

Cooper Forestry

An 8-wheel Ponsse Ergo and brand new Buffalo working in the south of England

The Buffalo arrives in dramatic fashion, stirring up a photogenic cloud of dust.

It is a bright, early-summer day. On the sandy slopes within the first forest west of Poole in Dorset, the Forestry Commission-owned Wareham Forest, acres of mixed quality Bishop's pine (*Pinus muricata*) give off their heady scent. Contractor Nick Cooper of Cooper Forestry has been here with his forwarder driver Philip Palmer for the last six weeks, working on a 30% thin, harvesting 6,000 metres of rough pine, destined (mostly) for the shaver bar market. Last week, Ponsse delivered, direct to site, Nick's latest machine, a 6-cylinder, 275hp Buffalo forwarder. FJ went along to see it on the first day of its working life.

Based in Southampton, Nick (41) has been contracting for 25 years, working almost exclusively for Tilhill on private estates and FC-owned land for the last decade.

Leaving school in 1987, Nick joined his father Rod as a self-employed forwarder driver. He says, "My father ran his own sub-contracting business and I had driven machinery at weekends and during school holidays since I was 12. We used [up to 20] handcutters and tractor-based machinery. During the 1987 storm, we were on a big FC contract near Petersfield, cutting 8,000 tonnes of beech hardwood, forwarding out on a Rottne forwarder and winch machines. Our first Rottne forwarder was a big leap from those tractor-based machines."

In 1991, the company invested in a Kockums harvester with a Silvatec head (bought direct from Sweden), which caught fire. In 1993, after

forming a partnership with his father, and forming RF & NJ Cooper, they celebrated by investing in an excavator-based machine with a very slow Tapio stroke-head. In 1997, Nick built a harvester, using an old Ösa 260 base with a Ponsse head, his first introduction to Ponsse. In 2001, Rod went on the forwarder and Nick bought his first Ponsse machine, a five-year-old HS15 harvester.

In the mid-1990s, RF & NJ Cooper began buying timber standing from the FC and MoD and marketing direct to the sawmills. "In the good times, this worked out better. In bad times, it was difficult to move the timber, which impacted on cash flow. With motor manual teams to pay, Dad spent his time chasing the sawmills for payment."

Having worked on contracts for the MoD in Camberley, Surrey, when the head forester moved to BSW, it was suggested that RF & NJ Cooper might like to market timber through BSW. This continued until BSW were taken over by UPM Tilhill. In 2003, Nick renamed his company Cooper Forestry Ltd and returned to full-time contracting. "This is the way it has stayed. We get paid fortnightly and on time."

Nick remains loyal to Ponsse machines. The HS15 was replaced with an HS16, followed by two 6-wheeled Ergos. The Rottne forwarder was superseded by a Kockums 83-35, two Ösa 250s, a Valmet 840.1 and then a Ponsse Elk. The machines were bought second-hand until last year, when Nick took delivery of a custom-built 8-wheeled 275hp Ergo, delivered six months after order. "It is unusu-

al to have an 8-wheeled machine. They offer better climbing ability and are better on soft ground. We are lucky in the South, where it is pretty flat, but we do get wet, boggy areas."

Nick approached the contract at Wareham Forest as he would any other. "Generally, contracting is a standing sale. The FC put a 'measured' block out for tender. Tilhill tell me what products they want cut from the material. Knowing what volume of timber there should be, I look at the job and give a rate to get it to roadside."

Nonetheless, the Wareham Forest contract is different. It is a 'cut to select' contract. "The trees are not measured or marked. The FC has gone through and 'estimated' the plots. We are given maps of

the areas to work (marked with stacking areas and anything we should avoid – here it is a badger sett and rare plants). I select the trees as I go through. What the FC has estimated, and what I am finding, is not what it should be."

