

Recollections of a 'Lumberkid' by Joyce Holt (Joyce Lockhart)

My forestry career ended abruptly on a lovely August day in 1951, when I turned a beautiful cartwheel over the handlebars of the bicycle on which I had travelled from Dunoon to work that summer. I bent the front forks and had a lot of bruises. I was just 19.

The career began in 1945, in the interim between VE Day and VJ Day. I was disconsolate that the usual companions of my school summer holidays had found 'jobs' at the Forestry Commission Nursery at Uig, Benmore, Argyll. My mother permitted me to acquire a pair of dungarees and to join them. There was no compulsion to join, we went voluntarily. We seemed to be a children's squad, and you can see some of us in the accompanying photo.

Every day, the Dunoon contingent caught the High Road bus (Dunoon Motor Services) to the Sandbank Terminus at Broxwood, where we waited for the Sandbank children to join us, and a lorry (driven by one Frank Keenan) carried us to the Nursery, which then lay to the left of the main road to Glasgow, now rerouted. En route, in the lorry, we sang the usual songs, such as 'She'll be coming round the mountains' or 'The quartermaster's store' or 'Tipperaray', some of which were standard choice on Sunday School outings, but others which would have made our mothers blush. If you missed the lorry, you could wait for the Benmore bus, which would put you off at Puck's Glen, and you walked from there, or else you walked from Sandbank, knowing you would be 'quartered' that day.

We carried with us our 'pieces' for the day, in haversacks, with a bottle of fizzy lemonade (probably made at Stirling's lemonade factory in Dunoon). Flavours were lemon, lime, cola, or – much-prized – American Cream Soda, and the drink was known as 'scoosh'. We certainly all knew how to make it scoosh, by shaking up the stoppered bottle to a froth of bubbles, which scooshed out when the bottle was opened. We all wore dungarees and had waterproof clothing against the Benmore rains, which in that sheltered valley of the Eachaig tended to be heavy. Old shoes or wellies completed the picture – and a few were lucky enough to have boots. You can see some of the footgear in the photo. (Clothes rationing was in force long after the war ended, and much that we wore would be hand-me-downs from older siblings, cousins etc).

I was 'signed on' on my first day in 1945 by the foreman, Andy Hopkins, (known as Andy) but I don't remember how much I was paid. I was nearly 13! The real boss was the forester, Mr Jackson. Older people often did 'piece work' and so were better paid. The young ones were paid by the day, but weekly. If you were late, you could be 'quartered' which meant your day's pay was docked by a quarter. In those days, the Forestry Nursery was desperately short of hands, and in summer gave employment to groups of schoolchildren from Sandbank and Dunoon. The money was probably a godsend to the mothers – it certainly was to mine. Children from Sandbank tended to be even younger, some probably 11. I do remember a certain rivalry between the children from Sandbank and those from Dunoon – sometimes surfacing as warfare at breaktime. In addition they employed older children, whom I remember as quite senior at Dunoon Grammar School (the only secondary school in the area, which all the children there eventually attended) – I now realise they were all of 16 or 17, but I thought them very grown up. I do not think questions were asked about age. Then there were the permanent workers, working winter and summer, the real lumberjills and lumberjacks, who had helped the war effort. In 1948, when it became compulsory at 15 to have a National Insurance card which identified you, things were tightened up, and I believe you had to be 15 to do the work. I went each summer to this job, until my forced 'retirement' in 1951.

On payday (Friday afternoons, last thing) we broke early, lined up outside Andy's office and went in

to sign for our pay packets when our names were called. I gave it all to my mother, who gave me a nominal amount in pocket money, and to save, while most went on the housekeeping (those bottles of scoosh for example!) but also my clothes for the next school year. How my mother managed to produce pieces for me every day (since rationing was with us, as late as 1954) I cannot imagine, but she and the other mothers achieved it.

The valley of Loch Eck and the Eachaig (you pronounce it 'echy' with a real Scottish 'ch' sound) lies between Loch Fyne and the Firth of Clyde, sculpted by glaciers out of the rock. The Eachaig pours out of Loch Eck and runs through the Benmore policies, between hills then heavily wooded by forestry as it runs to the Holy Loch at the edge of the Firth. The valley floor is flat, with a gravelly, sandy base, which made good nursery ground (as well as being the basis for the famous gardens at Benmore House). Few are granted the chance to spend their summers in such surroundings, in such company, and to be paid for it!

