

'Delivering Excellent Customer Service from a Forest Operation' at Edystone, Coed Caeau-gwynedd, Llanfyllin

Report on the CCFG Wales Site Visit, 6 October 2010

The CCFG Wales 2010 Regional Visit was hosted by Mr & Mrs Keith Blacker who provided the opportunity to see progressive woodland management coupled with innovative added-value marketing.

An engineer by training Keith Blacker and his wife Decia have developed a business by applying engineering and business management principles to create and fill a niche market.

The Blackers purchased former FC woodland near Llanfyllin to develop their business which centres on the production and retailing of firewood. Whilst firewood has enjoyed a renaissance, for the Blackers conventional firewood sales make up only 7 percent of the business, the majority is made up of bespoke firewood sales selling for approximately £120 m³.

The firewood business is box-based where the Blackers supply fully seasoned cut and split logs delivered in portable log stores. The Blackers emphasise that they do not supply a product but rather a service with the key being the guaranteed supply and ease of use. The service is not cheap with a £50 annual subscription and a minimum box load of 0.3m³ retailing at £35 with a fortnightly delivery within a 15 mile radius. Full seasoning adds value by ensuring a higher calorific value than typical firewood. Niche marketing is not price-focused and the Blackers' customers are typically well-off retired people and busy professionals who have firewood as a supplementary source of heat, but also wheel chair-based customers who cannot cope with typical firewood deliveries that are often dumped on the drive and may require further splitting.

The raw material for the Blackers' business is derived from a sometimes neglected but key aspect of woodland management – thinning - and provides both volume and useful stem diameters for the firewood business.

It is not a casual boast that the timber only touches the ground once – when it is felled. Keith Blacker's



Timber only touches the ground when it is felled – the rest of the operation is based on engineering processes.



Firewood and milled timber are the core staples of the business



A home milling facility adds value and flexibility

application of engineering principles means that handling is minimised and there is never the need to pick wood up of the floor; rather a pallet-based handling system allows rapid work flow to minimise production costs from the seasoning stacks to the flatbed delivery wagon. A pallet truck system facilitates easy delivery to customers merely replacing an empty firewood box with a full one.

The firewood boxes are another success story. A home milling system allowed the Blackers to develop a product with a variety of styles and sizes that have sold throughout the UK with retail prices ranging from £270 to £1,185. Keith Blacker claims that apparently anywhere in Britain you will never be more than 20 miles from a Blacker woodstore!

The Blackers' programme of woodland management also provides a mix of environmental and community benefits. The thinning programme is transforming the woodland to help create areas of naturally regenerating understorey and enhancing wildlife value. Numbered bird boxes provide data on nesting frequency and serve as a catalogue of the attractiveness of the improved woodland.

Woodlands are also ideal learning environments and in recognition of this the Blackers provide a one hectare Forest School facility which provides opportunities for children from nine primary schools to enjoy the magic of a woodland experience; unfortunately a lack of funding limits the growth of such opportunities. The Blackers also support a MENCAP project in their woodlands as a personal commitment to putting something into a disadvantaged section of society.

The over-riding feeling from this inspiring visit is that it is enthusiasm coupled with innovation that drives this business. Keith Blacker as an engineer has not been hampered by tradition but has applied skills learnt outwith the industry to enhance a basic product and build a successful business that contributes to the economy and to society. Forestry needs more of his kind.

For more information visit: <http://www.edistone.com>



Firewood delivery is in wood boxes using a pallet truck handling system



A programme of thinning has added environmental value to the woodland



A 1 ha Forest School facility serves 9 primary schools and a MENCAP group