The Ergo is parked up a steep bank in the forest margins. The cab is large enough to fit two people. Nick offers me a ride through the 8-hectare compartment to the harvesting site he is currently working. Nick sits for up to 12 hours a day in this cab and says that the best thing in it is the 'Sit Right' seat technology. Perched on a storage unit, I watch his seat self-level as we dodge, skirt and reverse our way down the hill, around and under multi-diameter, branchy stems and bare harvested piles of



Forwarder driver Philip Palmer (left), who has worked with Nick for the last 2½ years (since Rod retired), and Nick Cooper of Cooper Forestry, beside the 14-tonne capacity trailer of Cooper Forestry's new forwarder, the 275hp Ponsse Buffalo.

80-year-old Bishop's pine.

Before starting work on any harvesting contract, the timber recovery sizes are entered into the Opti 5 computer, which prioritises the most important products by price. The program 'optimises' each tree, cutting the best product from each stem to maximise value.

To demonstrate, Nick harvests a stem. The cab rocks. Crown fights neighbouring crown. Nick struggles to lay the pole flat. By the time he has said, "This is a problem here; the trees are so rubbery you cannot get them on the ground," the Ergo has cut, colour-marked and laid two 2.9-metre bars into piles for chipwood, and a third for fencing.

We inspect the Ergo's cutting head. Nick says, "The Ergo has a big oil flow and big pumps. Whereas competitor machines have one pump to the crane and head, the Ponsse has two: a 145cc pump to the C4 crane, and a 190cc pump to the head. I chose external feed and return hoses to the head. The rest are inside the boom."

For its size, the H7 (70cm) head is powerful. "At 30 kilonewtons, the feeding force is phenomenal. The machine cuts a wide range of material; from tiny 0.07-metre thinnings, right up to the 5.5-metre sticks (1.5-metre diameter) of Sitka spruce cut at our last job in Cheddar. In this small, rough branchy pine, I am cutting 15 to 20 metres an hour. In clean timber, you can get up to 60 to 70 metres an hour.

"The knives should last five years, but do wear down. I sharpen them once a week with a light touch, using a grinder and flap disk, which gives a good shiny finish. The feed rollers are long-toothed, because in the South we have deep bark and we need the extra traction."

Under Ponsse's 12-month warranty, the machine is serviced at 200 and 1,200 hours. Most parts on the Ergo needing regular maintenance are easily accessible. The only problem has been a front knife snapping clean off. Ponsse replaced it the next day.

Since taking delivery of the Ergo, Cooper Forestry has done well. Last year, profits were up by 20%. "In small material, it takes a long time for the Ergo to cut a tonne of timber. In the bigger material, productivity increases by 20%. Last year I cut 35,000 metres in 1,700 hours.

"On this site, the FC cut [direct

production] the big material, then parcelled up the smaller, uneconomical timber. I gave a price for this job at a certain tree size. In my opinion, the measure that the FC say is here is not. It is way smaller than it should be and I am not cutting enough timber each day. Production is down 40%. After expenses, it is costing me £1,000 a week to come to work. It is hard to argue with what the Ergo's computer says has been cut, but the FC are trying to. I have a meeting with Tilhill and the FC forester at 4pm [to try and resolve the issue]."

Parking the Ergo back at the forest edge, Nick says that although he likes to work within a 70-mile radius of home, the downside of contracting in southern England is that there are no long-term contracts. For three months of the year, Nick stays in motels and Philip Palmer, who has worked with Nick as a forwarder driver for the last 2½ years (since Rod retired), stays in his Bailey Olympus 530-4 'caravan' when Cooper Forestry's machinery is low-loaded as far away as Redditch and Devon. Their last contract was in Cheddar. Their next project, in Marlborough, is actually four contracts, three for softwood and one for cutting 2,000 metres of beech hardwood.

Nick remains loyal to Ponsse because of their machinery's reliability and build quality. Last Christmas, together with other contractors, he went to Finland to look around the Ponsse factory. "We went into the forest where a Buffalo was working. Having a go on it convinced me it was the right machine to replace our 4-cylinder 13-tonne, 175hp Elk forwarder."

