

THE HISTORY OF RIDDOCHS TIMBER MERCHANTS

George Riddoch the grandfather of the brothers who ran the business from the 1930s onwards established Riddochs in 1841 he lived at Burnside Rothiemay and the Company was called George Riddoch & Son. The first sawmill was sited at Millegan and it was powered by water from the Shiel burn. The son, also named George left school at 13 years and succeeded his father and over the next years the business success was such the he was able to purchase Tarryblake Estate from the Duke of Fife in 1893 and built Tarryblake House the following year.

This business continued quite successfully according to an old ledger dated 1880 to 1891.

At that time they were supplying many different products including fencing material and all bits and pieces of timber that the local farmers required (Plough handles, egg boxes, yokes and swingletrees, cart frames, filloes and spokes for cart wheels). The company were also supplying large quantities of barrel heading and staves for the extensive North East fishing trade and Railway sleepers. Most of the coastal villages had a busy fishing fleet. There were many boatbuilding yards in the Northeast and these were supplied with their boatbuilding material. Telegraph poles and railway sleepers for the local railways. They were also supplying mining timber through commission agents as in those days all the mines were privately owned.

After World War 1 George Riddoch's sons Alex Garrow and Willie Joseph took over the tenancy of the farm at Mains of Mayen along with the timber business but at that time agriculture was not in a good way again so they gave up that side of the business and concentrated on the sawmilling side this was during 1931.

The company was renamed A.G. & W.J. Riddoch Timber Merchants of Rothiemay and their office was at White Cottage on the Tarryblake Estate.

Brother Wyness David joined the company in 1938.

The old ledger dated 1888/1891 which shows the type of business Riddochs were supplying the products were many and varied. The list includes barrel heading and staves for the very busy fishing industry, larch posts, sheep stakes and rails for the farmers, telegraph poles and railway sleepers also quite a quantity of mining timber sold through commission agents for the different mine owners this was before the advent of the National Coal Board.

This ledger also gives an interesting insight to who was farming mostly in the Grange and Rothiemay areas.

From this time onwards information appears to be unavailable as many of Riddoch records were uplifted from Reidhaven Street Elgin by Scottish Archives in 1985 after the company went bankrupt

It was on the 31st of January 1953 the Northeast of Scotland had most of the forests flattened by gale force winds, this was when the Timber Merchants expanded their operations to undertake the clearing of the fallen trees and this was when A.G. & W.J. Riddoch increased their sawmill production to include most of the North East of Scotland

The Government of the day put pressure on the National Coal Board to accept home grown mining timber by Collieries who previously only used imported timber. There was also assistance given to the Timber Merchants for transport costs to allow timber to be sent to collieries in England this was for rail transport only

The mining timber sizes were many and varied and in 1953 the production of mining timber was:

Round Pit Props	2 1/2ins dia.	x 2ft, 2ft 6ins and 3ft lengths
	3ins	x 3ft, 3ft 6ins and 4ft
	3 1/2ins	x 3ft 6ins, 4ft and 4ft 6ins
	4ins	x 4ft, 4ft 6ins 5ft and 6ft
	5ins	x 5ft and 6ft

Sawn Mining Timber

Pillarwood	2" x 2"	x 2ft lengths
	3" x 3"	x 3ft

Pillarwood had to be square and in bundles

Pit Sleepers	5" x 2 1/2"	x 3ft and 3ft 6"
	6" x 3"	x 3, and 3ft 6"

Pit Sleepers had to be 1/2" better than half face

Crowns	4" x 2"	x 3ft 6", 4ft, 4ft 6", 5ft and 6ft
	5" x 2 1/2"	x 4ft, 4ft 6", 5ft and 6ft
	6" x 3"	x 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 ft lengths

The crowns were acceptable with only half face

Baulks	7" x 3 1/2"	x 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 12ft lengths
	8" x 4"	x ditto

Baulks half face

Mine Car Sleepers	8" x 4"	x 3ft 6", 4ft, 4ft 6" and 5ft
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1" wane on either edge.

Chocks	4" x 4"	x 1ft 6" and 2ft
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5" x 5"	x Ditto
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6" x 6"	x Ditto
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Chocks had to be fully square.

