

Dowdeswell Forestry – looking to the future

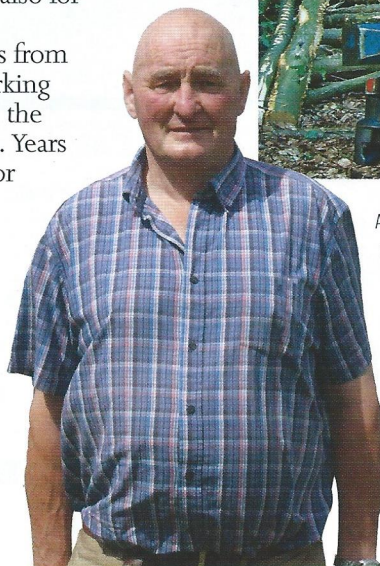
To forester Geoff Huggett, newly planted trees are like sheep in a field... As he puts it “They’re all right when they’re small, you can have thousands of them. But as they grow and get overcrowded you have to thin them out and support them so they survive. Graham Mole visited Dowdeswell to find out more.

“YOU’RE doing it for the interest of the people, and the countryside and the woodland. Sheep or trees, it’s just the same. You have to manage it. You can’t just go into a wood and cut trees down – you go in to benefit the trees and the people,” continued Geoff.

Sadly though, as Confor pointed out recently, planting in the UK is at an all-time low. Said Geoff, “We’re just not planting enough. We’re well below what we should be doing. And that’s a serious issue when we have big biomass companies taking wood for fuel. If we’re going to go down that road we need to get more trees in the ground because if we don’t, then in 25 years’ time we’ll have a really big problem.”

Geoff has owned Dowdeswell Forestry for over 30 years and, with a background in agriculture, he’s passionate about the need to manage woodlands, not just for people and profit but also for wildlife and ecology.

His passion all stems from his younger years, working alongside his father in the woods of South Wales. Years later, whilst working for Seven Trent Water Authority, he moved to the Cotswolds to manage the water company’s Dowdeswell Estate. Then, when the firm started to sell off its assets, he took early redundancy and the need to get back into the woods was rekindled.



Above: Family team. Geoff Huggett (right) is about to discuss thinning operations in a local woodland with sons James (left) and Richard.
Left: Geoff Huggett – the boss.

At first, Dowdeswell Forestry started small – carrying out forestry maintenance on local estates. As time went by, and the business evolved, forestry maintenance died off but timber sales grew.

Today, the business – based

near Cheltenham in the Cotswolds – is in the process of being managed more by three of Geoff’s sons, as he takes a step back which will allow them to flourish and grow the business further.

While he still has his input in the day-to-day operations, his sons are being encouraged to look to the future, with each of them specialising in a different aspect of silviculture and arboriculture. The youngest, Richard, is a fully skilled tree surgeon qualified to carry out tree

safety reports. At present he mostly works within the woods with his brother James, who is the main experienced operator of the harvester and looks after the firm's machinery. The eldest, Edward, concentrates on forestry management and handles quotations for incoming contracts.

The firm manages the woodlands for several large estates ranging from several owned by the Wills Family, to others scattered across Gloucestershire and the Cotswolds, ranging as far as North Oxfordshire.

Dowdeswell Forestry Services takes its name from Lower Dowdeswell, the small village where the business started and where Geoff still lives today. It's such an expensive area that every house in the village was valued at over £1.5 million – and often four times that. It was once dubbed 'the Sloane Square of the Cotswolds' by one national newspaper.

In a year, the firm deals with around 2,000 tons of logs, sells 2,000 Christmas trees, harvests up to 9,000 tons of timber and plants around 40,000 trees.

Now, the business has grown so much there are six employees working solely on forestry, with four part-time subcontractors plus a skilled team of arboriculturalists, consisting of two full-time employees, and several subcontractors.

A typical day would see Edward compiling quotes for various tree surgery jobs and scheduling works. He works in the office on forestry management plans alongside the office manager, Laura Davis, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the business. But Edward also gets some time out in the field, managing various landscaping jobs and getting stuck in to some physical work himself.

James would usually drive the harvester with Richard working alongside him, assisting with operations and hand-cutting any timber that's too large for the machine.



Richard Huggett processing firewood ready for sale. All firewood comes from within woodlands managed by the company within a 30-mile radius of Dowdeswell.

