

FCAtoday

The newsletter about former Forestry Commission employees

Issue 25 - March 2005

Delta Dan

The Story of Phil Ratcliffe (aka Delta Dan), the Mississippi Blues and the new book on the life and times of Mississippi John Hurt.

Phil Ratcliffe known to some as a previous Head of Wildlife Research and Environment Branches, left the FC in 1992 to establish Ecological Land-Use Consultancy. Although during his FC career his guitar playing was on hold, Phil continued to collect and listen to the early Ragtime and Blues of 1920s-30s America. He has been a big fan of Mississippi John Hurt since the 60s. Following his departure from FC Phil began to seriously pursue his musical interests again and has collected a number of early vintage acoustic guitars.

He plays and sings the acoustic blues and ragtime music of the 20s and 30s and performs many of Hurt's songs, employing the same intricate finger-style guitar technique. In 2003 he performed the first Mississippi John Hurt festival in Hurt's home town of Avalon, Mississippi and met Hurt's grand-daughter Mary Francis Hurt-Wright. The two of them agreed to write a book on the life and times of the famous blues man.

Mississippi John Hurt was one of the most famous of the early Mississippi blues and ragtime songsters. Until 1963 he was known only from 13 recordings made in Memphis and New York in 1928. Although the recordings were outstanding, the American depression saw an end to any

recording career. John Hurt went back to raising a family in the backwoods of Mississippi on the edge of the Delta where he worked picking cotton, lining railroad track and farming.

During the folk revival of the 1960s a bunch of hippies around Washington DC were busy locating some of the old blues men. Many had died, but some were rediscovered, including Skip James and Son House. Nobody knew what had happened to John Hurt. However, Dick Spottswood and Tom Hoskins were listening to one of his early recordings called Avalon Blues; the lyrics included, 'Avalon's my home town, always on my mind'. They wondered if Hurt had written this about a real place and whether this might be a clue to what became of him. They scoured an early map of Mississippi and sure enough there was a tiny rail halt called Avalon. Tom Hoskins took off bound for Avalon. He drove into the gas station adjacent to the railroad halt in Avalon and enquired if anyone ever heard of a guitar player called Mississippi John Hurt. The reply astounded him; "third mailbox on the right up on the dirt road", said the gas attendant. Sure enough, John Hurt was there doing what he had been doing for most of his life, unaware that people were looking for him. Between 1963 and 1967 when he died, Mississippi John Hurt recorded several albums and became a great hit on records, at concerts and at the



Newport Folk Festivals.

In July 2004 Phil returned to perform a larger set at the festival and to collect material for his book. He was able to interview local residents of Avalon, some of whom still remember John and have provided many anecdotes of his life and times. Phil also spent time around Annapolis, Maryland and Washington DC with his buddy Neil Harpe, a spectacular and talented blues guitarist and fine artist who will be providing the illustrations for the book. They spent time interviewing some of the people who knew John Hurt during the years of his rediscovery in the early 1960s.

Phil is taking a six-month sabbatical in 2005 to concentrate on writing the book. If anyone is interested in talking to Phil about his musical interests or having him perform some songs (just pay his expenses to get to the gig) please contact him at ratcliffe@bosinternet.com.

From the Editor

Many thanks to all those contributors who sat down over Christmas and New Year and sent in stories, news and anecdotes, particularly about their present activities. I have a good reserve of material for future issues, but I can always do with more. Please keep writing in. If you enjoy reading FCA Today, why not contribute?

On another subject, at our Group Christmas Lunch we had a first – even a unique experience. We had 4 ex-DGs at the meal. George Holmes, Gwyn Francis, Robin Cutler and David Bills. As you can imagine, in the theme of "The 12 Days of Christmas" we speculated on the 4. Unkindly someone volunteered "4 DGs a-grumping" – but they all looked bright and perky. In the end we settled for "4 DGs delegating".

Dean FTS Reunion Dinner

Bart Venner organised the ex-students' reunion dinner at Speech House in October 2004.

There were 60 people, more than half were ex-students with wives and partners making up the difference. There were several who hadn't been able to attend the centenary last year so it was good to meet them. There were several cards and letters of good luck. The most interesting meeting was one between Ian Ledgard and David Rice; both Englishmen who retired to Wales living in Llandeilo and didn't realise it until I said to them your postcodes are close and they were about 2 short streets away.

The provisional date this year is 5 November. Contact Bart for more details.

Welcome to Retirement!