Coverboards	4/8"	x 11/2 / 1 1/4 ins	x 5 and 5ft
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Riddoch's at this time were selling all of their mining timber through Commission Agents and as the volume of timber available was now much greater this was now quite expensive so it was decided to sell direct. The Agents were not very happy about this and did their best to get the Coal Board to ignore our offers eventually we broke into this market. The selling of mining timber was a complicated business as the Coal Board were split into 8 purchasing areas in Scotland in Scotland and 4 areas in England and each of the areas had their own Purchasing Manager who was responsible for purchasing the timber requirements for the Collieries under their control.

The pricing structure for mining timber was agreed between the National Coal Board and the Home Grown Timber Merchants of Scotland. This was a body set up to obtain the best prices and to stop undercutting the prices. This arrangement worked quite well but did not take into account the volume of timber allocated to each merchant and only by attention to deliveries and the supply of reasonable quality timber were we able to obtain a major share of orders. In 50s and 60s Riddochs value of sales were in the region of three quarters of £1,000,000 per year and this increased to £1,000,000 during the 1970s

The Coal Board changed their methods of purchasing and tendering for the supply of mining timber. They centralised their purchasing departments to two offices the Scottish office being in Edinburgh and the English office in Doncaster.

All suppliers were now on their own, each timber merchant being responsible for setting their own prices and one of the stipulations was no collusion between suppliers so life became much more competitive. Tender prices had to be justified by providing a summary of our costs.

When I joined Riddochs in 1953 production methods were primitive to say the least. The clearing up of the of the blown timber was still a long way from being completed this was a slow job when one remembers that most of felling was done by crosscut saws, mechanisation was just beginning, the advent of power saws had just began. The company provided the saws and the felling contractors paid a hire purchase fortnightly. At the same time we had 18 horses on our books and they were gradually replaced with tractors and winches and in most cases we supplied the finance for these changes. The wages paid were a price per tree for both cutters and extractors paid fortnightly. Most of these workers lived in bothies close to their work it is possible that the Department of the Environment of today might not have approved of these living conditions, no water, no central heating and worst of all no toilet facilities but that was life at that time the only consolation being plenty of firewood to heat the bothies.

The Company had at this time permanent sawmills at Strathdon, Markethill Turriff, Boghead at Fochabers, Glassgreen at Elgin and Stoneyford at Forres these mills were powered either by oil or steam. The steam engines used the slabwood from the mill a fireman was employed. It was decided at this time because of the urgency to clear up the fallen trees that Riddochs would build with the help of Reid engineers at Forres portable mills for use in the various forests and by the end of 1953 about 20 of these mills were producing on average 100 Tons of fencing and mining timber each per month.

The portable mills were manned by a sawmiller with 1 or 2 labourers and again were employed on a contract basis. The production stock was counted every 4 weeks in pieces and calculated on volume. The volume at this time was cubic feet and the sawmiller was paid on so much per cubic foot depending on the size of the product the smaller the size the higher the price because of the extra handling. The workers were paid fortnightly and after the deductions for the labourers the sawmiller got the balance and on the whole good sawmillers were quite well paid although the millers would have disputed that.

All our south deliveries were done by haulage contractors whose lorries were only carrying about 8 tons and as most of the transporters had only "O" contract licences they were not allowed to carry return loads it was beginning to be an expensive affair the company began to look for more central sites. It was taking almost a whole day to gather a load from 2 or 3 different little mills.

Stays were supplied in 7ft lengths x 4ins in diameter underbark

Rick posts (now obsolete) were in 8 and 9ft lengths x 3 and 3 1/2 ins dia and were mostly supplied in spruce.

As good quality larch became scarce and as farmers were not happy with posts sawn from Jap larch it was decided to cut Scots pine into posts and treat with a preservative. The boffins had to come up with a treatment that did not affect animals or crops and they came up with Celcure and Tanalith. A treatment plant was established at Timber Preservation Aberdeen this being a joint effort with other merchants and another plant was installed at Forres with Moray Estates having the main interest. The treatment used was celcure.

It took some persuasion to get farmers to change from the tried and trusted use of larch but eventually the opposition was overcome and now this is standard in the trade. The same applied to rails and other larch products.

From the 1950s until the 1970s the Company had 4 representatives on the road 1 covering the Huntly and Strathdon areas 2 covering the Buchan area 1 covering Elgin and North and the 4th calling on the shipbuilders and joiners. The agents were very successful in collecting formation and sorting out any complaints also collecting any outstanding accounts. The company also rented office space from local marts .