Richard usually operates the tractor and timber trailer with help at times from Jamie Clark who also assists with ground-level chainsaw work, forwarding and managing the firewood side of the business, making sure that all logs get split on the day of delivery.

The arboriculture side of the business is led by head arborist Brett Norman, whose team carry out tree reductions, hedge cutting and tree maintenance. Usually a second team of contracted foresters, led by forester Jack Fraser, works on hand-cutting in another areas.

Ideally, the firm would like to expand but Geoff says the absence of funding and lack of well-trained practical foresters – who don't mind getting their hands dirty – makes this tricky.

Said Geoff, "We can always get arborists and tree surgeons, but a forester who can both cut timber and understand the way forestry extends through an estate just

doesn't seem to be around."

He added, "You certainly don't go on an arb course and come out as a forester."

Keeping the staff well trained comes at a price too. Multiple insurances, refresher courses and machinery training costs tens of thousands a year, and there are day-to-day running costs. Said Geoff, "We think training's important, and for us that's just part of the job."

But no amount of staff training can reduce the current risks to woodlands posed by the extent of tree diseases. Geoff explained, "It's quite frightening; and it's got so bad now that you simply can't risk creating a single-species plantation. Diversity is key. In the UK we haven't planted enough trees over recent years, and as a result we're simply importing



Left: Another lorryload of local beech timber being unloaded by Dave Parker and stacked in the yard.

Right: Forestry Manager Edward Huggett, with Mother Liz Huggett and Office Manager Laura Davis, stood amongst the well-kept gardens at Dowdeswell Forestry Services.



Forester Jamie Clark (left) and Head Arborist Brett Norman (right) resting on the Binderberger timber trailer.



Geoff Huggett (left) standing with eldest son, Forestry Manager Edward, on the top of 'Huggett Hill', the home of Dowdeswell Forestry Services for the last 30 years.



As a family business, even Geoff's wife, Liz, works part time in the office, managing the accounts. Said Geoff, "There's the need for regular discussions about the firm. I think it's important that we all communicate regularly. We need to sit down now and then and touch base about the key operations taking place. Putting aside at least an hour a week is worth it. Let's face it, there is plenty of work around, and communication is key to avoid people feeling under pressure."

He added, "One thing I am proud of is the relationship we have with our customers, particularly those on the big estates."

"I'm lucky because I've got a background in agriculture, and a vested interest in country sports, meaning I can talk to the owner about our shared interests. This usually sparks an interest, for them, in forestry, and how woodlands work – whether for conservation, sporting or commercial needs – and that really does help."

And the firm's future? Expansion could be on the cards. Said Geoff, "I'd like to push the business forward and get more forestry management work. We're in the throes of developing a bigger office, and that's an integral part of pushing the business forward. As the old saying goes, 'mighty oaks from little acorns grow.'"



Head Arborist Brett Norman surveying the world from the top of a holm oak before he starts to crown reduce.

diseases. A lot of biomass is untreated, pallets are untreated and before you know it, we've got diseases here that we thought we'd never have. There's no barrier and the only real solution is planting a wider variety of trees, but we're not getting close to the volume required.

"There's been a lot of talk, but we're nowhere near a solution. It's all been swept under the carpet. The government's not listening and they're just not getting the message."

At least the government got the message in one respect – the Leader scheme, which offers grants for the purchase of machinery. Geoff recalled, "The current version of this programme is a lot better. The first time we tried it we were after an excavator-based harvester, specifically a Kobelco with Keto harvesting attachment, but the process took so long that in the end we gave up, secured finance and, at a struggle, purchased it ourselves."

"The next time we applied for machinery funding, we learnt from the

previous experience, and started well ahead of the target date. This proved invaluable and we secured a Binderberger timber trailer, a Posch Autosplit kindling machine and a Timberwolf 230DHB chipper. It joined a stable of machinery which boasted a Doosan 14-tonne digger with Keto harvesting head attached, a Valtra N121 with 12-tonne Binderberger timber trailer, a Valtra 8150 with 10-tonne Botex timber trailer and a Valtra 6550 with 9-tonne Igland double drum winch. There's also a Massey Ferguson 6150 driving an S360 logging machine and timber deck, a forestry mulcher, a Merlo telehandler and a Timberwolf chipper used behind a Nissan Cabstar."

But still in some cases – on steep hills – work still has to be done manually. Said Geoff, "And that can't be anyone inexperienced, working on their own. We can't, and won't, take those sort of risks. It's just not worth it."

