

# A walk on the wild side

Horses are increasingly being used rather than machines to log land as traditional forestry skills make a comeback

Hazel Southam

Ella, a 16-hand Percheron mare, is pulling a felled piece of wood weighing around a tonne out of dense brambles and woodland near Bosbury, Herefordshire. Her handler, Doug Joiner, chairman of British Horse Loggers, quietly guides her massive footsteps through difficult terrain. "Gee off... come here," he calls. The commands sound like those at sheepdog trials, and Ella is as responsive as any trained dog.

At Joiner's instruction, she steps over logs into thick undergrowth. He guides her, on long reins, with calls and subtle commands into an area of fir trees that is slowly being cleared. Then he attaches a 12ft-long fir trunk to a chain, gives the command, and Ella strides downhill, dragging the enormous trunk as if it were a matchstick. After an hour, they have cleared half a dozen similar-sized trees, ready to be turned into planks.

Ten years ago, it would have been rare to have seen anyone working the woods with horses, but it is becoming more and more common as landowners and foresters learn to appreciate its benefits.

The ancient art of horse logging, which dates back 10,000 years, nearly died out during the 1980s as machines took over. By the mid-80s, there were only three full-time horse loggers left in the country.

Today, there are 15 full-time horse loggers in the UK, and up to 1,000 people working part-time. Such is the demand for the skills that a new apprenticeship scheme was launched at the end of last year, backed and partly funded by the Prince of Wales, who has used horse logging on the Duchy estate in Cornwall.

Joiner frowns at the idea of using a quad bike or tractor. "Horses don't damage the environment," he says. "This way of working takes more care of a woodland. The aim is that you wouldn't know we had been here except for a few hoof marks and the fact that the trees aren't there."

But it is in environmentally sensitive areas – such as bogs, by streams and in ancient woodland – that logging is really taking off.



Doug Joiner and Ella at work in Childer wood, near Bosbury, Herefordshire, with Sky the dog leading the way Photograph: Jay Williams

As Joiner explains: "There are all sorts of delicate ecosystems that need our protection. We have just been working in an area where there were wild daffodils, which are a protected species. Using machines would have decimated them, but using a horse didn't."

"An increased interest in ecology and environmental issues has made a big difference to our trade. Horse logging has a real future. It's definitely something that's coming back."

The Forestry Commission, National Trust and many wildlife trusts have all used horse loggers in recent years. Nick Walmsley, a forestry adviser for the Forestry Commission, says people are choosing horse logging more and more, "not just because the carbon footprint is lower, but because horses are better in environmentally sensitive areas.

"Heavy machinery can cause rutting,

soil compaction and erosion. If you damage the soil, anything will struggle to grow. You can almost kill the soil this way. It's taken thousands of years to generate the soil in British woodlands. If we destroy it, our natural history is under threat. So we need to manage these sites in a sensitive way, and that's where you would bring in a horse logger."

In addition, he says, there's less pollution from a horse. "There's horse we

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and poo, but no danger of hydraulic fluid leaking into streams."

Horses are now used regularly instead of machinery to clear woods across the UK. Tam Hows in the Lake District, Hafod wood in Ceredigion, and Craigvinean forest in Perthshire have all been maintained using horses. They are also used on archaeological sites, where machines can't be used for fear of destroying historic remains.

Rob Stoneman, chief executive of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, says: "The benefit of logging woodlands is to encourage new growth, which is good for, and attracts, a host of species – for instance pearl-bordered fritillary butterflies, woodland flowers, and dormice, which eat blackberries that spring up when the canopy is cleared.

"Often it is difficult to get logs out of ancient woodlands using heavy machinery.

The most sensitive way of removal for all these species is to go by traditional options, such as using horses, which cause far less damage than heavy lorries."

Joiner now runs five-day training courses in Childer wood, Herefordshire, where novices can pick up the basic skills. He aims to train 20 people this year, and three of his five courses are already fully booked.

Using one of his five horses, Joiner moves an average of 10 tonnes of wood each day, and says that he once moved 35 tonnes in a day.

At the end of the working day, Ella joins the other horses back in their field adjoining the woodland. And in Childer wood you would hardly know that anything had changed, apart from a pile of tree trunks by the side of a path.

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