What did we do? In those early years, we were employed to weed the seedling trees – mostly the first year seedlings, and usually Sitka Spruce. Weeding second or third year seedlings you might get Sitka rash when the needles pricked your hands and lower arms. The seedlings were laid out in lightly raised beds (you can just see those at the feet of the children in the picture) separated by alleys (which got very muddy when it was rainy). The gaffer (usually an experienced lumberjill – I remember Jenny, and later her sister Martha, who lived at Dalilongart, and also Peggy, who was from outwith Cowal) would allocate us to sections of the bed we were to weed. We worked in pairs, sitting at either end of a wooden bench, about 8 inches from the ground. These benches straddled the width of the beds, with their legs in the alleys. We had a 'topee' – presumably desert army surplus – in which to place the weeds. When your topee was full, you carried it to the heap at the end of the bed. It would be searched for 'accidentally weeded-out tree seedlings' and woe betide you if you had too many in your topee. Since I subsequently became a professional chemist, with hindsight I can say that the seeds had originally been coated with a bright orange substance, which I believe was red mercuric oxide – now known to be extremely poisonous if ingested. I wonder how much of it we got on our fingers? The said fingers were of course very, very dirty at the end of a shift. The nails, I remember, got very dirty and the forefinger of the weeding hand was ingrained with dirt all summer. At break time we proceeded to the only piped running water, an outside tap by Andy's office, where we queued to rinse (not really wash) our hands before we ate our pieces, usually in the old green shed (still, I think, standing, at Uig on my last drive past). Since there was no running water, there were of course no wcs, only earth closets, one for the girls and one for the boys, in the woods behind the old green shed, separating the nursery from the Eachaig. This was a severe shock to most of us.

First break was ca 10 am, second and longer one ca 12 noon and one later, before we went home on the lorry ca 3:30 p.m. Saturday was a half day. The older workers shared the green shed, where they set a wood fire and boiled their billycans. We husbanded the pieces and the scoosh to last till third break. We also repaired to the shed when it rained heavily, as it did quite often. We often sang there. I can still remember some Aussie songs taught us by an Aussie lumberjill who had spent her war at Benmore – Suvla Bay and The Brave Engineer. {From her I first learned of the ANZAC preoccupation with Gallipoli. She did not believe my father had been wounded there in 1915 – for to her he was only a Scot. To me he was a hero.} If the rain set in for the day, we were sent home early. Of course there were wonderful sunny days as well. In the open all day, we competed to take a tan – those with the fairest skins lost out and went red and peeled. There was no such thing as suncream – but no hole in the ozone layer either. Two sisters with Mediterranean complexions and Italian forebears rubbed themselves with olive oil to help them bronze even faster.

I remember idyllic break-time picnics down on the shores of the River Eachaig as it flowed past the rear of the Nursery on its way to the Holy Loch. Sometimes we were able to have a dook at breacktime. The water was cold, and to those used to sea-swimming, rather than fresh water, it felt silky and curiously light. Sometimes we saw trout. Occasionally we caught glimpses of the young man from the 'big house' at Benmore, George Younger, later Secretary of State for Scotland in Margaret Thatcher's Government, later Chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland, who would be going to fish the Eachaig (the Younger family once owned Benmore Estate, but seem to have retained the fishing rights on the Eachaig). On more than one occasion we climbed Puck's Glen, opposite the nursery, to eat our break. I also remember Potts, a gentle giant of a man, who led around the great Clydesdale which was used to pull extracted timber.

