

Donnie Williamson – Early days in the Forestry Commission

School days

Wartime timber production had been under way close to the north of our home, Coldholme Farm, Killen in the Black Isle, a smallholding of 80 acres.

It was a block of somewhat less than 100 acres of mature Scots Pine with a tiny smattering of larch and felling was going on apace. Huge swathes were felled and not immediately sned which even to the lesser learned seemed a foolhardy way of woodcutting as the felled trees lay higgly-diggly one often crossing over the other.

I do believe the felling lads were recruited from the F.C. at the princely sum of 10d per hour which was at least 1d better than was to be got elsewhere. Their earlier timber experience was probably gained only in the preparation of fuel for the home fire. This leisure occupation tended to keep local woodlands free of dead or dying trees and not necessarily with the knowledge or agreement of the owners. High pruning was often undertaken using a rope with a weighted end which was thrown over the higher dead branches. If the branch had not yet reached the early removal stage then there was an effort penalty to pay and much sweat expended.

When at the advanced age of 15 a F.C. officer approached myself and my younger brother with an offer of 2/6 (12.5p) per bushel of cones it seemed that our coupon had come up. It was my first ever contract but failed to place me in the millionaire class. But we made some much desired pocket money.

F.C. Millbuie Forest Nurseries.

It was in the late forties I became acquainted with the Millbuie Nurseries, in the plural for there were several units all within a 3 mile radius namely: Blackstand, Mt High, Ardmeanach and the Red Tank, the latter being a so-called Heathland Nursery. Since the bulk of the peaty surface material of the old woodland site had been bulldozed to the sides of the strip, 'heathland' could be termed a misnomer. However copious supply of brewery waste was regularly applied and as I recall it gave quite good 1 year pines that largely fell prey to the local black game and at a period when it was being claimed that the caper had largely disappeared in central Scotland. Not so at Millbuie.

Shortly after I joined the Millbuie staff another acquisition was made and The Colony, a small out-of-the-way small holding, was added to the nursery acreage making the combined unit a very large one. The total area I do not recall. Mt High and Ardmeanach plus part of Blackstand were utilised mainly for seedling production and the remainder for transplants some parts being periodically green cropped using Hamilton Potato oats. That's the name of the grain as I remember it being considered best for poorer soils. I do believe that the F.C. believed that poor quality land was best for conifers. Certainly the land that made up the Millbuie Nurseries was, in my opinion, far from ideal and this was

clearly demonstrated when we attempted to use the Ledmore lining-out plough as soil depth proved totally inadequate.

The Colony unit was lacking in drainage and efforts to hand weed transplants in over-moist soil conditions was not a wise decision. When Willie Murray, my Head Forester, asked me why I allowed him to send the total staff over there to get them out of sight after a couple of extremely wet couple of days I believe I smiled just a wee bit. The decision had been his and his alone. If he hadn't made use of the word plowter before he knew it now.

One of the most labour intensive jobs that fell to me was the raising of seedbeds using garden spades. It was due to the illness of Alister, my then foreman, I was made responsible for plants dispatches and this was followed by seedbed making. By employing the 'Fergie' tractor and farm type drill ploughs (just 2 ploughs set 5ft apart with metal tails added to the inner ploughboards to help draw the soil in towards the centre) a major part of the seedbed was formed. Some hand raking was still called for to give a more even surface but such manual work was negligible. The excessive work of the raking of smaller stones ceased as it was found that it made little difference to final plant numbers or growth. The covering of the newly sown seeds with rough sand was another labour intensive job that was next for change.

The sand distributor, commonly referred to as two wheeled sand barrow, was manually filled with a half ton load and hauled over the newly sown seedbed attempting an even coverage. When it was on a down slope two sturdy men could manoeuvre the barrow but often four were required. It was considered that the Fergie tractor with its three point linkage could be brought into use. And so down to the local blacksmith our best tractorman Mike was sent. It wasn't long before the wooden barrow framework proved a bit tender for our new arrangement so back to the smiddy Mike had to go. Extra metal bands were affixed, these did the job and so seed covering became a more pleasant job except for the guys who had to refill the barrow. A heath-robinson hopper contraption next appeared on the scene and this allowed for the seedbed covering process to proceed with little loss of time. The best I can recall was 3 acres of seedbeds sown and covered in one day thanks mainly to the tractor mounted barrow and the courageous sweaty efforts of our hopper filler. Several years later when the nursery was still in operation I was amazed to find that the hopper was still in use. It had cost the Commission not one brass farthing. It performed well. In two seasons the seedbed prep staff fell from 32 to a mere half dozen. The Fergie with its three point linkage was a truly marvellous nursery aid!

Fertilisers were something I knew all too little about and the F.C. did not provide much information on the application of such nor were supplies generously allocated. A bit of nitrogen top dressing could work wonders but such plant treatment was not encouraged by North Conservancy.

Darnaway Forestry School

In March 1951 Mr Murray had asked me if I would like to go to the Darnaway Forestry

School on a three month intensive study in forestry. I had earlier turned down an opportunity to go on a two year course and then this opportunity came along. I said I would consider it to which the reply was 'You are going anyway and are to report at Redstone, Darnaway on Sunday' - just three days hence.

On a beastly chilly day in early March heavily wrapped akin to a tattie pit I arrived there, (on my ex US army 'Indian' motor bike), to start three months of study and practical work direction in the capable eyes and hands of Mr Ewen Grant and his assistant Jimmy Bowles. It was a super three months and all at the cost of the Forestry Commission. The 'students' were generally a happy bunch. A picture of the 1951 Darnaway School appears elsewhere.

Life after the Forestry Commission

Came October 1954, by which time I had the protection of the Civil Service cloak around me, I decided to part company with the F.C., all in good terms I care to say, to lay the foundation of my hoped for future fortune in Forestry Contracting around the northern counties.

Ten years were then spent Contracting, then five years at Panmure Estate as Head Forester, 5 years Nurseryman for EFG at Littlemill, Forfar, a unit which I opened up for that company in spring '99 from a rather unkempt small farm. Then in late summer 1974 I acquired the nurseries of T & W Christie of Forres the nursery having been established by John Grigor in 1826. In December '93 I retired from business my successor now trades as Christie-Elite.