25 years of CCFG
Rodney Helliwell

Subsequent to a meeting on “uneven-aged silviculture” in Pershore, which I helped to organise in 1986, and one or two meetings in Oxford, the creation of the European body Pro Silva in 1989 provided a stimulus for the creation of the Continuous Cover Forestry Group (CCFG) in March 1991. There was a fairly strong view at that time that CCFG should be independent of any existing bodies in Britain or Ireland, and in retrospect this was probably essential. There was, and still is, much entrenched thinking around rotation lengths, planting areas, and prescriptive working plans which can make it difficult for some people to accept a different and apparently less structured approach to forest management.

At a workshop in North Wales organised and run by Mark Yorke soon after the creation of CCFG, I was standing next to Henry Ricketts, of Pryor and Ricketts Silviculture, when he had a sudden epiphany and turned to me and said “this is a totally different approach, isn’t it?” Yes!! At least one person had grasped the fact that this was not just a modification of the way in which foresters in Britain had been operating previously, but was a completely different approach.

Over the years, various people have enquired as to why we needed to adopt a new term. Why, for example, couldn’t we just call ourselves the Selection System Group? The answer was that continuous cover forestry (CCF) is not a particular system, but a basic approach to woodland management. The selection system might embody much of what CCF is about, but it is still a “system”; and some foresters have been unable to make the switch from thinking in prescriptive terms to going into the forest and doing what is needed in a predominantly reactive way. I had thought that it might take 15 years for CCF to become generally accepted, but after 25 years it appears that we are perhaps only now starting to achieve this to any substantial degree. There is likely to remain a place for even-aged and other systems, but I would expect CCF to play a major role in Britain and Ireland in the future, as it has so much to offer.
CCF [or “close to nature forestry”, or “Dauerwald”] requires foresters who have a thorough understanding of tree growth, daylight, soils, and woodland ecology, in addition to harvesting, marketing, planting, felling, and filling in forms; and the role of CCFG should be to help to facilitate the necessary changes in practice and governance to enable it to flourish. The term “close to nature” (or “proche de la nature”) does not imply that the forests are necessarily more “natural”, but a thorough understanding of forest stand dynamics and ecology is required to manage such woodlands.

There is an increasing amount of information to support the silvicultural and ecological advantages of continuous cover forests, and a growing body of knowledge on economic performance, and I would hope that this will lead to a reinvigoration of forestry in these Islands over the coming years. The net benefits should be greater, and the job of the forester will be more interesting. And perhaps, when much of our forest and woodland is managed in this way there might then be no further need for CCFG as a separate body, as this approach to management will have become a part of mainstream practice.