Anne Baxter	Edinburgh
Roy Burch	Rugeley
Terance Bexton	Rugeley
William Barber	Brandon
Alan Walker	Castle Douglas
Christine Clark	Bournemouth
Robert Murray	Southampton
Carol Morgan	Southampton
Leslie Starling	ruthin
Jennifer Noel	Farnham
Derek Evans	Lydney
Douglas Archibald	Banchory

AGM 2005...a reminder

This will be at Crieff on 3rd & 4th May.
Details from Group Secretaries.

More on that "Cabin in the Forest"

by Jimmy Mitchell

After publishing "A Cabin in the Forest" in the last issue, sent in by Charlie Mitchell, his brother Jimmy had more to add to the girls' story. Here it is.

I took the photograph of the girls at Durran 'Dump', which was a timber yard by the lochside, where timber was converted into pit props for the coalmines after being towed in rafts across Loch Awe from Inverliever Forest. I worked on this as a young fellow and remember the girls well, but Anne Henderson does tell some fibs and I do not think that life at Cruachan was quite so idyllic as she makes out, and Ian MacKenzie who lived on the opposite side of the loch is slightly annoyed about her saying that they cycled to Portsonachan dances; as they went in his stepfather's hire car and on their return at about three o'clock in the morning, Ian got out of his bed and rowed them back across the loch.

Incidentally, my family had a connection with Cruachan; as earlier than the log cabin, there was a workmen's hostel on the site. This, in the 1920s and 30s, housed forest workers and young newly-trained foresters awaiting a posting. My mother was caretaker and cook there in 1933 and the family shared part of the building; when on Hallowe'en night, with most of the folks from the 'bothy' as it was called, out dressed up guising, the building went on fire and was well alight before anyone knew and so folks had to flee; my young brothers and me in our pyjamas. Almost everything was destroyed and the returning guisers had to stay in their fancy get-up for some time.

One guiser, Jock MacLaren, was just about to get married and had drawn all his money out, ready to go with his future wife and buy goods for their house and this was in his room and burned, but when he phoned his girlfriend and told her about it and that they would have to cancel the wedding, as he did not even have any clothes to wear. She said, "no way, they were getting married as planned", and with all the help that they got from friends and others, they were able to do so. This Jock MacLaren is the person mentioned in a previous article by Stan Forrester, when he said that as a forestry student working in the forest and staying at Durran, he had helped build a bonfire and organise a home-coming for a prisoner of war, and this was a particular celebration, as Jock had been sent to Poland and was out of touch with home for a long time.

Rail Memories...again!

Forest rail has certainly encouraged nostalgia. Martin Fletcher, now retired to Brockenhurst, recalls the noxious days of Thetford!

To add a further recollection the FC rail networks, back in 1966 some of us were unfortunate enough to serve time on the Hot Tank Creosoting Plant at Thetford Chase. This brainchild of the late Donn Small, to utilise and add value to the early pine thinnings from the Chase for FC use and outside sale, required a railway to shift the quarter million or so stakes per annum around the site.

The system was totally manually powered so sensibly the stake blanks were delivered to the highest point on the site, which was near Santon Downham, beside the Brandon/Thetford railway tracks. There was a network of Deckville 2 foot gauge track with four wheel bogies to transport the blanks to the Coles Hurricane peeler, onto the Liner benches for pointing, prior the cross stacking in the drying area. Thence, after a period of some months, to the seven creosoting tanks (the messy part that I was involved in).

The treated stakes from the tank cradles were moved again by rail to the stacking area prior to despatch. Braking systems were as I recollect non-existent or at best a stake point wedged into a wheel.

All that is now gone and the site has PIO CP - I wonder if any of that crop has gone for fencing in its first two thinnings, rather than into pulp and bars!

As a footnote to Martin's recollections, while visiting Kyle Forest in October, the RSFS rendezvoused outside the old sawmill and hot and cold creosote tank. We marvelled at the fact that such a noxious and risky operation could have ever been developed. Just what was it like working under such conditions! Today the HSE would have a field day with an inspection and would instantly close it!

Letters

Stan Forrester of Strathcarron has written in.

"I can also reminisce a little. A Cabin in the Forest was still there in 1945, although not then the abode of the land army girls. A new contingent was housed in Inverliever Lodge, a Victorian shooting lodge. The cabin had been demoted to a wet weather shelter, and was used for the weekly payment of wages. Comparing the photo in FCA Today with the one in my album, I may be imagining that the supervisor then was the lead girl of those we students knew in 1945."

