

FCRA News

The newsletter about retired Forestry Commission employees

Issue 17 - August 2002

Blast that tree!

Readers will recall in the last issue of FCRA NEWS I mentioned Tony Burns had sent me an enjoyable story of Jock Low, and his influence on young students at FTS. Here it is.

Your article from Jock Low reminded me of a time when the Forestry Commission was full of characters instead of today's plastic management clones.

Our paths first crossed when he visited Gwydyr Forestry School to lecture on engineering. He strode into the lecture room and bluntly announced that he would have the best job in the world if b***dy foresters would keep their vehicles off his roads when the frost was coming out and keep their b***dy trees far enough back to stop the branches dripping onto the roads. We then had to shout several times – "A dry road is a good road". He was perfectly correct on all three counts!

The afternoon was a field trip where good practical advice was liberally laced with comments on senior officers which delighted us and would have made a libel lawyer drool. His stock was raised even further when he leaped onto a dozer and demonstrated the art of forming roadside drains with a fixed angle blade. Here was a man!

His piece de resistance was a demonstration of felling a tree using Cordtex instantaneous fuse. Two turns for every inch of diameter and a couple for luck – thirty six if I remember correctly.

We were ushered back about twenty yards for safety and the resultant explosion left us lip-reading for several days and the tree teetering on a pencil point. Like all good generals, he knew when to retreat and led his shell-shocked, head-shaking troops from the field of conflict, leaving the dozer driver to deal with the tree.

A few short months later I was an assistant forester and we were ploughing the slopes above what is now Llyn Trewern. The thick summer growth of bracken was obscuring large boulders which the drivers claimed were wrecking their tractors. I had no sooner got them down to the roadside when, in the magical manner of senior officers, Jock Low drew up in his car. He asked why the tractors weren't ploughing (or words to that effect). When the problem was explained, his solution was that the D2 driver, Gomer Rowlands, would have a flag, walk in front of the D4 and wave it when he came to a boulder. Jock roared off in the direction of Shrewsbury, not realising that Gomer was only 5ft 6ins tall and the bracken was 6ft. If you have ever wondered why the trees above Llyn Trewern are in wavy rows, now you know!

Our paths crossed many times in North Wales and later in West Scotland and there lie further tales. A day when Jock Low came to the forest was never dull and it was the end of an era when he retired and moved south.

Go to Prague

This time last year, I suggested that you go the Amsterdam – by budget airline. This year its "Go" to Prague. Go flies from Stansted, but search the web as competition has brought down the price of mainstream airlines. Travel around Prague is easier than around cities in Britain. There is a public transport information desk at the airport. Obtain a map and buy a pile of 25p Transfer Tickets which are good for one hour. Jump on the 119 bus (every 15 minutes) outside which takes you to the end of the Metro line, 25p to Prague city centre! The rest is up to you. Tram 22 is the tourist route. The art nouveau is fantastic, the Municipal House is outstanding. The beer is mellow, the streets are vibrant and the ambience is romantic.

Accommodation need not be expensive and there are excellent central B&Bs. The "Rough Guide" is very helpful. The Kotva Campsite at Branik on the banks of the Vltava River has basic, clean, comfortable and friendly accommodation in 4 berth cabins or 2 to 6 bed rooms in the main camp building. This is easily reached from the centre by tram 3, 16, 17 or 21. English is spoken.

Try: **Tel: 00420-2-44 46 17 12**

Fax: 00420-2-44 46 61 10

e-mail: kotva@kotvacamp.cz

Internet: www.kotvacamp.cz

Travel info: www.dp-praha.cz

A 2 bed room is £10 a night! Summer will be very busy in Prague, but autumn, well – just Go.



Christmas Lunch

Fifty-five members of the North Wales Group enjoyed a Christmas lunch last year at the Port Meirion Hotel.

Arrangements were made by the previous Chairman, David Williams, who was the major driving force in setting up this Group. A great thanks to him for a successful launch and continued existence.

