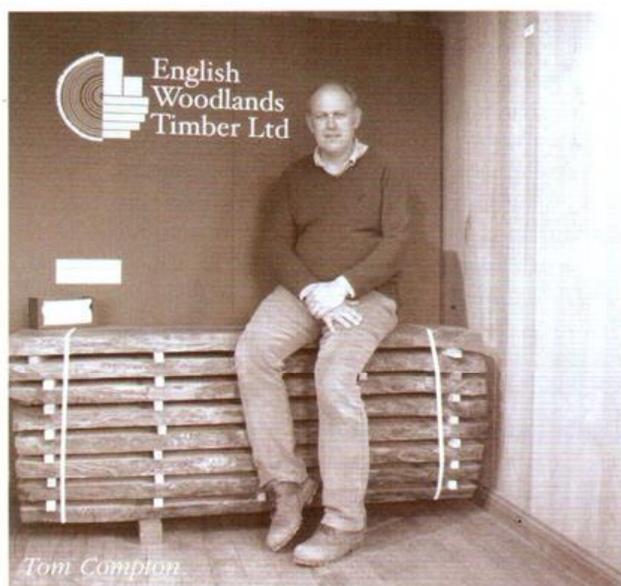


English Woodlands Timber Ltd

by Peter Savill

Cocking Sawmills are located in the recently created South Downs National Park on a delightful site near Midhurst in West Sussex. The sawmill is the base of English Woodlands Timber (EWT), a company that originated in the 1940s. It later became the Sussex Sawmill Co. and in 1986 was renamed English Woodlands Timber. The company has two main functions: woodland management (of about 4,000 ha) and sawmilling. Tom Compton, the Managing Director, met and showed us round the mill.



Purchasing policy

Cocking Sawmills has an annual throughput of about 600 m³ of freshly sawn timber and 500 m³ of dried timber. The majority is hardwood, with small quantities of Douglas Fir, Larch and Western Red Cedar which are supplied by the surrounding Cowdray Estate. All the timber is purchased on the open market, much of it locally, some from further afield in Britain, e.g. Scottish Elm and Walnut from wherever it can be found, and some, such as Slovenian Oak, from continental Europe. The policy is to buy predominantly large dimensioned defect-free timber whenever possible. There is a demand for this for which EWT fills a niche. The company likes to buy FSC/PEFC certified timber, but this is difficult to acquire in Britain. *Relatively few woodland owners see any advantage in going through the tedious and expensive certification procedure in a country where State regulation of what may and may not be done is very strict anyway.*

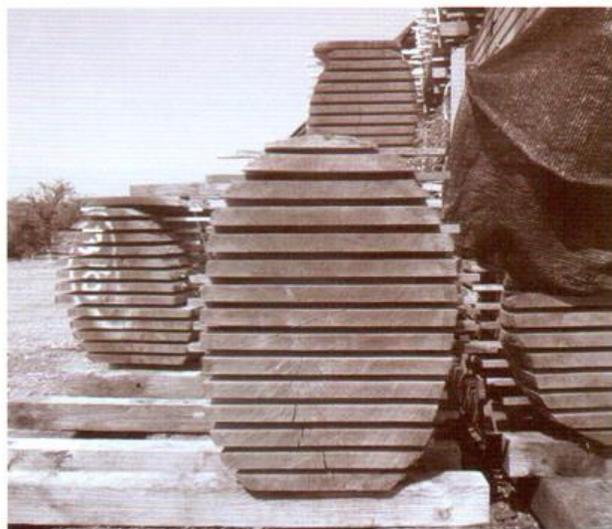
Processing and drying timber

Much of the large dimensioned timber goes for the developing and evolving high quality furniture making market. Where a few years ago manufacturers bought boards, they now require cut-to-size, planed and semi-finished or finished wood for specific pieces of work.

The company actively buys and saws log of large dimension but total throughput of round timber has declined. As a result it outsources the primary milling process to Helmdon Sawmill near Brackley, so that it can concentrate on other parts of the business and without the expense and safety matters that running its own bandsaw creates. The quality of sawing is excellent with the added advantage that logs are debarked. This in turn reduces potential infection of the sapwood of Oak and Ash by powder post beetles (*Lyctus* spp).

Their capacity for adding value to timber has recently been hugely increased by the purchase and installation of a Weinig Unimat 23E 6 Head Planer Moulder. The Weinig enables EWT to offer joinery companies finished products. This machine will plane, mould and shape timber on all sides in a single pass. It has two top heads allowing the manufacture of deep moulded sections without difficulty.