Arnold's Anagrams

Colleagues may recall that when Arnold Grayson had to while away the boring hours waiting at airports, he used to make anagrams of FC staff names.

Here are a few to test you - answers in the next issue. Most have retired, two soldier on!

Hardier duties	Heed joins keenly
RAF bomber	Higher mull
Dig half toffee?	Moist bent
Some logger he	Dad's alive
Touch pet shiner	Get great sower

Knock on the Door

by Bart Venner

At the end of July there was a knock on our back door. When I answered it there stood a person I hadn't seen since the end of July 1956. I had been in contact with him for 2 years about the Dean School centenary but his work and the distance was always going to be a problem.

However, his old boss had died and he had come to Hereford to attend the funeral and on his way back to his daughter's house north of London, he thought he would try and find me. He had left home in a hurry and didn't have my phone number or address but knew where St Briavels was and he still had his tongue. Imagine my surprise to see Peter Sanders standing there all the way from British Columbia!

He was in my senior year at Forestry School and couldn't make the centenary 'do' because of commitments to a Canadian Forestry tour in October 2003. He had promised his wife that he would bring her over to show her the Dean and the old School, however the funeral changed his plans and his wife couldn't get away.

Many people will remember Peter. After leaving the School he took on a post in West Scotland. After about 10 years he felt he wasn't moving very fast in the promotion stakes and joined the Scottish Woodland Owners, still in West Scotland. After some years there a family problem saw him relocated to British Columbia. He divorced his wife and married a Canadian lady to whom he is still married. Retiring from his Canadian post, he now owns a farm with sheep and cattle and hopes to purchase further acres. He moved from a village where the traffic count of about 20 cars a day was too much, his new home is 7 kms from his own postbox! Three hours to the nearest airport and 7 hours to the international airport. He received his FC news and wishes everyone all the best for 2005!

Whitelee: An Oral History of a 20th Century Scottish Forest

As we all know, Britain realised its urgent need for a strategic timber reserve after the ravages of the 1st World War. The 20th century thus became a period of vast tree-planting, when the Forestry Commission bought large areas of hill-land throughout the country and planted them with timber trees. There were enormous impacts upon the local human communities, landscapes and ecology.

In Scotland, such massive effects in rural areas will, in future centuries, be seen as comparable with the degree of change associated with the Clearances or the Agricultural Revolution. But the period and its changes are gradually receding from living memory.

In Wales, an oral history survey (sound recordings of people's memories) of 20th century forestry was carried out in three places during 2002 and 2003. These sound archives are stored for posterity in the National Museum of Wales and in the localities surveyed.

A project is now under way in Scotland to explore the social and landscape history of Whitelee Forest, mainly from oral sources, but also from archives and old maps. Whitelee Forest is situated between the towns of Kilmarnock, Strathaven and Eaglesham, where Ayrshire, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire meet. It is on a huge plateau at about 1000ft altitude, over very deep peat and with rainfall of 60-90 inches each year. It is predominantly Sitka Spruce, but there are also larches and a few areas of hardwoods. Planting of Whitelee Forest started in 1963 and finished in the mid-1990s. Now, harvesting is under way, and Whitelee has recently won an award for the quality of its timber.

Whitelee Forest was chosen for this study, because there is still population stability in the area, with comparatively little inward or outward migration of people. Families live close, remaining in the general area all their lives. There are many people of great age and people who remember the beginning of this Forest in 1963 and its later development. We wish to record memories of this Forest. However, we are also interested in the Forest now and in the future, and hope to meet a variety of people who have views about the future of Whitelee Forest - for recreation, wildlife, timber, education or a wind farm, perhaps?

In the first six months, we have been organising the project, explaining its aims locally, and meeting with people who are interested in participating. We have had discussions with, for instance: *farmers who sold land to the FC, naturalists, kids who swam or fished in the burns while it was still muir, forestry contractors, shooting tenants, local historians, people who remember the annual pilgrimage to the 'Gulls' Hags' to collect basket-loads of eggs for the bakers and food, people who lodged forestry workers...*

We shall be ready soon to record these local residents and store their memories on CD and as paper transcripts, for posterity. These archives will be stored in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, in St Andrews University, and somewhere local to Whitelee Forest. Of course all this work is carried out with due regard to ethics, copyright and the wishes of participants. So people who contribute their memories will be able to check the transcripts and alter anything they wish before they are finalised. Contributors will also have the final say in the future use of their archives..

However, retired Forestry Commission staff also a very important part of this oral history study of Whitelee Forest!

