

One Man and his Horses

John Bunce of Pine Ridge Timber Horses is one of a rare breed in Britain; a full time horse logger.

Whilst many of his kind supplement their income with other work, John Bunce is probably the only full time forester in England who relies solely on horse power to do all his heavy work for him. He's determined to keep going that way until he drops!

It all began just under ten years ago when John was working in Woodland Management, running his own tree surgery business in Berkshire. His girlfriend at the time had a horse, and he fancied one too, so he bought himself a Clydesdale from a horselogger in Inverary. After a bit of "fiddling around not really knowing what I was doing," John went on a couple of courses and that was it. Sadly, one of the older horseloggers in the locality died around that time, but it was in the wake of his death that John's first logging contracts started coming in.

"The first two years were a struggle, but I was so determined, it had to work," admitted John. There was disbelief from others that horse logging could ever become a profitable enterprise, but fortunately, this lack of encouragement only served to strengthen John's resolve to make the dream a reality. And he has. Since the early days his workload has developed into a steady and reliable stream of contracts, and five

years ago he decided to concentrate solely on the horse logging. Having reached his mid forties, he found that climbing trees, and the risks involved in tree surgery had less appeal, so he took the plunge and pulled out.

Despite his obvious success with horse logging, John admits that it is often hard to get people to take it seriously. Until a year ago The British Horseloggers' Association were part of the FCA, and it was John who instigated their departure. "Admittedly we did get a bit of funding from our association with them," conceded John, "but I always felt that we were seen to be at the twee end of things, good for photo shoots and publicity but not much else. We can do a bloody good job and really shift some timber."

Obviously one man and his horses can never compete ton for ton with a machine harvesting operation, but they're not trying to. There are some areas where traditional ways of operating are always going to be the best and the most appropriate. Sites where access is difficult, conservation areas and amenity woodland are three examples of places where John and his horses are the obvious choice. He does two to three months a year for the Woodland Trust and



is just waiting for his contract to be renewed, hopefully for another three years. John also does work for the National Trust and Wildlife trust. Horses are extremely manoeuvrable and very low impact. John has just finished taking out 75 oak trees over a golf course in the Chilterns. "How else could you do that at this time of year without making a complete mess?" he reasoned. On steep slopes and wet slippery ground, or areas where the flora and fauna are important, the horses get in neatly and still manage to shift 40 tonnes a day. Not very impressive in comparison to modern harvesters but, "It does the job."

John uses his Swedish Orsabjorn forwarder for most jobs which means that he can get the timber to roadside efficiently and quickly. Using chain gear to drag timber for miles along a road would be pretty difficult. The forwarder was originally designed for use with softwood but John has modified it to take big sticks of hardwood. "Before, it would lift two thirds of a tonne – now it takes two tonnes," explained John. "I modified it until it broke, made it stronger. It broke again and I modified it again." He strengthened the crane, and installed bigger rams and used the same roll cage tubing found in racing cars, for strength and durability.

Depending on conditions John also uses one of his Ulvins timber arches to get the wood to ride side where it is then transferred to the forwarder. I'm a bit of a dinosaur when it comes to forestry equipment," admitted John; he is very proud of his 1960s Fordson tractors, which he still uses regularly.

Although there's nothing to beat simple chain gear on steep slopes, John sees the machinery he has invested in as an important part of

horse logging today. "In the past there were a lot more horses and a lot more manpower available, but now we have to do the whole job from start to finish alone, and that's where the equipment helps. During the foot and mouth crisis in 2001 he bought himself a Unimog and chipper and managed to come out the other side. "For a guy with one horse and a set of chains, it was impossible to survive that long with no work, and that's when many of the one man outfits went under."

But the stars of the show are the horses, and John has five Clydesdales, which he has trained himself. The eldest is in semi-retirement and the youngest just being trained up, but John can work the other three together by himself when he needs to. It all depends on the size of the job and accessibility. But the horses must come first. If treated well a horse can have a long working life. (Their eldest horse, Shane, has just retired aged 23, after 18 years in the woods.)

