Forestry Commission. Estate Work. 1949

After a bus journey from St Andrew's square bus station in Edinburgh, Andy, and I alighted at the road end that led into a large private estate. A road opening opposite was the approach road to a small village near Jedburgh, in the Scottish Borders.

We entered the open estate gates, and walked along the broad rough driveway for a few hundred yards, turned right into a narrow dirt track that led us to our destination; a cluster of estate workers houses, the sawmill and our ultimate objective, the estate shooting lodge, that was being used as a hostel for trainee forestry workers.

Andy, like myself had chosen to attend a course in forestry motivated by a Government Training Scheme available to ex-service men.

The first year was to be served on a private estate to learn the basics in forestry, paid for by the Forestry Commission, a Government Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Forestry was the work I wanted to do. I did not want to return to Forres, where I grew up and complete my apprenticeship as a baker. I'd had enough of working in enclosed premises for six years; four in the bakery trade and two years service as a cook in the army. Both jobs had been forced on me. The job in the bakery had been the choice of my mother, as she wanted me to have a trade, the second by the Government, which I had no control over. Now I could make up my own mind, and had applied for and accepted to go on the forestry course I was now about to begin.

We opened the heavy oak wooden lodge door. Four young men, about the same age as Andy and I, sat at a bare wooden table, eating their evening meal. They looked up as we entered and we introduced ourselves, we were acknowledged with a nod from four heads, but we were not invited to sit down and have something to eat with them. Food rationing was still in force and we had not been allocated a meal for that day. Andy and I were not offended and accepted the situation

. Andy enquired where we could put our cases and were informed by one of the diners to the fact. "There's nae spare beds in here, ye'll find yer beds in the buildin roond the back"

A nod accompanied by a smile indicated the direction we should go.

Andy and I thanked them, picked up our cases and made our way "roond the back". We opened a door in a high wall that led into a small yard over-grown with weeds, divided into sections with netting wire, obviously chicken runs. but now not used for that purpose. This was blatantly clear to us when we saw our living quarters, the chicken house. We looked at each other in amazement.

"They're jokin" he said and we laughed. We assumed they had put us through an initiation ceremony for new starts on the course. We trudged back to the lodge.

"Right lads, ye've had yer joke, where's oor beds?"

They all laughed and answered. "Roond there, in the hen hoose."

We asked if that was all the accommodation to be had, and were politely told. "That's it!" There was no use arguing with them about the situation, there was no one in authority we could appeal to, and as it turned out, that was to be our sleeping quarters for the time being. There was nothing for it but to accept the fact that the hen house were our sleeping quarters.

Andy and I returned "roond the back," and pushed down the "sneck" in the rough wooden door, stepped inside too give our quarters a closer inspection The place had obviously been used as sleeping quarters before us. Along the far wall were four beds and, I use the term "beds" loosely. They were in fact ex-army metal frame and mesh casualty stretchers, heightened at each corner with wooden blocks. There were no lockers or shelves for our belongings. A couple of fold up chairs, a single fly blown, dusty un-shaded light bulb completed the "howf" as we now christened the hen house.

Around this cheery interior wafted the aroma of chicken droppings, these, we were reliably informed later, had been evicted six months previously too make bed space for trainees, but their aromatic presence persisted.

There was a small single room at one end of the main sleeping quarters, in which there was an ex-army iron metal and brass bed, spring framed, the blankets in a rumpled state, obviously, the quarters of one of the characters we had met in the main hostel. The bed looked more comfortable than what Andy and I had been allocated.

It transpired that the room belonged to the trainee factor of the estate. We had not met him with others as he was "winching" the cook's daughter and

had his meals at their home in the village. When we met him, he turned out to be quite a nice guy, and did not interfere with the running of the course.

We each staked a claim on one of the stretchers with our suitcases as we were not sure if more lad's were still to arrive.

We returned to the kitchen in the lodge, to see if we could scrounge something to eat. I had not eaten since I had left my mother's house in Edinburgh that morning.

