



Jason (left) with his team.

Hedging their Bets

Jason Turner and his crew will turn their hand to anything from clearfells to hedge laying

When Jason Turner delivers logs to one of his customers – an old lady – the routine never varies. He'll take the logs in a big, white sack into the house and then, of all places, into the bathroom. There he'll gently empty them onto a blanket on the lino floor. Then the old lady will carefully stack them, not on the floor, but on the bathroom's bookshelves.

"We've been doing it for years and it's always the same," said Jason.

He explained, "Nowadays there's an increasing demand for logs – maybe because the price of oil went up so much. We sell loose loads and large sacks which we carry in and tip them out where required. A lot of houses don't have places like a driveway where logs can be tipped, so often they go in sheds, under stairs or in the bathroom."

Jason first started delivering logs when he worked on a farm and needed to pay his way through college. Now, he runs a business which has five full-time staff plus himself, with two subcontractors on a regular basis and another worker who does a couple of days each week.

And, where once it was just logs, it's now quite normal to get jobs felling hundreds of tons of timber or planting up to ten kilometres of hedge-



The 40-ton splitter.

row, or simply altering Ordnance Survey maps because of the extent of his tree planting.

And it's the planting that's his passion. He explained, "It's very satisfying and you're putting back native plants into the countryside. We can change the colour of a map where we've planted. A lot of those hedges were grubbed out in the sixties and there were grants to help people do it. Now we have government grants to put them back in."

The hedge planting is often followed after seven to ten years by laying the hedges. The firm does nearly three kilometres a year and all the staff are trained to lay, which keeps a traditional skill alive and in the public eye.

But, growing trees is not without its problems. Jason said, "I think we need more education about planting and maintenance. What we want for the future is to produce good quality timber – tall, straight stems that will be usable in construction rather than just going for firewood or just left for conservation. We've got thousands of acres of woodland that are under-managed and there's no point at all in importing timber. This affects the balance of payments and gives us things like ash dieback, which we've now got quite near us."

Jason's hope is that the older ash will survive, but he's convinced now that we need a substitute species.

He explained, "Here, we're mainly on chalk soils, which aren't ideal for conifers and there's no point in planting beech if you don't have squirrel control. I am a Confor member and they are running a training day in squirrel control which I will be attending. Landowners need to cooperate to control forestry pests such as squirrels and deer. We also need to plant in tighter spaces rather than the usual three metres by three metres spacing. It needs to be taken down to two-and-a-half or maybe even two metres so that you get lateral shade and encourage vertical growth. And you need to make sure you don't have problems with old man's beard, for example. That just covers everything and strangles it."

One current job is typical – looking after a plantation of 15,000 trees that the firm planted last winter on an estate. For at least three years after planting the base of the tree has to be sprayed with herbicide to reduce weed competition. The trees also need regular checking to make sure the stakes are solid and the tubes are firmly in contact with the ground. Jason explained, "We have to have weed control because if the grass gets long it is an ideal habitat for mice and voles. These rodents nest in the tubes and ring bark the young trees. With a combination of herbicide and mowing, natural predators can get at them and control the population. The voles are a nuisance because you don't want to see a tree that's got to six or seven years old and then find they've ring barked it and killed it. So the

control needs to go on until you've got canopy cover and the grass gets killed by the shade from the trees. Luckily, now we've got an increased number of birds of prey on site, so if we keep the grass down they can see what's going on. It's short term control for a long term benefit.

"Effective care needs to be focused on nationally. There are so many places where that isn't done and the future potential of a crop is lost."

But the care isn't just for new plantings. Jason's now using woodchips to increase the lifespan of veteran trees in parkland. Once the grass is killed by spraying with a herbicide, the chips are used to mulch the whole drip zone; so what was once waste from tree surgery jobs and site clearance has now become a product used to enhance ground conditions and improve the trees' longevity.

Jason is on the Policy Committee of the Forestry Contracting Association. He made a move onto the committee to help other contractors after chairman Donald Maclean had helped him to recover a debt.

He recalled, "It was a great help, and often, with a few phone calls to other members, you can sort out things like getting a quote right. It's a very useful outfit."

