

Name: Keith Threadgall, Woodmizer

Place: Jedburgh, Roxburghshire

Headline: Successful mobile sawmill agent and sawmiller

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Context: Small and medium scale timber processing has increased over the last twenty years with mobile sawmilling machine sales remaining strong, year on year. Many mobile sawmill sales are to; community groups, individual start-ups, and a few are to medium sized sawmilling business, such as J. Russell at Newtonmore. Keith sells machines on behalf of Woodmizer, one of the half a dozen or so companies selling mobile and static sawmills in Scotland.

Original aims: Keith's mobile processing and sawmill sales business has developed organically, there was no master plan or set of original aims. A motivating factor for Keith to move into mobile sawmilling was to move away from the itinerant, backbreaking, heavy manual job of chainsaw operator. Keith spent 12 years clear-felling and thinning conifer plantations, mostly Sitka spruce, and was looking for a way out of this part of the timber sector.

What actually happened as a result and what has been achieved?

Eoin Cox at Woodschool in the Scottish Borders employed Keith in 1998, on a part time casual contract. His duties included management of the hard wood timber yard – stacking cut planks and beams - and sourcing and cutting hardwood timber on a Woodmizer LT30 mill to hardwood maker's requirements at Woodschool. Keith gradually developed his expertise as a wood miller, hardwood timber buyer and businessman. In 2009 there was a change in the structure and management of Woodschool – it became a worker owned cooperative – and Keith became a Director of the new entity, Real Wood Studios. In 2010 Keith became an agent for Woodmizer for the South of Scotland and Northeast England and in 2012 he became the agent for all of Scotland and the North of England, extending to Catterick in Yorkshire.

As well as operating the mobile sawmill for Woodschool and Real Wood Studios, Keith undertook planting and woodland maintenance contracts for Borders Forest Trust, such as at Wildwood project in Carrifran Valley. Keith has maintained an interest in establishing and managing woodlands.

Currently Keith runs a business that involves; cutting timber as an independent sawmiller, running wood milling training courses for the private and public sector, selling mobile and static sawmills on behalf of Woodmizer and carrying out tree planting and woodland management contracts. He travels the length and breadth of Scotland – from Stornoway to Stranraer processing timber, setting up or installing sawmilling machines and providing timber-processing training for the likes of Scottish Natural Heritage and Forest Research.

Keith maintains an interest in tree planting because, as he puts it, he would like to put something back.

What is the evidence for these outcomes?

Keith has developed a successful sawmilling business and is a successful sawmill sales agent. Woodmizer sales in Scotland and the north of England have developed to a point where Keith is selling and setting up/installing approximately 8 machines per annum, generating earnings of 6 figures over the last three years, 2014, 2015 and 2016.

By the time that the Woodschool Woodmizer LT30 mill was sold in 2010 Keith had clocked up some 6,000 hours on the machine. Using an approximate 1 tonne of roundwood processed into sawn timber per hour this equates to some 6,000 tonnes of timber processed over 12 years. Keith estimates that from the year 2000 to 2016 he has processed some 12,000 tonnes of timber, of which some 75% has been hardwood. It is unclear (to us) how much hardwood and softwood timber has been or is being processed locally in Scotland, but seems reasonable to say that the activity of Keith Threadgall, through his involvement in timber processing, sawmill sales and sawmill training, has been instrumental in the development of local timber processing in Scotland.

What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?

Hardwork, skill, flexibility (doing a variety of jobs) and being in the right place at the right time, to take advantage of opportunities, have all contributed to Keith's success. He was fortunate to get involved in sawmilling with the development of Woodschool. Hard work and determination equipped him with the perseverance to become skilled at milling timber. Fortune again provided him with the opportunity to becoming a Director of Real Wood Studios and subsequently to become a Director ASHS. His workload involves UK wide road (and sometimes ferry) travel, towing a mobile sawmill, to clients, training courses, summer shows and exhibitions, often involving working weekends and long days.

A key element in business development is communication. Contacting potential clients and following up on work done to maintain customer satisfaction play a large part in maintaining a flow of work.

How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?

Because of the specificity of Keith's experiences, they are not replicable per se. Not everyone will get an opportunity to learn mobile milling within an existing business, or get an opportunity to become an agent for a mobile saw manufacturer. But it does illustrate the way that small scale enterprises can expand in scope such that they that can generate unexpected opportunities – in this case as a sales manager.

There are opportunities for individuals and small businesses to get involved in mobile

sawmilling, however it may be wise to maintain other forms of forestry or other business, tree surgery, tree planting, forestry contracting are all suited to combining with saw milling. Bringing in other forms of income is important whilst developing a sawmilling business, such that you are not solely reliant on the sawmilling.

Key messages:

The small sawmilling sector has expanded and matured to the point where yearly sales of equipment supports a part time specialist sales manager.

Regardless of where you are placed in land management or the forestry sector, there are opportunities to acquire mobile sawmilling skills – potentially as an apprentice or supporting worker to an existing business, and to build up expertise and knowledge in this developing sector. Whilst it may take time to build a mobile sawmilling business it is possible and probably best developed with other income sources.

Furthermore, if an individual has an existing business - tree surgery, contract planting, fencing, etc. – to support a bank loan or finance, there is Govt. assistance from the latest (2016) round of SRDP grants (up to 40% of the total purchase price) for the purchase of timber processing machines.

Small scale mobile sawmilling is suited to the often fragmented and disparate nature of local timber processing in Scotland; many milling jobs being seasonal, geographically remote, unpredictable in timing, but apparently with increasing demand year on year.