

A day in the life of a Dartmoor horse logger

Maxine McAdams talks to John and Clare Williamson about their Dartmoor Woodcraft business

PHOTOGRAPHS MAXINE MCADAMS

Low impact and sensitive: may not be the first words which naturally spring to mind when faced with all 1000kg of the equine powerhouse that is Jens, but – nonetheless – this is what would be written on his CV (if he ever had need of such a thing).

Standing 17 hands high and from good working stock, Jens has the perfect build and temperament for a draught horse, so much so that John Williamson travelled to Belgium to bring him home to the Teign valley where he plays a central part in John's and his family's life and work.

It is becoming harder to find good working British varieties of draught horse," he tells me. "In this country, Shires were usurped by the tractor and so the working temperament and build is slowly disappearing. Modern Shire horses are generally bred for showing and are more rangy than they used to be, with a longer back and skinner in the leg.

Also stallions aren't generally worked here, so a working mare will go to an unknown stallion and you don't get the total breeding history, whereas in Belgium draught horses continued to work after mechanisation so there is an uninterrupted tradition of working horses."

We're in a beautiful spot overlooking the Teign valley, on what promises to be a beautiful summer's day. As we discuss his credentials, 11-year-old Jens, peering out from behind his blonde forelock, seems to look (rather modestly) the other way.



John with Jens, the Belgian draught horse



The horses are ideal for extracting timber from sensitive or hard-to-access areas of woodland

I met John and his wife, Clare, at their 18-acre woodland near Bridford where they are currently two years into their management plan of restoring a sustainable coppicing system. As with much of Devon's woodland, access is limited and the terrain steep, and Jens' role in clearing and moving felled trees is pivotal.

"People's perception of horse logging is that it is old-fashioned, expensive or quaint, something to see at a county show rather than a legitimate 21st-century profession. Purpose-planted modern woodland is created with machinery in mind, but horses really come into their own in ancient or small woodland, anywhere where access is



Jens is an integral part of the Williamsons' working and family life

tricky or the terrain sensitive or challenging. This is the type of woodland which is often for sale but people see the difficulties, assume there's no money in it and the woodland gets abandoned.

John cites some recent contract work for the Fingle Woods project (a partnership between the National Trust and the Woodland Trust) as a good example of how traditional and modern methods can be used in tandem. A team of horse loggers (including John and Jens) worked for six weeks last winter clearing felled conifers from the area of Woodston Castle Iron Age hill fort to enable archaeologists to excavate the site (see DM126 spring 2017). The horse loggers did the more delicate work of pulling the timber to the boundary edge, where the machines took over.

Contract work for private landowners and organisations like the National Trust is a major part of the business and takes up the bulk of John and Clare's time from September through to March. Now that they have the woodland, the summer is spent making charcoal and running training courses and experience days. Any extra time goes into maintaining their own woods.

We drop down into the lower field which leads into the woods and I walk ahead opening the gates. John follows with Jens and behind them, Clare leads Louie.

Louie is a traditional cob, around 13 hands high, bred by the travelling community for pulling wagons, a mini draught horse with a sturdy heritage combining lines of native ponies with heavy horse breeds. He came to John and Clare untrained (laughing, Clare tells me how John trained her and Louie up at the same time).

There is an almost tangible connection between each horse and handler, and it was marvellous to witness the ease and efficiency with which the partnership



Clare attaches the timber to Louie's harness for transportation to the log pile



The horses stand patiently while John unloads the timber before heading off into the woods once more

manoeuvred huge logs around tight bends and up steep tracks. Jens can take around 1½ tons at a pull, but the amount of timber it is possible to move in a day can vary from anything between 5 and 20 bins, depending on the terrain.

As I follow behind, watching the horses work, the areas of coppice which have already been cleared are easy to spot. The land is classed as ancient (meaning it was planted before AD1600) semi-natural woodland, being predominantly made up of hazel, oak and birch, and has not been managed for some time. The trees are bent and gnarled, twisting and turning as they grow, fighting for light.

The Williamsons' plan envisages felling areas of the woodland in 10-year cycles, providing space and light for the new shoots to grow straight from the cut stools, giving them a higher market value as materials for hurdles, thatching spars and woodworking. Coppicing has been practised in this country for thousands of years, and woodland managed in this way provides pockets of environments at different stages of growth

which encourages a greater variety of plant and animal life.

Clare tells how important it is to spend time getting to know the land. "Rather than coppicing everything, we are leaving some standards, for instance we would never fell a veteran oak but would look to take out the smaller hazel and birch. Because we are here almost every day, we can see the effects of our actions and our impact on the wildlife."

With the extracted timber John and Clare have started to make their own wattle and cleft gate hurdles, but to date most of their labour has gone into producing charcoal, an industry which has been practised in the Teign valley since the 17th century. Marketing it under the name of Proper Charcoal, they sell bags of the fuel to local campsites, shops and online.

"We have got two big kilns set up in the woods and have created a high-quality product which lights easily and burns hot for a very long time. Because it is grown sustainably and without chemicals it is more expensive, but – as with the horse logging – it's a question of education. There is no need to