We were in luck, there was some roast rabbit in the oven, that the lads did not want, left over from the main meal,---I was to find out later why--With some dry bread and mugs of tea made from already used tea leaves. Andy and I ate heartily.

There were four other lads apart from us on the course, they, like ourselves were ex-service men. They had proper ex-army beds in a small room adjacent to the kitchen. They were all single men, and as it turned out, a happy bunch of individuals. I knew we would all get along well. In fact one of them, Jimmy Smith, and I became great friends and he was my best man when Ethel, my wife and I were married in 1955.

Today 50 odd years after that first meeting we are still mates, even though Jim resides in Vancouver, Canada. My wife and I have been out there twice on holiday at his invitation. The first time as guests at his son Tom's wedding, the second time when the four of us toured round B.C. in a camper van.

After Jim had finished his first year on the estate, he left for pastures new. We met again two years later when I was employed in the forestry squad of the Parks Department, Edinburgh Corporation, and discovered Jim was a member of one of the other forestry squads. We renewed our friendship and worked together until Jim emigrated to Canada.

But I diverse. Well into that first evening, after introductions, we chin wagged and getting to know each other, mostly service talk and what the work next day would entail. Apart from Jim, I can only remember Freddie Mann, who came later that day, to begin the same course as Andy and I.

I was looking forward to beginning my future employment the next morning, and working along side my new friends. After a long and exciting day, I was tired and ready for some shut-eye.

Wearily Andy and I walked round to our palatial quarters and prepared for bed. The mattress was a large hessian sack stuffed with straw, provided

courtesy of the rich landowner. The straw at least was, I must admit fresh. After I had punched the packed straw into shape, it was really quite comfortable, even on the hard mesh stretcher. It was a cold evening but there was no fire. I undressed, rolled myself up in the two army blankets provided, there were no sheets, or pillows, a rolled up shirt sufficed. I was soon warm, and comfortable. The situation certainly did not bother me, I was used to the hard 'biscuit' type mattresses on army beds and other discomforts. In spite of the chicken fragrance, I fell asleep. I slept well enough and woke up at 6 a.m. the following morning.

My mouth felt and tasted like the bottom of a parrot cage, or in this case a chicken run. I opened the howf door, and relieved myself among the weeds in the yard outside. Gave my face and hands a wash at the cold water tap beside the clap wood door and felt refreshed.

There was hot water in a small capacity tank in the lodge for washing dishes, face and hands but never enough for a bath. For this we would have to wait till the weekend when the boiler was lit to provide plenty of hot water, or ask a colleague working in the sawmill to light the boiler fire at lunchtime, for someone to have a bath in the evening.

Early next morning, dressed in our ex-army uniform and boots--standard forestry work clothes at that time. Andy and I made our way round to the kitchen for breakfast; which consisted that morning and every morning thereafter, of porridge and mug of tea. I had to make up my own "pieces" for the mid-day lunch break. It consisted of one double slice of bread with cheese, or Spam, one double slice with jam and a flask of tea.

Later that day at 'lousin time', the cook/cleaner welcomed us as we handed over our ration books. She was a plump woman about 40 years old, a widow, and lived in the village nearby.

She gave us our sugar ration for the week in a one-pound jam jar. From this essential commodity we had to sweeten our mid-day "piece" time flask of tea; a mug of tea at breakfast and supper. We were also entitled per day, to two teaspoons of tea, one ounce of margarine, one teaspoon of jam, and two ounces of cheese or Spam. From these items we had to make sandwiches for our midday meal.

Our other rations for a week consisted of two rashers of bacon, four ounces of stew, four ounces of mince. Rabbit was the main source of most of our evening meals, with soup, alternating with milk pudding each day.

The Forestry Commission paid for our food and board.