WHERE ARE THE EARLY CONSERVATIONISTS

?

I have been contacted by The School of Geography, University of Nottingham which is researching how and why concern for the environment developed in England in the post war years. Detailed studies are being carried out in Norfolk and Herefordshire. The research workers are keen to interview former FC staff for the two counties who worked in forest management, wildlife and conservation in the period 1945 to 1970. This seems an excellent opportunity for the work of early FC conservationists to be acknowledged. If you do qualify, please contact:

Paul Merchant, School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, tel: 01158 466 336, e-mail: paul.merchant@nottingham.ac.uk

WARTIME STORIES

We haven't had a story in the series for some time, but fortunately I have material in reserve. So here is George Marshall's story about Rendlesham Forest in 1944. He retired as FOI from Thetford Forest and is now living in Horncastle, Lincoln.

On leaving school at 14 I started work with the FC at Rendlesham in January 1944. One of my first jobs along with other boys and girls was to burn the lop and top where felling had just taken place to allow a massive storage tank be built which was to supply fuel to the FIDO (Fog Dispersal System).

We had to burn until dinner break and all afternoon was spent covering up the fires to ensure that they were not visible to the enemy plans at night.

A great deal of our work entailed felling and clearing alongside the runway which was used almost entirely as a crash landing strip for returning aircraft, mainly American, which had been shot up whilst over Germany.

Many planes just failed to arrive dropping short into the forest. We witnessed many, many planes landing on fire, on one engine only and suffering loss of part of the superstructure. Our forester J Brooks had a close shave when a damaged plane slewed off the runway, colliding with his van.

Pay was usually brought round to gangs on site on a Thursday, however on one Thursday we were instructed to assemble at the forest office making sure we were on time.

On arrival we were addressed by a high ranking army officer who informed us that we would be witnessing a build-up of aircraft and troops in the area warning us to keep quiet as a lot of men's lives depended on absolute security.

We soon saw what he was talking about and my most vivid memory is cycling across the eastern end of the runway one Saturday morning on my way to Fenrow Nursery seeing planes and gliders lined up down the side of the strip.

I am afraid little work was achieved as all our time was spent in watching this massive airborne landing depart.

Life in Retirement...

Readers will have seen Geoff Waygood's name mentioned a few times recently in connection with Harry Smith's history of the FTS. I asked Geoff what else he gets up to.

For the past six years on a Monday afternoon I am to be found at the Dean Heritage Museum at Soudley in the Forest of Dean. I got involved by answering an appeal for volunteers to assist in running the Gage Library at the Museum. This library was left to the Museum by Laurie Gage, a bookseller and a benefactor who lived on the South Coast but had once lived and worked in the Forest. He had amassed a large collection of local books during his lifetime, besides books on Scouting and Methodism, and he felt that the collection of local material should come back to the Forest.

So I became a volunteer librarian and researcher at the Museum. The Museum and Library occupy an old mill, complete with water wheel and large pond, plus the ducks who get fed by numerous visitors. The library is open on Monday and Wednesday afternoons and is manned by volunteers like myself. Anyone wishing to use it can come in with their queries and requests for information. Many of these concern the date when their house was built

within the Forest, and if it was an encroachment in the Forest.

Being an old mining area with ancient traditions of Freemining, there are all sorts of queries regarding miners and mines – not only of coal but also of iron ore, which was once extracted by the Romans in the Dean.

Many of the people enquiring live abroad and write seeking information on family matters. Family history has an enormous following and we get letters from America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, requesting information about great grandfathers who were miners or quarrymen or Crown woodmen who worked and lived in the Forest of Dean.

Students too turn up fairly often looking for information and help with their project work. Even the Forestry Commission turned up one day looking for a photograph of a pithead and winding gear, which they needed for a new publication.

The range is quite wide, from the "History of Whitmead Park, once the local FC Headquarters", "Where was the 'hard-up' tree in Bream where miners who were out of work and strapped for cash used to congregate?" to the Civil War and how it affected the Forest, and "Who killed the

Bears?"...but be very careful where you ask that question in certain parts of the Forest of Dean.