Ordered after Christmas, the 14-tonne 275hp Buffalo, with a 10-metre reach (and hose-work housed inside the boom) was delivered in just six months. Although a medium-sized machine, the Buffalo is comparable to some competitors' 'big' machines.

We drive the mile between harvesting and forwarding operations in Nick's Toyota Hilux. Philip spent the best part of yesterday tweaking 'parts', like moving the 'too-close' bolster backwards so that longer-length logs loads would balance. This means that Philip is running a week and half behind Nick and we spot the Buffalo, on its first full day of work, making the first of three passes through this steeper part of the forest. The first log load is destined for Bedmax (chip), the sec-



The 8-wheel Ergo stripping a stem of Bishop's pine.



The Ponsse Ergo harvester and the H7 (70cm) head is powerful. "The feeding force is phenomenal. In this small, rough, branchy pine, I am cutting 15 to 20 metres an hour. In clean timber, you can get up to 60 to 70 metres an hour."

ond for shaver bars (Mendip) and the third for fencing materials. We return to the log pile and wait. The Buffalo arrives in dramatic fashion, stirring up a photogenic cloud of dust.

Logs unloaded, Philip steps down from the cab and says, "Ponsse delivered the Buffalo to the site straight from Hull docks. They PDI'd it, set up the crane, installed the radio and bar signature system, and the Buffalo was good to go. This machine has an extra 100hp to the wheels in a 6-cylinder engine. It goes well up hills. The back-end is the same size as the Elk's, with a slightly larger load capacity. Nick had the exhaust pipe shortened to stop it snagging in the trees. The crane is smoother. With an internal hose run, I am not worried about pulling the metal pipes off. The larger 0.35 grab can pick up an extra 15%, making a difference, especially in the smaller



Inside the cab of Nick's Ergo harvester, with the Opti 5 system on the computer screen, showing length, diameter and optimisation.

timber. Unloading is quicker."

Nick listens to the engine. "The revs are set at 1200 for loading, which is quite low. I think it needs setting at 1250 or 1300, because I can hear it pulling down the power of the engine." Philip nods in agreement.

Philip says that the Buffalo has been well thought out. "Access for maintenance was a battle before; there was no room beneath the Elk's cab. This one has plenty of room underneath it and the interior has been updated with Ponsse controls.

"The Buffalo is massively over-engineered for a forwarder. The centre joint is a lot stronger than on older models. Now we have heavy-duty stabiliser rams, which stop the cab jiggling around and smooth out the ride." Philip does not have 'Sit Right' technology, preferring to operate, "By the seat of my pants."

Philip needs another couple of days getting used to the Buffalo and speeds up again. Nick, in the meantime, has a meeting to go to.

Having spent £295,000 on the Ergo and £200,000 on the Buffalo, Nick expects to keep both

machines for five years before upgrading again. "At four to five years old you start to get problems with machines. It then becomes a balance; whether to pay money in finance, or in breakdowns and repair costs. As a contractor, if my machine is not available, I am not available and it does not look good to my client. We work hard. We get a job, and we get on with the job. It is far better to get a fresh machine and avoid the down time."

Addendum: After another on-site meeting with the FC, the matter that Nick had hoped to resolve is still (to date) unresolved. He says, "I decided to move the machines off this site and to cut my losses."

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Cooper Forestry's new forwarder, the 14-tonne, 275hp Buffalo, with a 10-metre reach loader (hoses housed inside the boom) unloading shaver bars. Nick had the exhaust pipe shortened so that it would not catch on branches when in the forest.

The new computer system is not at the front of the cab as it is in the Ergo harvester. In the Buffalo, it is to one side. Philip can see it when driving either forwards or backwards. "This is a bigger monitor with more information on it."



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