The company invests considerable resources in air-drying timber, which is necessary for the types of wood they supply. This is time consuming and therefore expensive. Air drying timber out of doors typically takes a year per inch of thickness. About 600 m³ of sawn wood is drying in the yard at any one time, representing a considerable financial investment. There are also two dehumidifying drying





kilns. Timber is brought down to 12 to 14% moisture depending on thickness. EWT also has 15,000 sq ft of buildings for storing the kiln dried wood. The newest building is covered with solar panels which generate approximately 40K kilowatts a year, or about half of the electricity used by the company.

It is often desirable to leave sawn timber unedged and stacked in log form ('en boule') until it is air dried and ready for conversion into shaped pieces. Advantage can then be taken during the sawing process of any natural curves in the log. There is also a demand for wood cut from the same log as this can be readily matched for figure or colour. Stacking en boule reduces handling to a minimum since the boards can be stacked straight off the saw and each boule transported as a unit. The drying of wood en boule tends to be rapid because the pile of boards is narrow. Hence to avoid drying degrade only small, 13 to 19 mm thick, stickers are used and the end grain of the boards is sealed

EWT saws Cedar of Lebanon when it can get it (which should not be confused with Atlantic or Blue Cedar). An interesting use for its sawdust is that it will kill dog fleas if put into dog baskets. There is a good demand for short offcuts which are sold separately.

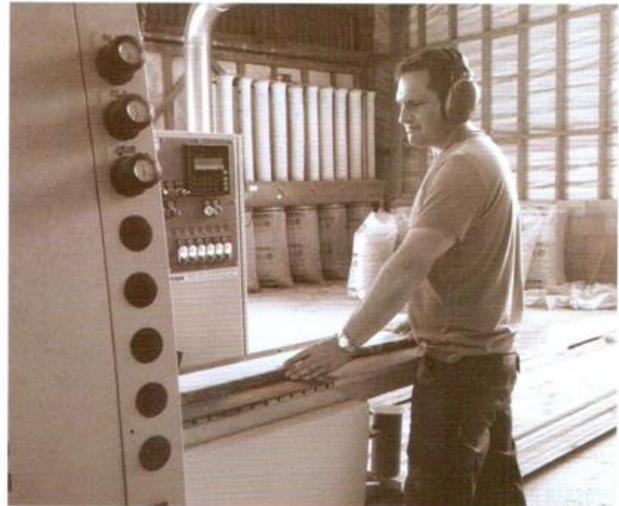
Beetle damage to timber

A plague of many sawmills is the damage caused by the wood boring beetle *Platypus cylindrus*. These so-called 'ambrosia' beetles bore into the wood of Oak and introduce several species of 'ambrosia' fungi into their tunnels. The fungi grow on the tunnel walls and serve as the main source of food for the adult beetles and larvae. *P. cylindrus* becomes established only in trees that are severely stressed or already dead. The beetle does not itself kill trees. Newly felled trees are an ideal source for infestation and rapid conversion of felled timber, to accelerate drying is the only way of preventing beetle activity.

EWT has avoided any damage so far at Cocking Sawmill by converting them as quickly as possible after felling and by debarking before sawing.

The sawmill's location on open downland also reduces potential infection from surrounding woodland. Logs are far more likely to be infected if they have been lying unbarbed in the forest for some time.

The current conservationists' aim of leaving dying trees standing and creating 'habitat piles' of felled timber provide ideal sites for the beetles to multiply and is absurd.



Sales

Customers are welcome to come in person to select their timber from the wonderfully mud-free yard or warehouse but EWT is well in advance of many of its competitors in that much of its timber stock is identifiable and traceable on its website (www.englishwoodlandstimber.co.uk). Customers can send their requirements by e-mail using an online form and just call. Both which estate and which individual tree the timber came from can, in most cases, be identified: this information can be important to purchasers of expensive furniture, for example. Also data on species, when the tree was cut, whether kiln- or air-dried, dimensions and which category it is in: boards, cladding, joinery and furniture timber or structural timber. Pictures of most of the stock will be visible online by September 2013 in different categories. Suitable waste material is sold as firewood.

We started and finished the visit in the newly refurbished sales office, a delightful building that is constructed out of most of the many native hardwood species that the mill deals with (Oak, including 'Pippy' Oak, Ash, Beech, Chestnut, Elm, Plane and Sycamore), in addition to the three conifers, Douglas Fir, Larch and Western Red Cedar. I left feeling that English Woodlands Timber is an imaginative and innovative organisation that fills a valuable place in the utilisation of British timber.