The library holds a great number of books and papers on the Forest, the Wye Valley and Gloucestershire in general, besides maps, photographs and a considerable local postcard collection.

The Museum also has a large number of artefacts – old tools, farm, forestry and mining equipment, a working beam engine rescued from one of the local collieries long since closed, and so on. It even has a miner's cottage, complete with an Old Spot Gloucester pig in the pigsty in the garden.

As always, there is a lack of space and only a fraction of the items held can be displayed at any one time. However, things are set to change with a lottery grant in the offing, and plans to improve the layout and the buildings to provide more space.

A visit is well worthwhile if you happen to be in the Dean. You can even find your photograph of when you were a student at the Dean Forestry School, plus copies of past Deansday books, records, etc.

I look forward to meeting you one Monday afternoon!

The Ballad of Jack William's Tractor

*Down in the depths of the forest
The silence began to retreat
A terrible noise in the distance
Vibrations, I felt, through my feet*

*What could be coming - I knew not
Clouds of black smoke through the trees
Whatever it was, I was certain
'T would scare off the birds and the bees!*

*And then it put in an appearance
At sixty it came down the ride
A rickety four wheeled contraption
At least ten feet long and six wide*

*I'd seen it before, lying idle
I thought it was left there to rot
There was no point in calling the scrap man
He'd not give ten quid for the lot*

*Yet now I could see it was mobile
(It passed me with inches to spare)
And though it was fit for the scrap-yard
Jack's tractor was taking the air*

*Now Jack was a part-time contractor
He'd buy the odd tree that blew down
And cut it up back at his sawmill
He rarely went down into town*

*But here in the woods he was happy,
And later - I heard from a friend,
If bits of his tractor were ailing
With putty and glue he would mend*

*Fashioned from spare parts and remnants
Meccano, elastic and string
Not one wheel the same as the other
A rusty, decrepit old thing*

*With a canopy fit for a sultan
That he'd fashioned from old sheets of tin
And a cabin - devoid of all windows
Where Jack sat serenely within*

*As the tractor sped past me it slithered
Jack wrestled to master the skid
With a steering wheel from an old Mini
He'd purchased for less than a quid*

*On the front - an old winch had been added
And the winch-rope (all oily and black)
Went under the sump of the tractor
To emerge through a hole at the back!*

*Then up in the air at an angle
And over a pulley or two
The winch-rope went close to a drainpipe
That served the exhaust as a flue*

*At last with a shudder it halted
Then Jack, took the winch-hook in hand
Dismounted and, leaving the tractor,
He entered a conifer stand*

*The winch-rope groaned loud as he pulled it
He was gone just a moment or two
Then, striding back into the daylight
Preparing the next job to do*

*Then up to his cockpit he scrambled
And revved up the throttle full choke
Till the engine (designed for a bomber)
Enveloped the forest in smoke*

*The winch-rope went tighter and tighter
How would it cope with the strain?
If it snapped it would take the man's head off
Though his end would be quick with no pain*

*But then with a slow grinding movement
The winch rope wound back cog by cog
As out of the trees slid a mighty
Twenty foot long Sitka log*

*Two cubic metres of lumber
The best part of two tons of wood
Brought to the side of the roadway
By a wreck that I thought was no good!*

*There must be a moral here somewhere
- A lesson to brighten the day
'Beauty is only skin deep' might be one'
Or, 'Where there's a will there's a way'?*

*'Faith can move mountains', is also quite apt
(Such proverbs I learnt from my mother)
But I reckon the one that I like best of all
Is 'You can't tell a book from its cover'?*

Ken Broad

Ken started with the FC as a forest worker in South Wales in 1953 and finished as District Forester (Private Woodlands) in Somerset and South Devon Forest district. He had a five year stint in Research (under the infamous Michael Brown) during which time Handbook 4 'Lichens in Southern Woodlands' was published. He left the FC in 1991 to start up and manage the Oxfordshire Woodland Project. His book 'Caring for Small Woods' was published in 1998. This has done surprisingly well and has been reprinted twice. He retired in 1999 and moved back to Somerset.