On Saturday noon, after my week's work, I was paid the sum of five pounds. This amount was to cover any costs I would incur during the following week: bus fares, toiletries, soap, tooth paste etc. or leisure activities. This wage may not seem much by today's standards, but for me it was more than adequate for my needs, as I do not smoke or drink. When I could not afford the fare home at weekends, which was often, I would cycle into Jedburgh, go to the "pictures", and treat myself to a fish supper afterwards.

Food glorious food! Army food had a bad reputation but the cooking by that cook was diabolical. With the rations she was allowed, I deduced from my experience, (which she did not know about) she could have produced better meals than what were being served to us. I suspected we were being robbed of our rightful rations, and were been given un-rationed substitutes, for example, rabbits and sheep heids.

One evening after work, I, with the others sat down for dinner. The cook had made sheep's heid broth--she left at 4.30 P.M. and as usual we helped ourselves to what ever she had prepared. I glanced over at my mate Jim's plate and could not believe my eyes. A maggot, a pure white maggot, crawled out of his soup. How it had survived the soup pot I do not know, but there it was, like a survivor from a shipwreck, crawling onto the lip of his plate. Jim was enjoying the soup, until I drew his attention to his extra un-rationed meat course. The incident caused some hilarity but no one had seconds or even finished what they already had in their plate.

As I have mentioned earlier we had rabbit at least four times a week, stewed, but most times roasted. They'd been tossed into a roasting tin, and bunged in the oven, heads and all. If the gamekeeper had not skinned them before he'd handed them in, I reckon she would have roasted them with their skins and fur still on. One day out of curiosity, I examined the cavity of the roasted portion on my plate. The inside had obviously never been cleaned or washed out properly, I could see the "purls" still inside. How no one came down with "something " was a miracle.

To complain would have produced negative results as the cook was "well in" with the factor, and we were not in a position to get rid of her. It was a case of, take it or leave it situation. There was no organisation or union at that time we could turn to, and we had too accept the conditions without complaint. During the rest of my time there, I examined each plate of food carefully before I ate it.

I could have quit the course, but I was determined to continue in spite of what had taken place, sleeping in a chicken house and nasty food. If I gave

up I might not have the opportunity again to accomplish the work my heart was set on. I had chosen forestry as my vocation. I had to accept the rough with the smooth.

Farming and forestry has always been the worst paid profession and yet without them we could not survive, as they supply us with the basic materials in this world, past and present Timber for house building, furniture and warmth . Farming supplies the food that is required for human life to exist.

As stated earlier, the course in forestry was implemented in the large estate of a rich landowner, financed by the Forestry Commission. The estate would obviously benefit from the cheap student labour. We were paid the sum of five pounds for a 53 hour week.

As I mentioned earlier, I did not smoke or drink, I was therefore better off than some of the lads and could buy the necessary items I required, and once a month managed to save the bus fare to go home to Edinburgh and visit my mother, and family.

I had too purchase a second hand bicycle, an essential piece of equipment required to transport me from the sawmill starting site to wherever the tree work was being carried out on the estate. Every-body including the estate workers all had a "bike." The small tools, axes and saws were slung over shoulders by a short length of rope, and carried to the felling site as there was no other means of getting these tools there, or, alternatively, if we were returnng to the same site the following day, the tools were hidden in the undergrowth.

I would also use my bike to transport me to and from Jedburgh. I was stopped one evening by the local bobby for not having the rear red light showing, even though I explained to him that I had switched it on, but he was having no excuses, and I was fined ten shillings (50pence) at Jedburgh Sheriff Court

The working day began or "yoked", promptly at 7 A.M. and finished- "loused" at 5 P.M. prompt, Monday to Friday,. Half an hour was allowed for a break at twelve noon for our 'piece.' On Saturday, we began at 7 A.M. as usual and finished work at twelve noon.

At the beginning of the course, each trainee forestry student was partnered up with a member of the estate forestry squad, all highly skilled and proficient forestry workers, and for two weeks, would teach us the practical side of the course. After this initial training you were expected to carry out all the work pertaining to forestry. Felling, snedding, measure and cross-cut

the felled trees into manageable lengths for the estate saw-mill. There was supposed to be a theoretical side, but I never ever came across it, and as far as I know, neither did the other students.

