

My Career in Forestry – Summary of my 42 Years.

I left school aged sixteen and gained practical forestry experience at Delamere and Thornthwaite Forests before enrolling at the Gwydyr Forester Training School in North Wales in 1950. My first posting was to join the Northern Sample Plot Party under Alex McKenzie in Edinburgh. Our main work here was the setting up of one-tenth acre plots in young plantations of fifteen to twenty year old trees, and recording their growth over three years in order to establish a quality class. We were also involved in measuring the amount of damage caused by the 1953 windblow in East Scotland and the ten year tree census.

On getting married in 1954, I was posted up to Culbin Forest under the watchful eye of Chief Forester Willie Milne. Culbin Forest was the first forest in Scotland to have a radio communication installed and I took a great interest in its development and maintenance. In 1959 I was on the move again, this time to the great Kielder Forest to serve under Chief Forester Tom Fox at the Mounces Beat. Planting was still going on here and together with thinning operations.

1963 saw me on the move again, this time to Glentworth under Chief Forester Alex McCrae. Here there were large planting and hand draining programmes ongoing, and my job was to allocate work to different squads and measure their work, because they were all on piecework rates.

It was whilst at Glentworth that a job with the newly formed Radio and Electronic Branch was advertised, and I applied for it along with other candidates. We were invited down to SW(E) Conservancy in Bristol to be interviewed by the Conservator, Charles Connell and Bob Linder, who had been a Head Forester at Clashindarroch Forest in East Scotland, and was an amateur radio enthusiast, who Mr Connell had already appointed to establish the unit. I was offered the job and that was the end of my sojourn at Glentworth.

I had to establish a base which was central to the area which I had been given, which was in effect, all points north from North Yorkshire across to the Lake District, and the whole of Scotland. I finally established my first workshop at Inver, just outside Dunkeld in 1969/70. From then on it was a huge workload to buy test equipment, tools, a vehicle, organise surveys, advise Conservancies on suitable radio installations, purchase radio equipment, and maintain equipment after it was installed. I also enrolled at Dundee Technical College for radio technology classes for two evenings a week for two years. As the radio schemes expanded, so did the need for extra staff to install and maintain the systems, so two additional radio workshops were established, one at Smithton, Inverness and one at Mabie Forest in South Scotland. Each workshop was manned by two radio technicians, not from the forester grades, but fully trained electronic technicians who had been working previously with the emergency services, ie police and fire and rescue services. Each technician had a vehicle, normally SHERPA vans at that time, fitted out as a mobile workshops with power tools, an electricity generator and all necessary test equipment and spare parts for the many different types of radio equipment in use.

Eventually Charles Connell relinquished his control of the REB, whether or not it was due to his retirement, I don't know, but the Branch became the responsibility of the Chief Mechanical Engineer, Mr Roger Hay, stationed at FC Headquarters in Edinburgh. A further appointment was made by recruiting an electronics engineer to oversee the day-to-day organisation of the Branch, and to advise Roger Hay on its future development. His name was Dave Blandford, who opted not to have his office in Edinburgh, but to set up next to mine at Inver. This was advantageous to me because I then became involved in policy decisions and meetings with major equipment suppliers to identify which equipment best suited the FC requirements, and to broker deals for the best prices.

As all the major forest areas were now provided with radio communications, work became more routine for the out-stationed technicians, dealing with breakdowns and attending forest fires to deal with any communication problems that might arise. If a fire broke out in an area which was a communications blackspot, they had to set up some sort of local radio coverage to relay messages back to the control centre, and very often the Fire and Rescue Service had to rely on FC communications to get messages back to their control centre.

The REB were pioneers in the use of using photovoltaic cells (solar panels) to provide power for radio stations on remote hill tops, instead of diesel generators. We also devised a system for pinpointing items of interest on a landscape relief model of part of Thornthwaite Forest in the Lake District for the visitor centre at Whinlatter Pass. We did this by using fibre optics connected to a push button control panel, so that when a particular button was pressed, a pinpoint of light would appear at the point of interest selected on the relief model. A similar system was supplied to a diorama exhibit at the visitor centre at Dalby Forest in Yorkshire.

We were also involved with agricultural shows including the Royal Highland Agricultural Shows at Ingleston, both with setting up exhibits and providing local communication systems. Such was the variety of work that came the way of the REB, such as using vehicle traffic counters to control gates in deer fences, to concealing end-fed dipole aerials inside plastic flagpoles for environmental purposes outside forest offices, work was never dull. But retirement was fast approaching, and I was winding down from what had been at times a very hectic workload, but I consider myself very lucky to have had so many lucky breaks and to have been able to take advantage of them. I was able to take early retirement by retiring one year early in 1989.

Memories of Kielder

My first introduction to Kielder Forest was in 1959 when I was transferred from Culbin Forest in Morayshire. My wife and I and our two children were allocated a house in Booterhaugh, at 1 Southend, a well-built house with a front-to-back living room, a kitchen-cum-dining room, a utility room and a coal store all on the ground floor, with a bathroom and three bedrooms upstairs. Unfortunately the house was in rather a dirty condition and although the Estates Branch would not put decorators in, they did pay for forty-one rolls of wallpaper and paint for me to do the work myself!

There were just two shops, a drapery/haberdashery shop based in a room of a house in Butteryhaugh, and a post office, also based in a room of a house, in Castle Drive. Mobile grocery vans provided provisions coming up from Falstone, the nearest village down the North Tyne valley, the main van being that of Andy Fletcher, on a twice weekly basis, who supplied not only food products but odd items such as shoe laces etc or anything else you might need. A limited public bus service provided transport down to Falstone and further down the valley to Bellingham and on to Hexham, from where there was public transport to Newcastle and beyond. There had once been a train service linking Newcastle to Carlisle via the North Tyne valley, provided by the Borders County Railway which linked up with the Border Union Railway at Riccarton Junction in the Scottish Borders. This railway linked Edinburgh with Carlisle. The Border Counties Railway was closed in 1956. However, it was possible to have a day visit to Carlisle using the local bus service to Steele Road Station, on the Border Union Railway in the Scottish Borders, to catch the train to Carlisle.

Some other recollections of my time at Kielder, whilst I was working at Mounces Beat, was that there was a very good community spirit, and on May Day, or the nearest Saturday to it, there was a gala day, with sports for the children and even a dance around a Maypole. In the lower half of the village that is Butteryhaugh, there was a wooden hall which acted as a Community Centre and another wooden hut which was a Catholic Church. The Church of Scotland was on the main road at Castle Drive.

The primary school was situated down below the viaduct, about one and one half miles from Butteryhaugh. The headmaster was a Mr Brown and Mrs Hope was the only other teacher. The new school was built on land next to where the Community Centre hut stood at Butteryhaugh, opening in the summer of 1969 when we left to go to Glentroot Forest in South Scotland.

The Community Centre hut was for the whole village, with dances, film shows, whist drives and evening classes in various subjects during the winter. I became involved with operating the film projector. I remember at one time I had changed a reel of film and went back into the hall from the projector room, to watch the film. When the film had finished I went back into the projector room to rewind the film, only to find that the film had not been fastened properly to the take-up reel, and that there were hundreds of feet of film lying in a heap on the floor. It took a while to rewind it but I managed it without doing any damage.

The then headmaster of the Primary School, a Mr Brown, asked my wife and I, if we would consider starting up a basket weaving class because he had seen a magazine rack in our house, which we had made from a basket weaving kit. Neither of us had ever taken an evening class before, but we agreed and so began what was to become a steep learning curve for us. Surprisingly, the class was well supported and we were paid for doing it by the Educational Department of the Northumberland County Council.