderful what that girl has accomplished.

"We have to convince the farming landowners of England that they need to plant trees - and know what they're planting them for. In Scotland, farmers don't have any hesitation planting trees as an investment for forty or fifty years, but in England the idea of planting trees to make money rarely enters people's heads. We have the finest tree country in the world, with a maritime climate. There are too many tree planting schemes in England where the wrong trees have been planted because nobody thought about what they would be used for - landowners were confused by the generous grants. That doesn't mean we can't experiment: given our changing climate and ecosystems we must diversify. I have two experimental woods of tulip trees, and am planting Cedar of Lebanon. Cedars naturally grow well in drought and up to 7000 feet, so might be a good choice for 1000ft on Exmoor in a future climate - and their timber is highly valuable and rare. I'm also trying black walnut as a replacement for ash, and mixing it with alder as an experiment in fixing nitrogen.

Pine marten

"I do plant oaks and I love my oak trees, but we can't grow hardwood here because of grey squirrel. I'm very keen on the potential of pine marten which can control grey squirrel over wide areas while allowing red squirrel to escape. I'm also working with Vincent Wildlife Trust on the nationally-important bat colonies which inhabit our forestry thanks to its regular thinning. Pine marten could be our secret weapon to enable us to grow oak again.

"Meanwhile, I'm planning additional plantings of Douglas fir. Forestry is something I'd recommend to any farmer considering how to ensure their business is still here sixty years from now. But don't just grow trees - grow houses."