On my first morning on the job, I felt as if I had been pushed "in at the deep end" My first task, when we reached the wood, was to assist in felling mature Douglas Fir trees. These huge trees were over a hundred to a hundred and fifty years old, over a hundred feet high, and six foot in diameter. Beautiful specimen trees.

In 1949, crosscut saws were still being used in forestry.. Some of the saws in use were over 6 feet in length and would require four men--two each end- to fell a large tree. First, the “butt” or base of the tree a ‘mouth’ was "laid” in with a very sharp felling axe, the notch chipped out facing the direction the tree was to fall, a highly skilled technique requiring years of axe practice.

When the tree had been “laid in,” two men, with the long saw, one each side of the tree, would kneel and grip the saw’s wood handles and begin to cut into the tree trunk on the opposite side from the “laid in mouth.”

After they had started the "cut", and the cutting became ‘heavier,’ two other men would attach a piece of thin rope to the bottom of the wooden handles and, with a steady rhythm and little effort, would cut through the timber. If the saw was sharp, "worms" of wood sawdust were removed by the saw’s tooth "rakers" after being cut by the “cutter-teeth" of the saw. The wood cutters would watch for movement as the saw cut deeper into the tree, if the tree “sat back” on the saw causing no further forward movement, a small wedge would be hammered into the saw cut to “lift” the tree and allow further cutting until the tree toppled over with a crash.

I always got great pleasure as I watched experienced tree cutters at work, it was to me, poetry in motion, and in due course, after my arm muscles became used to the work, I became quite a good cutter myself.

After the tree had been felled, all the lateral branches were removed with very sharp axes. The “clean” log was measured into specific sizes by the gaffer, crosscut, dragged from the site with chains by the drag horse or manual labour to the edge of the wood, loaded onto a timber wagon via “skids and “cant hooks” then driven to the estate saw mill where it would be cut into boards or “stabs” (posts) for the maintenance of the estate properties.

The crosscut saws were maintained by a member of the estate forestry squad. It was his job to keep the saws in prime condition. He carried the necessary tools in his ‘piece’ bag, an ex-army gasmask. We all had them for

carrying our ‘piece and vacuum flask, but in his he had to carry a file, small hammer an anvil or saw-set to “set the teeth.”

He would use a short tree stump, cut at chest height as a trestle, and cut across the top to accommodate the inverted saw blade, so that only the teeth were visible above the slot for sharpening, a small wedge was tapped into the side of the blade to keep it steady, and in no time at all he would have a blunt saw in tip top condition. A dull saw was wasted energy, and effort.

The felling axe, I had to maintain myself, it too like the saw had to be very, very sharp. I had to buy my own round carborundum sharpening stone, rough on one side, smooth on the other. The axe, not new, was supplied by the Forestry Commission via the estate. There were two weights of axes, four and a half pounds and six pounds. I chose the former. There is a technique that has to be followed on how to sharpen an axe.

First, a "face" had to be put on the axe, this entailed getting a mate to turn a heavy sandstone wheel by hand, as I held the side of my axe to the wet stone, the water dripping onto the stone from a hole pierced in a can of water, balanced on a stout wooden frame that held the wheel spindle. Satisfied I had taken enough steel from off the edge of the face, I spat on the rough side of the carborundum and using a circular motion began to put an "edge" on the face of the axe, first one side then the other.

At first this operation due to my inexperience, involved cut fingers, as sometimes the stone slipped off the face of the axe. After a few cuts, I learnt to grip the stone tightly with fingers and thumb clear of the edge. To get a really sharp edge on the axe, the smooth side of the stone was used.

The ultimate test for a well honed, and sharp axe was to shave the hairs from my arms. Another test was to try and split a match, stuck upright in a stump, down the middle, it took a lot of practice to achieve this skill. I think I managed it twice. Pure luck more than skill.