John often works away from home for long periods of time; living in the woods in his van with the horses, and has established a rhythm of working together. The horses need time to digest their food before beginning their day so they must always be fed first before the fire is lit and the kettle boiled. They must be well rested to work efficiently and John says that they are the best judges of when they need to stop and take a break; six hours of work a day is an average day's output. In the summer work usually starts as close to dawn as possible to avoid the tormenting flies, and they are finished by 3pm.

It is a way of life for John and he wouldn't change a thing, although there have been times when he would like to have someone else



The oft modified Orsabjorn forwarder will now take 2 tonnes of hardwood.



Using the forwarder, John Bunce and his horses can extract some 40 tonnes of timber a day – in the most environmentally sound manner.

working with him in the woods. "Finding someone in summer isn't a problem", he explained, "but you can't get these youngsters out in the woods come winter time – they miss their creature comforts too much." Now he is so used to working by himself, and his horses are so well trained and responsive to his commands that he thinks that working alone is best. He has managed a 42 day stretch in the woods without visiting a shop, although that is a record he is not attempting to beat! "If I was away any more she'd leave me," he smiled, glancing at his wife Fiona.

Not all John's work is away from home. He does some thinning near his current home in Mid Devon, often forwarding the wood straight to a Wood-Mizer sawmill on site for conversion. However North and Mid Devon are not particularly affluent areas and most wood owners there cannot afford to manage their standing timber properly. Most of John's contracts are in Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

The stark contrast between the hectic pace of modern life and the slow deliberate speed of the

horses is never more obvious than when the two come face to face. Sometimes John has to travel some distance with the horses to his work place each morning and he has to work hard to avoid the rush hour. Last summer he had to get three horses through a one lane village in the Chilterns "just as everyone was heading for the M25!" Chaos and road rage ensued, as some people expected John and his 9 foot 6 wide cavalcade to reverse! "But most people are really delighted to see the horses," admitted John. "Some of the older guys who have worked with heavy horses in the past can get quite emotional." John does quite a few demonstrations at shows and competes in ploughing matches, which always pulls in the crowds.

However, an enthusiastic public can also be problematic. In amenity woodlands where there are a lot of dog walkers, heavy horses can be a delightful sight. But people sometimes seem to be oblivious to the fact that serious work is in progress. The sight of trees falling around their heads can be quite alarming for John, and frustrating. He also

finds that he has to get involved in more than his fair share of photo shoots and press days, and while public interest can be flattering, it can also be intrusive: John just wants to get on with the job!

John has had quite a few brushes with the odder side of society. Finishing off a contract near London, in midwinter, he was surprised to see a woman clad in a miniskirt and little else, wandering round the wood all day in thick snow. His surprise turned to alarm when the person in question dropped the skirt and revealed himself to be a man. By this time John was up a tree on his mobile phone calling the police, and he estimates that about £60,000 was spent on the search and rescue operation which ensued that night. You can certainly get more than you bargain for, living in the woods!

But it's living in the woods and working the horses that makes John's life what it is and he doesn't want anything to change. He could diversify and start running courses, which is a common money earner among horse loggers, but, "My horses have such lovely soft

mouths I couldn't bear to have them spoilt," confessed John. "I'm a bit chicken about letting anyone else near them."

Patience and gentleness are two prerequisites when training the horses and these methods pay off. John's four year old Clydesdale Drum is as placid and calm a horse as he could wish for. In just a few months he has learnt how to work in the woods and not to react to loud noises and movement, even when in close proximity to the chainsaws and forwarder.

During quiet times, in spring, when the birds are nesting, the horses can be put to good use on John and Fiona's farm in Devon, working the land; and they have even been known to indulge in a bit of hunting. "They all laugh when we come lumbering up," said Fiona, "but we usually manage half a day." The horses form an integral part of the way John and Fiona choose to live their lives and earn them a decent living into the bargain. Sometimes there's no way like the old ways.

Henrietta Job

Pictures by Ann Priest