What does worry him, however, is the lack of youngsters coming into the business, particularly with regard to forestry. He got into the timber industry after taking a ten week 'tree surgery for craftsmen' course as part of an apprenticeship programme. The course was at Merrist Wood College in 1992 and this proved to be an enjoyable and life changing time – his father standing in for him during his absences to continue the modest income from the log deliveries. Then came his degree at Harper Adams College, now a university.

At first, like so many others, Jason took up tree surgery because he simply couldn't afford the cost of the machinery needed to practise as a forestry contractor. He said, "It was just too expensive to go from a standing start into timber harvesting, but I'd always wanted to be self employed, so it was just tree surgery at first."

He had help from a local charity to buy his first climbing saw and then got his first tractor courtesy of a low cost loan from the Prince's Trust. A farm trailer was purchased and timber was loaded by hand and extracted to roadside. After a short while he was able to take on an apprentice, which is something he still continues to do.

But where will the foresters of the future come from? He observed: "All the training now seems to be geared towards tree surgery, which means that we have a huge number of tree surgeons but hardly anybody going into forestry. It's the greatest danger we face – this shortage of people coming in. Just think, when the old and the bold eventually stop working, we just won't have the people with the skills we need to carry on. It's a serious problem."

The proposed apprenticeship scheme is particularly favoured towards tree surgery over forestry. The tree surgery route will have the potential for an apprentice to finish with eleven certificates. The poor forester will potentially only be able to get four.

Over the years the firm – again like so many others – has acquired more



All Jason's staff are trained in laying hedges. (Right) Work progressing on this hedge, which is being ethered (intertwined).



The Heizohack HM 4-300 is usually mounted on the Ford.

and more machinery. The workhorse is the Valtra 6400 with a Botex 11 ton trailer that sports a crane and this is the main tool for extraction. There's a Posch S-350 firewood processor which can handle timber up to 15" in diameter, and if the wood's bigger, then it's split into billets with a 2.5 metre, 40 ton splitter. There's also a tractor-mounted HM 4-300 Heizohack chipper which is usually on the Ford loader tractor. Then there is a Holder A60 which is used for low ground pressure mowing and timber winching. A Massey loader tractor powers the firewood processor via a PTO shaft turning at 1,000rpm to keep down fuel consumption. There are timber and brushwood grabs for handling material with the loader, and finally the baby of them all – a narrow access chipper for the back garden tree surgery jobs.

For saws Jason relies on Husqvarna and Stihl. The main saws are the 560XPG Husqvarnas which were a little unreliable until he switched to the Husqvarna's LS two-stroke oil. "That gave us much better performance and reliability even though it was more expensive," said Jason.

He added, "The problem is that so often when you're on a job, the client will say, 'Can you just do this as well?' but if you haven't got a diverse range of equipment then potentially you could lose the work to a firm that is better equipped. In some cases the machinery isn't fully utilised, but it will last longer."

Keeping any equipment secure and well maintained is a constant worry.

Jason explained, "We had a break-in last year, so now we have to lock and lock and lock. We're constantly thinking about security. We've also lost diesel from our yard and from site."

For Jason, stealing the tools of a man's trade is a serious problem. He argues that proof of ownership should be traceable rather than anyone saying 'I bought it from a fellow in the pub'. He said, "If someone takes in a saw for servicing or repairs, the serial number should be checked against a list of those that have been stolen. If the owner can't prove ownership, it could be returned to the last registered owner."

Jason also has a word of warning for those contractors who end up working in or near water. Shortly after he went self employed he was cutting coppice and trees out of a ditch and ended up contracting Weil's disease – spread by rat urine. He recalled, "I was ill for two years and really couldn't do much; and it still comes back and you feel exhausted. So it's not just the bad backs and hernias we get – there's also this that we're exposed to all the time."

Every job is different and this summer Jason will be taking out 600 tons of grand fir which will be milled for timber, plus 200 tons of poplar which will probably go for biomass.

Meanwhile, if anyone would like to discuss joining the FCA, then Jason is available via email at j.turnerforestry@btinternet.com.

Graham Mole