



The fall and rise of small sawmills

As awareness of sustainable consumption rises, so too do small sawmills, as Nick Marshall reports.

It is great to see some good news and even better when it relates to an aspect of a vision set out in the early days of Reforesting Scotland. In 1989, the year that Reforesting Scotland came to be, the Scottish Green Party published a *Rural Manifesto for the Highlands and Islands*. Within was a cartoon illustrating an idealised green, self-reliant village showing (among much else) people growing trees and using the wood to build things. Maybe some of that cartoon and the vision it illustrates is coming to pass.

In economic terms, sawmills are like a keystone species in an ecosystem. They are not a big part of the economy but you cannot have a forest industry without them. And without a forest and timber industry, many landowners will not look after their forests, preferring instead to convert them to sheep grazing or some other more profitable pursuit. It is well known that early in the 20th century, Britain's forest cover

had declined to less than ten per cent. This led to the establishment of the Forestry Commission and the massive expansion of forested land since then—for better and worse depending on where and what type of forest it was.

What is less well known about is the decline of employment in the timber industry in Scotland, mainly during the second half of the 20th century, as small and estate sawmills closed down. The milling and timber processing industry became concentrated in a few large mills in places with good access to forests in Scotland and to ports for the import of logs from overseas and export of finished products. Timber is now an international commodity and Britain is a small player, with its industry controlled by the vagaries of the international markets. Mechanisation and centralised factories required far fewer workers to produce vastly more timber products, and forest industry employment in Scotland fell until the turn of the 21st century. The decline of the homegrown hardwood industry

was particularly extreme, and reached a low point in the 1980s when the Thatcher Government closed down most of the deep coal mines and eliminated demand for pit-props—the key market for the remaining hardwood sawmills in Scotland. That was almost the end of the Scottish hardwood sawmilling industry.

Sustainable growth

But this crisis was also an opportunity. New technologies meant that small-scale and especially mobile sawmills were now affordable, and during the 1980s many micro-business sawmills were established. I helped to set up one of the first, using a Trekkasaw mobile sawmill. The process accelerated with the introduction of Woodmizer saws, which could be set up and operated by a single person. At the same time, while many of the larger furniture manufacturers were going out of business or focusing on bulk production of basic furniture, there was a resurgence of craft furniture-making, given prominence by the likes of Tim Stead, who used the

Above: Chainsaw milling. Photo: Nick Marshall.

variable quality and interesting character of Scottish hardwoods to create innovative organic pieces of furniture. These furniture makers used only tiny amounts of wood, but they helped create a public profile of Scottish hardwood in a way that the industrial sawmills never could.

Today there are some two to three hundred small sawmills across Scotland, up to 100 of which focus on hardwoods. They are owned by estates, community groups and social enterprises, but most small sawmills are private businesses. Small sawmills tend to be in or near to villages and they saw timber sourced mainly from within a 50-mile radius, selling predominantly to furniture makers, builders, DIYers and other small customers in Scotland. Every year about 20 new sawmill businesses are set up and very few go out of business. An often-quoted figure is that 80 per cent of new businesses fail within the first two years—that figure is less than eight per cent for these small sawmills. And as awareness of the environmental and human impacts of the international timber trade rises, the future is bright with the demand for homegrown hardwood and premium softwood (such as larch and Douglas fir) products increasing.

The Scottish Government is committed to helping to create jobs and build vibrant local economies in rural Scotland and small sawmills are a crucial part of this vision. They produce timber for local construction and renovation projects, small-scale furniture and craft industries as well as for farming and other local businesses. They create a demand for quality timber from local forests, which feeds back into better small-scale forest management bringing biodiversity and tourism benefits as well as creating further employment.

Anecdotally, it seems that Covid-19 has had a positive impact on ASHS members, who have been working flat out to provide for the demands of building trades and an increase in DIY and home renovations during the pandemic. Furniture makers have

Above, top to bottom: Structural beams made from homegrown timber; A Woodmizer with stickered woodstack for the kiln. Photos: Nick Marshall.

had a more mixed experience, with some unable to go into the workshop or allow access to customers, while others have been able to fulfil continuing demand.

Priorities

The world of small sawmilling is not all plain sailing, though. Supplies of sawlogs are becoming ever more difficult to obtain, a result of the over-emphasis on fast-growing, low-quality Sitka spruce demanded by the forest industry over the last 50 years. And, ironically, concern about climate change and fossil fuel use means that many suitable logs are being snapped up by firewood merchants or biomass producers and chopped or chipped to be burnt for heating. Grants for hardwoods have targeted amenity woods which are not intended to produce timber, even though it would be eminently possible with low-impact forest management championed by a few managers and contractors. The loss of key species like elm and larch, and now ash, brings extra problems for the small sawmiller dependent on high-quality logs.

Nevertheless, the small-scale sawmilling industry in Scotland will continue to expand for many years, and we can look forward to a time when every village has its own sawmill, feeding timber to local wood-using businesses and paying for the management of local woodlands. What we really need to see is a move away from the forest

industry's obsession with maximum wood-fibre production by growing uniform industrial plantations of short-rotation Sitka spruce and a new emphasis on quality, diversity and flexibility in our forests, as our small sawmills have shown over the past three decades.

Nick Marshall is coordinator of the Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers and also secretary of the Scottish Working Woods label board. The SWW label—a joint initiative by ASHS, the Scottish Furniture Makers' Association and the Scottish Basketmakers' Circle—guarantees locally grown and manufactured woodland products made by small businesses in Scotland.