NEWS FROM THE NORTH

John Keenleyside reports that Finlay and Joey MacRae of Dingwall celebrated their golden wedding. Also Sandy McIntosh, who was Senior Clerk of Works at Balnacoul, Fochabers, and Jean celebrated their diamond wedding. They go on a long time in those parts!

Do You Remember this Tractor?

Yet another attempt at memory recall! It seems that some ex-FC vehicles are now in the loving hands of restoration enthusiasts. Many want to know stories of working days in the FC. My most recent contact is John Butcher. He has purchased an ex-FC County Super 4 based on a Fordson Super Major. It was made on 22 June 1963 and sent to Bomford and Evershed to have a dozer blade fitted. Its reg no was either 82XKE or XKE82. Since its sale from the FC, it has had a hard working life. John would like to contact people who worked with it, so unravelling its history, but he has no idea where it was based. Can anybody help?

John Butcher, 35 Robin Hood Street, Newport, Isle of Wight PO30 2AJ, tel: 01983 525373, e-mail JhnButc@aol.com

There was great success in uncovering the past FC history of the 1952 Landrover noted in the December issue of FCRA NEWS.

Martin Chattin, the LR enthusiast, had it since 1972, and purchased it as a non-running "wreck". He said it had a hard and unkind life in the FC as he had to flush out the chassis members which were full of silt and gravel. Subsequently it had many years of LR trials. Recently it was shown at the 50th Anniversary Rally of the Series 1 LR Club. He is in contact with David McQuillan of FC Mechanical Engineering Services who coordinates exhibits at shows. They hope to restore it to its original 1953 FC livery. I O Evans, a retired Head Forester, saw the request for information and was quick to reply. He recalled taking delivery of it for Twyi Forest in 1953. It became his old friend and trusty mount, surviving many boggings, hammerings and overloads in those hectic days.

Martin was very grateful for the responses he received to his letter from both current and retired FC staff. So it is worth making the effort on these memory recalls.

ONE TREE...

In the September issue of FCRA NEWS I described the One Tree project. There is still a chance to see the fascinating exhibition at its last venue, The Geffrye Museum, Hackney, London, 25 June to 1 September. However, another idea under consideration is to fully build and furnish a house using 20 trees. A permanent site and substantial funding is required. If anybody can help please contact Garry Olson or Peter Toaig, 17 Stoney Lane, Wilmslow SK9 6LG.

This is a good project in which the FC and its present day staff could become involved.

Jock....again!

Jock Low has become a 'persistent correspondent'! In the last issue of FCRA NEWS David Paterson was recalling the use of the GCI flume on Loch Eck. This got Jock thinking again. He remembered the flume was replaced by the sectional aluminium chute. It was in 10' sections which locked together and was "invented" by the engineers in Alice Holt. It was used in Dyfi Forest, and when on occasions it did not run well, a few buckets of water would help logs on their way. Jock recalled seeing a log take off like an arrow as a result of this lubrication and pierce a tree butt below the chute. On Loch Eck he had 15 10' sections bolted together, but the idea was shelved. On dry days and particularly if the logs were resinous they would not run. If it rained overnight the first poles took off like javelins, often piercing a distant bank. Changed days!

Forester Training Schools

Henry Smith's compiled recollections has sold well, of 100 copies only a few remain. They have been widely distributed, often to distant places around the world. Henry and Geoff Waygood have made a major contribution to the annals of forestry – we thank them for it. It is regrettable that at no time did the FC either recognise their efforts or even attempt to assist. There is a clear message there of how it views the past achievements of its retired staff.

Copies can still be obtained from Henry Smith, 35 The Pastures, Kings Worthy, Winchester SO23 7LX.

