

Thinnings from farm woodland

by John Joshephi

Thirty years ago I bought a small, unmanaged Oak and Cherry woodland. I thinned it immediately to produce firewood and cleft oak fence. Some of the hardwood pulp I sold, everything else was kept for my own use. Ten years later I repeated the exercise, and last year I gave the wood its final, third thinning. This produced a useful parcel of hardwood logs which were sold on, together with home heating and fencing material from the unsaleable trees.

I could clear, fell and replant in a few years' time, but my preferred plan is to spend the rest of my allotted span tottering around this wood with one or two dogs, and gazing with satisfaction at Oaks that have graduated over 30 years from spindly to majestic specimens. It's a great satisfaction, and one you can't put a price on. But it could never have happened without those crucial thinnings. . .



Why thin?

Thinning is the way to ensure quality and value at the end of the rotation. But there are other important benefits:

- thinning the forest floor encourages new plant life, insects and birds
- the holding is improved, revealing the potential of any wood that does duty as a game covert
- regularly thinned woodland is more likely to stand a winter storm than its neglected neighbour.

In pure economics, a regularly thinned plantation will produce a greater total volume over its lifetime than an unthinned stand. By harvesting, you increase the productive potential of every woodland acre.

How to thin?

The basic thinning method is to walk into the wood and mark for felling any tree that looks sub-standard. Marking is done on two sides of the trunk either using a high-visibility spray can or, more traditionally, blazing the tree with a billhook or scribe. The cutters simply follow your marks.

This is a crude early action to improve stand quality, almost a cleaning operation. It will yield little revenue and may even leave you out of pocket, so try to take out enough material to ensure that the job 'washes its face'. The Forestry Commission suggests a volume of 50 tonnes per ha (20 per acre) to be a viable volume removed, but your wood may need more or less, depending upon how heavily it is stocked.

Crown thinning

More mature stands may call for a more scientific approach based on selection of trees that you would like to see forming part of the final crop. A crown thinning serves this purpose. This involves choosing a superior tree and marking for felling all the surrounding trees with crowns that touch and compete with it. The process frees the chosen tree to develop and build timber.

Quick fix?

A more drastic, but time saving version of the crown thinning, is to simply walk the plantation and mark the trees to stay with paint spots. Then instruct your cutters to fell everything not marked.

When using this method remember to leave a reasonable density of crop trees, and do not use it on any site where windthrow is likely.



Presentation is critical

Preparing for sale

A timber buyer will offer you a fair price for your parcel if:

- he has a reliable idea of the volume and grade of timber involved
- he can remove the timber without undue complications.

Presentation is critical. If you can fell, extract and stack timber in a measurable form at a point where the merchant's vehicles can collect it you will have satisfied both the above requirements.

This may mean employing contractors with a forwarder to fell and remove the timber to a roadside or firm field. This is known as 'Free on Lorry' and will certainly enhance the unit price.

How to sell?

The most reliable way to ensure the best price is to sell by tender, inviting timber merchants to inspect and make their best offer.

Professional help is available to find likely buyers from organisations such as the Forestry Commission, and internet timber sales are also worth exploring.

When to thin?

Timber prices respond to global influences. A forestry professional can advise on current demand, but the most persuasive factors will probably be the local ones, such as the state of the ground and the availability of stacking and loading space. These may restrict you to summer operation only.

Other factors affecting timing can include cropping regimes and gamebird release/shooting. In practical forestry terms, there is no close season for thinning but you may decide against thinning between March and July to reduce any impact on local wildlife.

High value white hardwoods

Large and potentially valuable Sycamore or Ash should ideally be felled between September and January. This is when the sap is down, and felling then avoids discolouration in a timber sold expressly for its whiteness.

What is my wood worth?

Sycamore, Sweet Chestnut and Wild Cherry are all high value hardwoods, with Oak just below them in the value table, being saleable for many different uses even if of relatively poor quality.

Ash is difficult to sell and needs placing for specialist end use to be valuable. Sadly Beech, Birch, Horse Chestnut and Lime are all good for little more than firewood no matter how big or beautiful.

Larch and Douglas Fir should be the best performing softwoods, followed by Spruces and Pine, while Grand Fir, Red Cedar and Western Hemlock can all be difficult to sell.

As always, timing is all-important. The summer of 2007 saw a strong demand, and good prices for fencing grade softwoods. This provided an excellent opportunity to put potentially harder to sell species on the market.

Grow your own

Bought in timber, be it for fuel, fencing or outdoor buildings, can be replaced by your own thinnings with the potential to substantially reduce outgoings. Virtually all small or poor hardwood qualifies as fuel, and cleft Oak and Sweet Chestnut make excellent stakes and rails.

It is generally however, a false economy to use softwood thinnings for fencing as these really

need to be peeled and treated.

For larger logs the day's hire of a mobile sawbench and operators can produce an impressive pile of squared Oak gateposts and beams, softwood posts and beams, joists, planks and rails. Looked at in a different way, these could easily provide the makings of a new shed or field shelter.



take around six weeks to process.