

FORESTRY PEOPLE

In the first in an occasional series of articles on people who have had an influence on the history of the forestry industry :-

David Steers talks to Kenneth Rankin

A man described as “the father of modern private forestry”, is at 87 years of age, still planning ways in which timber growers can maximise their assets.

As Kenneth Rankin surveys the specimen trees in his garden at Odiham, Hampshire from his study, he muses on ways in which faster tree growth through wider spacing for a variety of species could mean a minimum 30 per cent in returns for the timber grower.

This accountant turned forestry expert says that the key to economic success in silviculture is to make sure that the diameter of a tree grows swiftly by early thinning and getting crown cover early on.

He also believes that more should be made of the forestry industry’s contribution to the UK economy. “For every £1 value of the timber standing in the forest there is £15+ available for the rest of the community through felling, extraction, haulage processing and selling in a variety of markets. Forestry contributes greatly to the rural economy, providing prosperity in the countryside.”

After war service - which saw him at the siege of Tobruk (about which he wrote a book) - he returned to the City and in 1952 set up a forestry arm of the accountancy firm he was working for. By 1957 this firm had established 30,000 forestry acres in the UK and others to follow in South Africa, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand. His first forestry management company was set up that year as Wealden Woodlands Ltd and this became English Woodlands Ltd. His next company, Rankin Dyson Ltd evolved into the Economic Forestry Group and eventually, through merger became Tilhill Economic Forestry.

Although Kenneth retired in 1974 from one company and in 1976 from the other, his study of forestry and economics led to the creation of a third management company Forestry Investment Management Ltd. He is now involved with a fourth management group Woodlands Quest Ltd which has brought together a nationwide

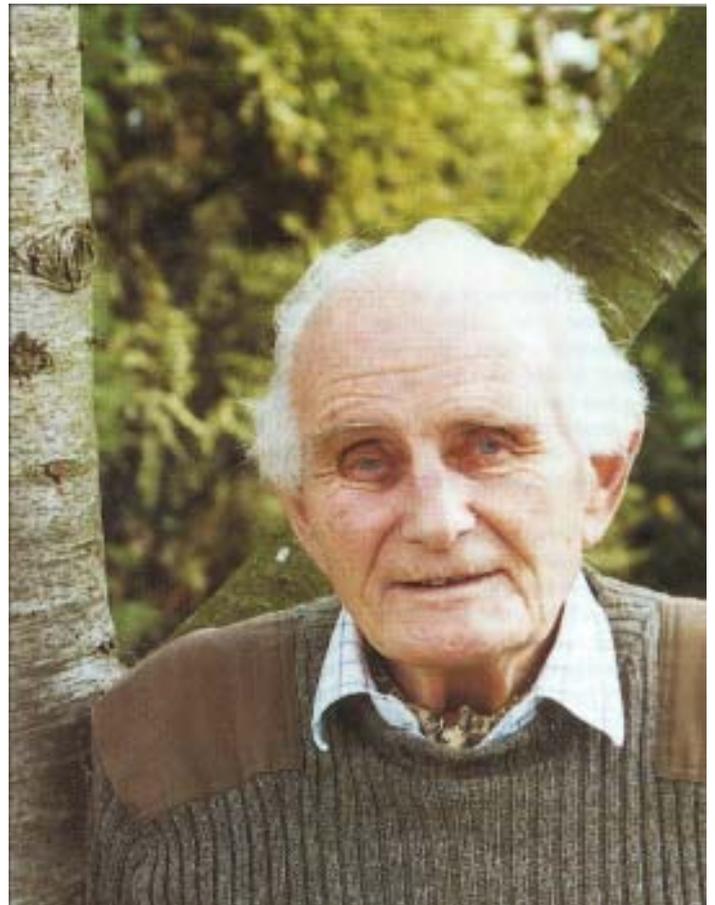
organisation of independent forestry managers, specialist consultants and advisers. EFG alone once had around 600 employees when the Eskdalemuir forest of 36,000 acres was being created in the 1960s and is now said to be the biggest forest in private ownership in the whole of Europe. Kenneth Rankin found the money almost all in the City of London and, without doubt, this was his greatest achievement. As a wildlife sanctuary it has now become widely acclaimed.

But he says he has not really retired and is currently overseeing 14 different forestry management projects from his Hampshire study.

Looking back at the tax changes for forestry which came under Chancellor Lawson, he says that he has had many shocks in his career, “but you have to pick yourself up and start again. That was when I founded Forestry Investment Management, a fast growing organisation that has invested over £26 million in forestry in the past 12 years.”

One of his major projects in recent years has been, in his words, “to improve the production of good quality timber by increasing growth rates.” He says that his method can mean that Sitka spruce reaches maturity in 25 to 30 years by a system of drastic early thinning which halves the number of trees from the original planting. Much wider spacing, thus arising means that tree diameter increases rapidly and this leads to more high value timber being produced in a shorter period of years.

Under this system planting is at the usual 2m spacing but respacing takes place after eight to ten years, down to 1,000 stems per hectare. Trees are felled that would otherwise become unprofitable and after canopy closure the growth rates on the remaining trees are much faster. The secret, he says, is to make sure that the trees put on 1cm of diameter per year so that you have a 30cm diameter Sitka spruce, for example, after 30



“Father” of modern forestry is still looking forward

years.

“We have done this now, with 23 years experience in Scotland and in June we will be holding an open day for the Institute of Chartered Foresters, in Galloway where this technique will be amply demonstrated. “It is a system which really must be more widely adopted in UK forestry. It is the key to economic success. I also think it can be extended to such species as ash, chestnut, cherry and possibly Red alder.”

It is vital, he says, that the right tree species, should be grown for the particular conditions in the region, and in sufficient quantities to justify the establishment of local processing industry. Best results are likely in Wales, southwest England, Galloway and the Scottish Borders.

His current investment projects are for investors to put in a minimum of £2000 into forest properties which can provide all the essentials for a good economic performance. These

are known as super-syndicates, covering around 1,000 acres, but in multiple investments.

The super-syndicate aim is to have an asset backing in excess of £2 million; to give sustained cash distribution, which is tax free; and investment liquidity for those taking part.

He also sees forestry as a family investment where “forestry is not only a means of creating wealth, but also of retaining it within family ownership into future generations. This is possible because provided a forestry investment has been held for a minimum of two years, there is 100 per cent relief of Inheritance Tax.”

Now this holder of the Medal of the then Society of Foresters of Great Britain, for services to British Forestry, and an honorary fellow of the Institute of Chartered Foresters for his major contribution to the promotion and understanding of forestry and forestry investment, is still planning for the future in his 88th year.