Welcome to Retirement!

Ron Elliott	Edinburgh
Thomas Massey	Petersfield
Shirley Petherick	Tintern
William Steele	Keilder
Elizabeth Grant	Aviemore
Sandra Lamb	Penicuik
Edward Baker	West Harling
Harold Beaver	Plympton
Edward Munro	Fochabers
Henry Murray	Huntly
George Pickett	Gatehouse of Fleet
Eon Roberts	Capel Curig
Paul Craig	Drumnadrochit
Brynmor Hughes	Dolwyddelan
Gerald Davies	Cinderford

OBITUARIES

I saw PETER GARTHWAITE's obituary in "Woodland Heritage", and the following is an extract. After graduating from Oxford his forestry career began in Burma in 1931 and he soon developed an interest in forest ecosystems. After the war he joined the FC at the time of large-scale expansion, serving in Dalby, Kielder and finally conservator in charge of Forest Management Division in HQ from where he retired. In retirement he continued to remain active in the profession. He was elected President of the RFS and worked as an adviser to many woodland

owners. He was awarded the OBE in 1972. He became Patron and a trustee of Woodland Heritage, offering it his wisdom, enthusiasm and sound advice.

Woodland Heritage commissioned a small outdoor structure to commemorate his life. It acts as a shelter and has been erected in the arboretum at Castle Howard in Yorkshire. The design was based on a traditional English cruck framed building, which was altered to fit the Yorkshire vernacular style. It was opened with a short dedication service last October.

FAREWELL

		Retired	Aged
Frank Adams	Thetford	1994	72
Colin Fergusson	Tarbert	1983	82
Kenneth Mackenzie	Portree	1973	93
Mary Mackenzie	Strathcarron		71
John Martin	Dunbeg	1979	87
Alexander Mitchell	Aberdeen	1983	83
Stewart Walter	Kirkcudbright	1985	76
George Lawson	Brandon	1979	88
Neville Lee	Chester	1973	75
Alexander Skene	Elgin	1984	77
Elizabeth Albrighton	Aberystwyth	1979	83
Alan Ive	Basingstoke	1983	82
Leslie Marshall	Marlborough	1985	81
Francis Pearn	Padstow	1981	85

Who is Active in the FCRA?

The majority of retired FC staff do not keep in regular contact with old friends and colleagues. Those who do enjoy the companionship which often started in "the old days". There are over 600 active members of the FCRA, both past staff and their spouses and partners. The following gives an idea of the extent of membership.

Alice Holt	87
Breckland	71
Chilterns	18
Forest of Dean	35
New Forest	10
Peninsula	33
Yorkshire	40
Cowal	6
Lorne	6
Mid Argyll	31
Edinburgh and S Scotland	99
N & NE Scotland	80
North Wales	84
South Wales	35

Why not sign up to a local group.
Make the small ones big and the big ones bigger!

FCRA News Correspondants

1. John Keenleyside: 01309 673599
2. Charlie Greenlees: 01546 602929
3. Nancy MacKenzie: 0131 339 2367
4. Elizabeth Capstick: 01439 771249
5. Mike Reaney: 01792 202449
6. John Thomas: 01179 863869
7. Lena Birchall: 01420 23213
8. David Williams: 01766 762280

GROUP CONTACTS

N & NE Scotland

Eric Urquhart: 01463 221989

Mid Argyll

Charlie Greenlees: 01546 602929

HQ & South Scotland

David Chadwick: 01383 821216

Yorkshire

Geoff Haw: 01723 859727

Brecklands

Margaret Mayes: 01842 811920

Chilterns Warwick Payne: 01442 865595

New Forest Henry Smith: 01962 882017

Alice Holt Sylvia Nicholls: 01252 516016

Forest of Dean Hilda Jones: 01594 836006

West Country Peter Webb: 01837 52926

North Wales Tec Roberts: 01490 412314

South Wales Peter Walker: 01633 424291

Check with contacts for exact area covered.