The next unit to be established was on Forestry Commission ground at Kinnoir this mill was 2 double slabber mills along with a resaw and the production was to be mining timber and fencing posts. The mining timber was large volume production, the method being through the double slabbers and split as mining timber sizes were in the main the thickness being half the breadth except for chocks and these were square.

During the 50s and 60s there was a very healthy draining, planting and fencing setup with about 50 staff there being 2 nurseries at Buchrumb near Dufftown and a Heathland nursery at Aberlour There was also a D7 bulldozer, this machine was used for roadmaking in conjunction with the planting the roads being for future use in the extraction of the harvested timber. Large areas were planted on contract for many private estates such as Dochfour Estates north of Inverness, Glenfiddich Estates , Carron Estates near Aberlour, Pityoulish Estate in upper Speyside and many other smaller contracts were undertaken.

Riddochs had themselves quite extensive forestry land as they bought a few estates some being Craigellachie Estate this was ground at Craigellachie and Aberlour.

Buchrumb Estate at Dufftown

Ardmiddle Estate near Turriff

Kildrummy Estate Strathdon

Mayen Estate along with their own estate of Tarryblake.

The estates were purchased and only the woodland and land suitable for trees were retained with the farms sold mostly to the sitting tenants. The mature timber was harvested over the years and all available ground was replanted mostly with Sitka and Norway Spruce with the emphasis on Sitka this being the fastest growing species, Scots Pine, Jap Larch and some Lodgepole Pine on the higher ground. At that time there were huge grants for the purpose of reforestation of suitable ground after World War 2. These operations continued until the grants were reduced during the 1960s.

The buying of standing timber and logs at roadside was a very competitive affair, the Forestry Commission were the main suppliers offering large quantities of both standing and logs at roadside, at one time the timber was mostly thinnings and the offers consisted of Compartment Number detailing number of trees and average volume per tree plus total volume the trees being marked by an axe blaze. It was the prospective buyers responsibility to satisfy themselves that the details given were correct. The volume was in Hoppus Feet this was got from measuring the trees by Quarter Girth Tapes, the girth taken at Breast Height (4ft 3ins) from the base of the tree, the height of the tree was found by a sample felling and used as an average and with the use of a Ready Reckoner the total volume was arrived at. The offer was then completed using our known working costs based on selling price less felling and extraction costs, haulage into mill, sawing and stacking costs, delivery to destination and overheads, also taken into consideration was the type of timber and the markets to which the timber would be sold to. The offers were subject to a closing date and all offers were opened at a given time. In later years the Forestry Commission sold a large volume of their timber by auction.

The products supplied by Riddochs were as follows:

Fencing timber to the local farmers as well as large quantities to the Islands, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles

Mining timber sawn and props to all mining areas in Scotland and England

Hardwood for furniture especially the Scottish Co-op at Shieldhall Glasgow

Boatbuilding timber oak keels and framing and larch boatskin for the local boatbuilders mostly in the Moray Firth area Lossiemouth, Buckie, Macduff and Sandhaven nr Fraserburgh.

Boards and battens to local joiners and boxmakers

Slab deals to the vegetable growers in Lincolnshire

A.G Riddoch had to retire from full time management due to heart problems and died on October 1956. This was when W.D.Riddoch became a partner of the company.

The year 1969 was a disaster for Riddochs as both of the Riddoch Brothers died suddenly Wyness in January and Willie in September and although the company carried on for a short time was then put on to the market and was taken over by a finance company by the name of Development Securities Ltd based in London, this company controls many other firms but none of them are in any way connected with timber. D.S.L. owned by the McAlpine family with Malcolm McAlpine being responsible for Riddochs. Riddochs carried on with great difficulty for the next couple of years as all that the management company wanted was more and more profit. The holding company was taken over by E.M.I. the record people as a going concern only because other firms within the group were of interest to them and as they had no interest in timber Riddochs were in the market once again.

The next purchaser was the Fraser family of Beaulieu

It was decided in 1973 to build a modern sawmill and after quite a lot of research especially in Sweden and Norway the company bought a small croft at Kilmallie on the outskirts of Fort William on the Malaig road at Corpach. The reasons for Kilmallie was the availability of large volumes of standing timber within a reasonable distance and also that there was the Wiggins Teape pulp mill just across the road who would purchase the chips from the offcuts.

