

Heavy Horses, Light Work

Low-impact horse logging is gaining ground. By **Nancy Wood**

The crackle of falling trees, the whiskery neigh of a horse, the low 'Steady, good lad' of the handler and the growing pile of logs by the track. Except for the sound of a chainsaw, this could be a springtime scene from a century ago rather than 2016. Attracting horse loggers' from right across the British mainland, the British Horse Loggers' (BHL) competition in May was a pocket demonstration of this ancient, economical, environmentally sensitive and sustainable method of woodland management.

Matt Waller, co-owner of Hawthorn Heavy Horses with wife Claudia, is hosting the competition event in the woods at Hylands Park in Essex where the couple lives and manages the woodland in a partnership with Chelmsford City Council. Matt reckons possibly as many as fifty horse loggers now work commercially in the UK in some way and that many others employ horses on their own land – up from a low of just three full-time horse loggers thirty years ago. Like most horse loggers, Matt and Claudia ferry their rare breed Suffolk Punches out to the woods for felling and extraction, and also offer bracken rolling, hay mowing and grass cutting, heavy horse 'experience days', and carriage rides for newlyweds as well as judging this year's competition and looking after entrants.

'The competition has two parts,' explains Matt. 'There is an obstacle course where we look at voice commands, balance, stacking, shunting and more. Then there's the extraction and felling competition where the handler fells three small trees and extracts them with the horse. We look for best practice and deduct points for mistakes.'

Carole and Peter Coates explain further, 'There's a lot to it. You need to read your tree if it's hung up and make use of your horse. There are ways of wrapping chains on the tree so it rolls as you pull it out. Of course, in competition you can't use all the naughty little tricks we all do when no one's looking.'

Kate Mobbs-Morgan, a judge in the obstacle event and chair of the BHL, says, 'Our competition is based on

Suffolk Punch Alex pulling a log, handled by Jeff Shea





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European horse logging competitions, where they take it very seriously. Here, it's more about encouraging people to come and have a go.'

The BHL group is an enthusiastic community, convinced that horse logging has a crucial role to play in all kinds of forestry and woodland management. The Forestry Commission, National Trust, many wildlife trusts and councils have come to agree. As has the Prince of Wales, who employs horse loggers on his estate and is now Royal Patron of both the BHL and the British Horse Loggers Charitable Trust. In order to encourage aspiring forestry entrepreneurs, the Trust operates a three year skills-based, fully accredited apprenticeship scheme (see box).

In this era of ever-increasing environmental sensibility, horse logging has re-established itself as the tool of choice in ancient woodlands and where woodlands are steep, dense or wet, or where sites of archaeological interest require sensitivity or endangered plants need protection. The ponies barely leave a mark.

Linda Thackray says, 'We used to do horse logging in East Anglia where we had heavy clay woodlands and the terrain was very wet. It's a site where, once you got machines in, you couldn't get them out until summer. And if you did use machinery, it would make ruts that would be there for thirty years. The heavy horses have broad hooves to spread their weight, so there is very little effect on the soil. The opposite of a woman in stilettos!'

Nick Walmsley, a forestry advisor for the Forestry Commission, has been quoted as saying, 'Heavy machinery can cause rutting, soil compaction and erosion. If you damage the soil, anything will struggle

Matt Waller judging felling and extraction

to grow. You can almost kill the soil this way. It's taken thousands of years to generate the soil in British woodlands. If we destroy it, our natural history is under threat. So we need to manage these sites in a sensitive way, and that's where you would bring in a horse logger.

And according to Linda, 'Lots of wildlife trusts really appreciate horse loggers because we can deflect public outrage at trees being taken down. We'll be felling in a public woodland and someone might start to become angry, then they see the horses and they calm down, because it seems natural to them, and they want to learn more.'

Horse logging is natural in the sense that the engine of work is made of muscle, not metal, but each horse logger develops his or her – there are lots of lady loggers – own method of getting the wood out. There are tools like timber arches and bracken bruisers, many of them from Scandinavia where horse logging never threatened to fall out of fashion. Steffi Schaffler, a former apprentice of the BHL Trust scheme who now has her own Ardennes, Lisa, in Dumfriesshire, says 'Horse loggers are like farmers. If they need a piece of kit, they invent it.'

The horses are a variety of breeds, from the Suffolk Punches to brown Dales to White Shires, tending to be small and sturdy with flowing fur over their fetlocks onto their hooves. Claudia says, 'Smaller horses are considered better for horse logging because their centre of gravity is lower. Though I did know a man who was the best horse logger in the country at one time and he had a Clydesdale.'

If you are interested in hiring a horse logger for your own woodland, a good place to start is the BHL website (see box) where you will find loggers operating all over the country. It's also a fine source to locate events and meetings. Volunteers are always welcome.

And if you are tempted to become a horse logger yourself, you will be in the company of many others who threw off their pasts to take up the reins. Nick Burton, who runs his Dutch draft mare, Elza, in mid Wales, came to horse logging after a career managing public open spaces in outer London. With his wife, his redundancy and the proceeds from the sale of his house, he trained with the Wallers before moving to Wales. He now manages 28 acres of softwood forest, ready for thinning, walking Elza down to the woodland each morning to pull logs out. He has owned the temperate 19-year-old horse for just three years. 'I was given good advice,' he explains, 'If you're a novice horse logger, don't buy a novice horse.'

And he, along with everyone else in the business, acknowledges that making a living from horse logging is 'difficult'. It is labour-intensive. Most actual logging work takes place in the damp and dark of the autumn and winter. Loggers tend to manage with the combination of activities that the Wallers and others engage in, a mixture of logging, demonstrations, public events and wedding transport.

This growing group of loggers, dedicated to their ancient craft, both its practice and its perpetuation, offer a window into the future of sustainable forestry. ■

Three Generations of Horse Logging

In the best year of horse logging that George Read can remember, he took out seven thousand tons of timber. That was nearly thirty-five years ago in Cumbria when he was working three horses simultaneously for Forest Enterprise. 'A normal day, we took sixty ton of timber out, twenty ton each horse.'

George began running horses when he was 11 years old, 'more than fifty years ago', learning from his father and going on to teach his son Kevin and now his granddaughter Saskia, 16, who found time to compete in the BHL competition just before facing her GCSEs.

When George was working three

horses at the same time, he could load a horse and send it down the mountain on its own, zigzagging like a skier, dragging a forty-foot length neatly behind. At the bottom on the haul road, someone would oversee the stacking and send the horse back up. Meanwhile, George would have sent another of his horses down the mountain and then the third. 'People say, 'You must have known some horses,' but I really haven't,' George says, 'because all my horses worked into their thirties. Every day, year in, year out. You have to work every day to be that good. It's the work that makes them.'

It was Kevin and Saskia who chose to compete this time. George says, 'The hardest bit is controlling the horse.' And it's clear he is proud of his progeny and pleased his granddaughter has shown an interest in the family tradition.

Will Saskia carry on horse logging, once she's left school? George and Saskia share a look. 'Yeah,' he smiles, 'she'll carry on.'
www.britishhorseloggers.org
www.britishhorseloggerscharitabletrust.org

Kevin, George and Saskia Read with Danny