We invite you to participate!

Your memories are very important to us! You might have been a member of FC staff who:-

Chose the site of Whitelee Forest
Costed the programme
Negotiated with landowners for land-sales
Surveyed the muir before planting
Assessed potential markets
Decided which species to plant
Ploughed and drained the ex-farmland
Planted trees at Whitelee Forest
Determined the silvicultural techniques
Dealt with public relations
Bought the tree seedlings
Transported seedlings to site
Fixed the shooting-rents
Bought the machinery
Bought the land for the FC
Hired the squad and contractors
Flew the helicopter which dropped fertiliser
Sold thinnings
Dealt with poachers
Drove the squad to work daily
Managed the daily/weekly work routine
Gave advice on diseases, silviculture etc
Ran the relevant Conservancy
Laid out the planting pattern
Controlled pests
Culled deer
Did the books and wages

If you would like to participate, please contact either of us involved in this project, and we will give you more information and discuss with you an agreeable way forward.

We are: Ruth Tittensor, who runs the Countryside Management Consultancy. Ruth can be contacted at: 'Faenol', 6 East Donington Street, Darvel, Ayrshire KA 17 0JR Tel: 01560 320543, email ruth@johnwalters.com

Professor Chris Smout who is Historiographer Royal in Scotland and can be contacted on: 01333 310330, email tcs1@st-andrews.ac.uk If you are a Scots speaker, and would like to be recorded in the Mother Tongue, Pauline Cairns of Scottish Language Dictionaries is available for this.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Notification of Deaths

Readers will know that the FCA has been unable to publish names of deceased over the last 2 years. I have finally received confirmation from Personnel that this will no longer be possible. Ed Gunkel from Personnel gives the background.

"Until about 2 years ago when Paymaster ceased to be the payroll provider of government pensions we regularly received details from them of pensioner deaths that we need for personnel management purposes.

However on completion of the data transfer from Paymaster to the new payroll provider (Capita Hartshead) it was found that the transferred records did not include a 'marker' that specifically identified FC pensioners and therefore Capita were not able to resume the notification service to us. After nearly 18 months of record retrieval Capita have in the past few weeks compiled a list that identifies, with a few exceptions, all FC pensioners and dependent survivors. Included are those who have died in recent years but without dates of death.

Although I personally was uneasy with the situation, while we were in receipt of the information from Paymaster it had been agreed that these details could also be provided to the Retirement Association for sharing with your members principally through the Slasher distribution.

As Capita are now in a position to resume the service to Human Resources, I felt it right to seek the view of our Director as to the appropriateness of forwarding these details to the Association. Although it is well appreciated that this information is of some interest to your members and that it also allows you the opportunity to compile obituaries for inclusion in your newsletters, fundamentally the information being provided to Human Resources is of a restricted nature and we have no authority to disclose it to others outside the Silvan House human resources function where we require it as part of our business needs. We never convey this information to any other part of the organisation and to continue with our previous arrangement is considered as not being appropriate. Regrettably I therefore have to advise that we shall not be resuming this service to the Retirement Association."

As I no longer know of members' deaths, I cannot seek obituaries. I shall have to leave this to local contributors, relatives, friends and colleagues. So if you are aware of the death of any member and wish to write a short appreciation, please send it to me.

OBITUARIES

Mike Whitlock recalls **JOHN PARKER** who died in November after a short illness and at the relatively early age of 58. This came as a great shock and loss to his many friends and colleagues.

On arrival at the Alice Holt Research Station he joined Pathology Branch. His main research project was on beech bark disease for which he gained his doctorate. He also spent a few years in Zambia working on tree diseases.

A complete change of career occurred when he took over the post of Research Communications Officer. This eventually involved responsibility for publications, the library, photography and graphic art.

John retired early from the FC but he was active in many fields, especially church connected ones. His experience in publications led him to the part-time job as editor of a national magazine for the Methodist Church.

As soon as he retired he joined the FC Association and took part in the activities of the Alice Holt group. When a minute secretary was required, John volunteered to take on this task, adding to the many other positions he fulfilled. He maintained his interest in botanical matters, attending a conference in Poland shortly before becoming ill.

John Parker was a "laid back" person and rarely ruffled by circumstances. He performed his responsibilities in a quiet, unassuming manner. As one of his former members of staff said to me "he was a kind and considerate boss". What more can be said.

Jim Dewar also said that he had close dealings with John in the aftermath of the 1987 storm when the FC was putting out advice to woodland owners. John was then the FC's Publications Officer and was most efficient in correcting and turning round proofs to ensure publication to very tight deadlines.