The Corpach mill opened with a no expense spared ceremony with all the trimmings and Prince Charles doing the honours. the total costs being in excess of £20,000. The sawmill was the most modern in Europe with all operations under cover with kiln drying facilities, stress grading and planing equipment The mill equipment was expected to produce timber to meet British Standard B.S.4471 as required by the building trade. The mill was expected to cost approximately £7,000,000 and with interest rates high this was to prove an over whelming burden.

The reality was, being a prototype set up, there were a lot of teething troubles and along with an inexperienced work force, production never reached the targets required. The mill produced too much 2nd class material which proved difficult to sell and to make matters worse Wiggins Teape pulp mill across the road ceased production with the result all the chip production had to go to Stirling incurring a much higher haulage cost and a less price per ton. The chips amounted to about 40% of the volume of logs taken into the mill. There was also a problem with the disposal of the bark because at this time there was not the demand for horticultural bark and most of it was dumped within the mill ground taking up much needed storage area. The management at Kilmallie were not experienced in timber production and had difficulties in coping with all the setbacks and it took a long time to get production up to anywhere near acceptable levels.

Riddochs administrative setup started from the small cottage at Tarryblake where the bookkeeping was done manually and the increased staff outgrew the space available it was decided to look for a larger building so arrangements were made to exchange the existing office for the Free Church manse at Mannochhill Just outside Rothiemay as it was the Riddochs wish to stay in Rothiemay. The office workload began to become unmanageable and a company of Office experts were called in and a semi-mechanised system was established under the name of Kalamazoo. This method was a great boon at the time but as time went on and when Kilmallie came on stream requiring stock control this was when the magic age of computers arrived. With the loss of the Riddoch connection the management at the time decided on a move to Elgin this being a more central place to find a new office. There was a large house on the market in Reidhaven Street by the name of Southlands and the building was adjudged suitable for the firm's requirements. The building was furnished with no expense spared. A large capacity computer (Data General) was purchased with a direct line to Kilmallie. This computer required a room to itself with constant temperature this meant expensive cooling fans. A firm of computer experts were engaged to write the programmes and being an open ended contract they made the most of it. The company employed 4 accountants as well as a large office staff and it began to look top heavy in the administration department. The office staff at Elgin consisted of a sales staff of 4, Secretary staff of 3, Computer and general office staff of 5, 1 telephonist and 1 tea lady this summary excluded all managers and directors.

The most important changes that took place in Riddochs since I joined them in 1953 were,

- 1 Metrication
- 2 Decimalisation
- 3 Miners strike (Scargill) 1984/85
- 4 Closing of the branch railway lines (Beeching)
- 5 Closing the small mines (Robbins)

6 V.A.T. introduced in 1973

Although all of the above caused extra work and expense the miner's strike did the most damage to Riddochs, possibly half of our trade was to the Coal Board and as there was no alternative to this specific market all the production especially at Kinnoir was altered and other markets had to be found, this proved difficult most of the production was fencing timber for stock and although the Coal Board did provide much needed cash by buying our mining stock against future delivery the company began to have serious cashflow problems and in the summer of 1985 the Clydesdale Bank had enough and called in the Receivers Grant Thornton of Glasgow headed by Alistair White who carried on the Company as a going concern. The Receivers retained most of the employees and trading continued under strained circumstances as all purchases had to be authorised by the Receivers this conditions continued until November when all the staff were made redundant and the company was sold, the West area including Kilmallie were sold to Smith timber merchant from Kirkoswald and the East section was sold to Generation Securities of London so we were back with the McAlpine Group once again. This setup was never going to work as no finance was available for the necessary modernisation of the old plant and the demand for higher production each month. After a couple of years time things were not working out as expected and the company was again available for sale, this was when James Jones & Sons Larbert purchased Riddochs their long time rivals, this was in 1989. There were a few redundancies but in the main the workforce remained as before. This was the best thing that could have happened especially for the staff as working conditions were improved and machinery modernised and where the mill yards were once a sea of mud they are now mostly hard standing. In 2002 James Jones began to computerise their production and office procedures through their main office at Larbert and the name of Riddochs has now become history.

Riddochs from 1841 to 2002.

The Riddoch family had interests in other parts of the timber industry and in the 50s and 60s:

They had the majority holdings in The Morayshire Sawmills in Elgin.

Major shareholders in William Fiddes Ltd Boxmakers of Torry Aberdeen.

Interests in Timber Preservation Ltd Craiginchies Aberdeen