During the winter short days, as darkness fell, we would make our way back from the woods to the saw-mill. Even though we had had, a hard day in the wood, felling, snedding, crosscutting, we were not finished for the day. Oh no. The gaffer would remove his "turnip" watch from his waistcoat pocket and declare. "Ye've 17 meenites afore lousin time, awa an empty the creosote biller o' stobs."

Days previously, "stobs", "stabs" or posts had been soaked/boiled in a large open steel trough, and brought to the boil with a fire underneath to assist penetration of the preservative into the fence posts. To empty the boiler was

a smelly, and messy job and it was the students who had to carry it out. Well worn heavy creosote soaked leather gloves were handed out to prevent "spales" from penetrating our hands.

The posts were lifted out of the now cool boiler, and stacked neatly in the yard to drip dry ready for use for fencing. The job had to be carried out by the light of a single light bulb attached to the wall of the sawmill, shining into the yard, so that we could carry out this task. We were after all, still due his lordship "17 meenits."

It took several days and nights to rid myself of the smell of creosote. I did not mind it myself, I think it's a nice "clean" smell. The only time I objected was when I ate my piece at mid-day the following day, when I could taste creosote on the bread. I could accept the smell but not the taste. The creosote boiler would sometimes go on fire, and there was panic as we threw shovels of soil on to the flames.

At last! "lousing" time. There was a rush for the wash basins in the lodge where there was limited hot water to try and remove creosote or rosin from our sore and calloused hands.

If it was Saturday there would be more jostle than usual for the wash basins, and the limited hot water, by the lads who were going home to Edinburgh for the week-end, as they rushed to catch the first available S.M.T. bus at the estate entrance.

For those who remained in the lodge, or chicken-house over the weekend, there was either rugby or a football match in Jedhart --the local name for Jedburgh--a stroll round the town, maybe the “pictures”. Afterwards, possibly a fish tea at the local "chippy". Alternatively, a walk round the well maintained grounds of the estate, and banks of the River Tweed that flowed through it, but I, like the rest of the lads were not allowed to fish the river, we were only poor students after all, and could not possibly afford the fee for a permit. There was a wireless to listen too, books to read, play cards, clothes to be washed, cycle to where ever or just blether or sharpen your axe.

This became a passion as the axe was at that time, such a vital tool in forestry or maybe it was the only piece of equipment that was yours alone, even if it was only on loan, and only you worked with it. Only you knew its strength, sharpness, and its weaknesses. The feel of the smooth, slim hickory handle as it slid through your hands when being worked. You became attached to your axe, like a violinist to his violin, you took great care of it.

As the cook did not work at the week-end, we had to cook our own meals, the inevitable rabbits, properly cleaned of course. We were never left any alternative food.

After I had worked at this location for three months. Two lads, Jimmy Smith, left for work with Edinburgh Corporation the other lad were relocated to another Forestry Commission area. Andy and I moved into their vacant places in the more comfortable beds in the lodge, iron frame and springs with a horse hair mattress, not as comfortable I thought, as the straw filled palliasse.

There was a sawdust burner in the sleeping quarters to heat the room during the winter. It was a pot bellied stove with a perforated pipe that went down the center of the stove, and out through the roof, around which was packed dry sawdust through the lid

When full the lid was put in place and lit with crumpled newspaper pushed into the draught intake at the front of the stove and set alight. When well lit, the air intake was closed to a minimum, and the fire would smoulder for about four days before it required refilling. It could have burned log off-cuts from the sawmill but these were sold locally as fire-wood for the benefit of the estate. Frugality seemed to be the motto of the estate. Nothing was wasted, not even time.

As I mentioned earlier, when I arrived to start work, most food items were rationed, but during my time there, the rationing situation eased nationally and some items were removed from rationing, others were increased in weight, which included sugar, margarine, meat, bacon cheese and some other commodities but we saw no difference in our portions.