John Martin and John Keenleyside have told me about **BILL FALCONER** who died in November. He was born in Forres and on completion of his education he went as an apprentice with a local engineering firm who dealt with everything from agricultural machinery to distillery installation and work on docks and harbours. He was an original thinker and came up with solutions to mechanical problems on his own. As an apprentice his nickname was Solo – some people thought he earned that title through his ability to work alone, others though it was derived from Solomon. After completing his training he spent some time overseas in the forces, which included the Chindits in Burma.

He was recruited to a foreman post at the Central Engineering Workshop Chapelhall in the late 60s. The Workshop, originally located at Blair Atholl, had been closed and the staff relocated to Chapelhall (near Airdrie) in 1966.

A hoped for promotion to Workshop Manager failed to materialise and Bill left the FC for a year or so but returned to Chapelhall as manager when the post again became vacant.

This was an intensely busy time at the Central Workshop and Bill's experience and talents were put to good use developing and building a variety of machine types for use in the FC. These included the Chapelhall Cable Crane for extracting timber on steep ground and the modification of bulldozers to enable them to be used as specialist ploughing tractors either on steep ground or deep peat.

In addition there was an ongoing programme of overhauls on the wide range of Civil Engineering machines in use at the time.

Bill had a dry sense of humour and to some of the workshop staff he could appear to be more than a little intimidating.

One famous story from his Chapelhall days relates to a rather nervous member of staff who believed he was on the wrong pay scale for the work he was doing. His fellow workers encouraged him to go and confront Bill in his office and to state his case for a pay rise.

He knocked on the office door and entered after a gruff "come in" from Bill. The man explained that he believed he was doing the work of two and was entitled to a pay rise. Without lifting his head Bill instructed him to send in the other man and he would sack him.

In 1974 Bill was promoted to Conservancy Mechanical Engineer for East Scotland, based in Aberdeen.

He remained here until the 1985 reorganisation closed the Aberdeen office and he reluctantly took early retirement at the age of 64, returning to his native Forres. He was an enthusiastic gardener and his place was neat and tidy with a range of flowers giving lots of colour. He was a keen supporter of the FCA and attended many meetings. The funeral service was conducted by his sister and many former FC colleagues attended.

John Thomas and Jock Low remembered **BERNARD HUGHES** who died in July. He joined the Forestry Commission in 1950 after qualifying at Bangor University. Bernard served in Wales initially, 3 years at Shrewsbury and 6 years at Llandrinod Wells. He then served in Bodmin and Thetford and Brandon where he was District Officer for about 5 years. He then moved to Cambridge as Divisional Officer and then to Bristol where he stayed until he retired in 1980. On retirement he moved to Falmouth in his beloved Cornwall. He acquired a boat and sailed and fished. He established the first Citizens Advice Bureau in Falmouth of which he was very proud and became its manager. In 1992 he moved to Wellington with his wife Olive to be near their children.

John also mentions **FALI NADIRSHAH** who joined the FC at the Bristol office as Clerical Officer in 1970. He died in June aged 80 and is survived by his widow Rophan.

Barry Griggs has written in about **HYWEL THOMAS** who died just before Christmas. He was born close to Betws-y-Coed in Snowdonia of a Welsh father and an English mother from Suffolk.

He started work with the FC at 15 in local forests and apart from National Service in the RAF remained with the FC throughout his working life.

While visiting his mother's relatives in Suffolk he met and subsequently married Barbara in 1952 and they set up home in Pentrefoelas.

Following subsequent visits to relatives in Suffolk they decided they liked East Anglia well enough to move. Hywel was transferred to Brandon Central Depot and an FC cottage between Munford and West Tofts was provided for them and their 3 daughters in 1967.

He remained there as a valued member of the pitwood production team until he was retired at age 61 when the Depot was closed in May 1988 due to the rapid rundown of the coal mining industry.

"Taff" as he was inevitably known, being the only Welshman in the Depot to my knowledge, was a quiet dependable man who had no regrets leaving Wales. He enjoyed his work at the Depot, but Barbara remembers well having to massage his shoulders and arms to ease the effects of handling heavy props and splits all day!

This got Barry thinking about the accumulated weights these men shifted. He considered it was about 30 tonnes per day and at 200 d/yr over, say 15 years, this worked out 90,000 tonnes a lifetime! All this weight on one body – what we asked men to do.

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Check with contacts for exact area covered.