In the nursery, the curse of the midgie was always present. We brought DMP (known as dimp, which had dimethyl phthalate in a cream) which stung the face and tasted awful – but we probably ingested lots of it from our fingers, since we never really washed them. Similar phthalates (which are used as plasticisers in PVC and other plastics) are now banned from children's toys. Another counter-measure, favoured by the lumberjills, was 'the bag'; we made torches from old jute sacks, which smouldered to provide enough smoke to keep the midges at bay. Other insects came into my ken, which, although I knew the open hillsides and glens of the Dunoon shore, were new to me. For instance, the ladybirds, of which there were many varieties. They crawled all over the beds, and we delighted in making them crawl up our arms and we blew on them gently so that they spread their wings and flew away. There were the usual orange and scarlet kinds, but we treasured the lemon and the buff coloured ones, as unusual. Sometimes there were baby ladybirds, whose wingcases were still soft, or where the spots had not developed. There were lots of beetles of all sorts, and the usual insect population, with plentiful butterflies and moths. The hills of course were festooned with wild rhododendron escapes – especially Ponticum, probably emanating from the collections of Benmore Gardens. The marshy bits of the Eachaig shore would have yellow flag iris and other wildings. I was never tired when I got home. After my meal, I often went out to play tennis, or even to swim, in the long summer evenings (when we had Double Summertime, and it was light till 11 p.m. that far North).

When I was 16, I went to the 'research' section, a one-man operation run by a Mr Thomson. This work was different. I was one of a team of 4 girls, who were very friendly. We all cycled to Kilmun (leaving our bikes at the back of Kilmun church, to be met by Mr Thomson and his van). Three of us from the same class at school, cycled from Dunoon and picked up the fourth on the way down Sandbank Hill, en route to Kilmun. Mr Thomson took us by van to Strone Nursery, high on the projecting 'nose' of the Kilmun Hill, or the Kilmun Arboretum, (now a national treasure) just above the Argyll Mausoleum and Kilmun Church, or Glenbranter Forest. Sometimes we just cycled to Uig, and worked there. The jobs we did were more varied. By that time there was a flush toilet at Uig Nursery, a great advance. At Uig, and at Strone Nursery, we would spread 'nitrochalk' fertiliser and other solid chemicals in selected sections of beds with 2-3 year old tree seedlings. We also used Bordeaux Mixture – which smelled strongly of copper sulphate. At the Arboretum, we 'brashed' stands of experimental timber. I remember the blisters on the fingers from using a less-than-sharp small saw to cut the branches. Amongst the special tree stands of the Arboretum were the Nobilis Fir, with its wonderful long cones, Douglas Fir, Scots Pine, and the graceful Japanese Larch. At that time, it was politic to change the Sitka Spruce monoculture which had blanketed the Cowal hills with a uniform dark green, and this Arboretum was part of the search for alternatives. The smell of the forest in the summer was intoxicating, and the delicious smell of wild honeysuckle, in the late

afternoon, is with me in memory forever. There would be only needles, cones and branches on the floor of the plantations, but there were wood pigeons, an occasional woodpecker, red squirrels, wood wasps, and plenty of midges, clegs and other biting insects, which just adored our fresh young blood, as well as butterflies and moths. The four of us usually worked alone somewhere up that hill. At Glenbranter, we measured quartergirths of every nth fallen tree in a set of thinned timber. The hill there was very steep, and as we went up and down each row of trees (the plantations were of course very regular), my waist measurement dropped to ca 23 inches that summer of 1950. Never since, I may add. At Strone, a very small nursery, just big enough for the four of us, and whose outline I detect with nostalgic pleasure every time I cross the Firth of Clyde from Gourock, we weeded or added chemicals as required. I remember wonderful views of the Firth, and upriver to Dumbarton Rock. That summer, a fine summer, the old paddle steamer 'Lucy Ashton' (known to us as the Lucy Ashcan) was fitted with experimental engines and we heard and saw her roar up and down the Firth in the trials. Somewhere, we cut bracken on open hillside, with the huik, pronounced 'hyuck', again hard on the hands.

I enjoyed the work, the sun, the company, and was sorry when my vacation stints at 'the forestry' ended. I learned without realising it, simply through the chance to talk, much about real life, about getting on with people, and about nature. It was a rich experience, one which young people nowadays probably miss out on, with their motorised transport and foreign holidays. It was also healthy, and obesity was not a problem! I smile when I wonder what the Health and Safety people and other nannyng agencies would make of it today?