Andy, had been a Military Policeman during his army service, and was naturally suspicious about no increase in our allocation. He set out to find out what was happening to our missing food ration. He visited the food suppliers to the lodge, and discovered that the proper rationed groceries and meat rations were being delivered. Where was it being diverted too? There was an obvious answer, but he had to get the evidence. He asked me help him to uncover what was going on. I agreed. Why? Maybe because I was fed up eating rabbits

In the kitchen was an old Welsh dresser, always locked; the key held by the cook. One weekend, when we knew her future son-in-law was away visiting his own family in Edinburgh, and would not disturb us, we pulled the dresser away from the wall. The back of the dresser was made up of boards screwed to the frame. A few turns with a knife soon had a couple of the boards off.

Every shelf of the top half of the dresser was packed with two pound bags of sugar. It transpired that the cook was hoarding it to make jam.

Two of the shelves in the lower half were stacked with jars of jam. It was too good an opportunity to miss. We all filled our weekly ration jar to the brim with sugar, replaced the boards and pushed the dresser back into position.

We helped ourselves several times over a period of two to three weeks, the cook obviously knew what we were up to but took no action personally, but reported us to the factor, who was responsible for us.

He confronted us one day after work. It was argued that we had only taken what was rightfully ours. He gave no reply to our accusations. This brought the whole ration issue to a head. Andy and I had gathered copies of the receipts from the various traders who had supplied the kitchen with the supplies for our use, and presented them as evidence. It was seen that we were in fact, not receiving our rightful allowances. We had a good idea who was involved in the discrepancy of our rations, but we did not have absolute proof, that apart from the cook, other persons were involved.

Andy and I decided we would present our evidence to the police in Jedburgh. Within two days, to take effect immediately, Andy and I were transferred from the estate to another Forestry Commission location at Bonchester Bridge, near Hawick.

As it turned out, they had done us a favour with the transfer, at Bonchester Bridge, the food was of superior quality in every way. There were no rabbits roasted or otherwise, unless we caught and cooked them ourselves, as a supper meal before going to bed..(See Winter in Forestry) Andy decided after a couple of weeks at the new place, he did not want to continue in forestry, and returned to Edinburgh. I never heard from him again.

Nothing more was heard or done about the complaint. Andy and I surmised the scam had involved more than the cook and the whole episode hushed up.

I had only completed six months of the year course, and apart from the ration incident, I had enjoyed myself there, even the short stay in the chicken shed did not bother me. I got on well with the other lads and the estate workers, who worked hard for a meagre wage, but they seemed happy with their lot. I suppose they knew no other life than working for the rich landowner.

I was disappointed not to have completed the course but in a way glad that I had deprived the landowner of my cheap labour. I do not suppose he would

have noticed my absence as he sat in his "big hoose". If he did, he would know there were plenty more like me, ready to take my place.

Fifty years have passed since that time, and I recently returned to the estate. I knew there would be many changes since my time, but I was sorely disappointed at what has happened there. It is now a Heritage Centre. The buildings I lived in, have been transformed into various workshops, including natural wood furniture, souvenir shop, cafe, and the chicken house, my old sleeping quarters, a leather craft workshop.

I was quite disappointed that a small museum had not been established to show visitors, documents and other paraphernalia, including, the various hand tools used by the estate workers in their every day tasks in maintaining a well run country estate over fifty years ago. Tree felling saws, axes, sharpening stones, wedges and the many other pieces if equipment used during that age.

Apart from forestry, there was fencing to be carried out to keep out rabbits and deer damaging new planted young trees. This required, post malls, wire strainers, awls. Drains had to be dug or kept clear of silt and mud to allow drainage water to run free. This involved, rutting spades, hacks, draining spades and all the trappings required to keep these hand tools in tip top condition. It was an embarrassment for me when I visited the Heritage Centre, and found that it is no more that a glorified children’s playground, when the children and their parents, with a bit more effort by the organizers, could have made the Centre interesting, and also discovered something of their true forestry heritage.

K.W.McRae. 7/2/08 ©