



## ***The job no one wanted. It turned out there was good reason for this.***

It was spring and the simple days, when cutting timber for the small group of local sawmills had been enough to keep everyone happy, were over. There were sawlogs and pallet wood that I had to find markets for, and although I had sold some small quantities to local outlets, it was a struggle, so I began to look further afield.

I had recently sold some rustic poles, by the lorry load, to a company in the North East. The business was based in a coastal town famous for its inhabitant's ancestors' treatment of a shipwrecked monkey during a disagreement with the French. They took the unfortunate primate to be a spy and his story ended on the gallows.

My little enterprise had been doing well until I met this new type of businessman. The timber wasn't what he wanted – it was too small, it was too big, it was too short, it was too long. Finally, after several weeks of skilful evasion, his business went into bankruptcy. It wasn't my load of rustic that had bust them and I wasn't the only one who got stung, but what really rubbed salt into the wound was that when the lorry went to retrieve the rustic poles, business was in full swing, and as you can guess, my wood was nowhere to be found.

It was with this fresh in my memory that I began dealing with WMS. They offered access to nationwide bulk markets and all payments were both prompt and guaranteed by insurance. I met the man behind WMS and we had a day touring the area which was new to him. It was refreshing that he seemed unconcerned that we were using a Fordson Major and a Roadless 115 to pull out timber. Instead he was very interested in the quality and the quantity of the timber at roadside.

The backlog of timber began to dwindle and we were soon in a period of transition where we were cutting more timber for bulk markets. This wasn't a problem as I was being paid every week, so times were good. It was usual to have a load of some sort going down the road on most days, and we never

had a big roadside stock which is always a good sign.

WMS was moving ahead and it was in the summer that the appointment of an agent was announced. He made himself very popular on his first site visit by changing the log specs, which saw a substantial rise in income – a great way to make friends and influence people. It was the beginning of a working relationship that was to last the best part of a decade. KB had a disregard for both reputation and authority. Anyone who wanted his respect would have to earn it. When the chips were down he would always stick up for his staff, but he expected a similar type of loyalty in return. This didn't mean he wouldn't try to use devious tactics to get what he wanted, or that he wouldn't try to screw a rate down here and there, but he would stick to an agreement once he made one – at least he always did with me.

It quickly became obvious that we were cutting too little timber for his high demand markets and so he kept offering me contracting jobs which were getting harder to resist. The Tree Gone Thinning Co now consisted of myself, Pete, Tim, who had recently qualified as a forester but was harbouring ambitions of becoming a poet, and the twins, who were probably the tidiest workers but the most infuriating pair ever to fell timber in the entire history of forestry.

It was around this time that Tim, Pete and I had been to look at a job on a local estate. It was on a hillside – a mixture of western hemlock and larch – and it was not particularly pretty. There was a distinct air of dissent in the van as we headed home and so I took the decision to take a detour and look at the latest job KB had offered. It was only 20 minutes from home, a lot better than the hour and a half we were currently travelling to Selby. It was a final thinning, Scots pine, big, almost dead flat and privately owned. We were all seeing it for the first time and we had to check the map several times; Tim and Pete could hardly believe it. Their mutinous mood had mellowed and they



*Sacked: aspiring poet, and reader of the Guardian, Tim Turnbull.*

couldn't understand why I didn't share their enthusiasm. They had seen the maps and the sale details but only I knew what the harvesting rate was and I was sure there had been a mistake. If there hadn't, it meant somewhere in this job there was a lurking gremlin. It had been on the market for a long time and the rate was far too good. Too late now... I couldn't turn it down and expect a happy workforce to fell horrible hemlock. I'd be back working on my own in a week.

The day came to start and the job seemed straightforward. Some of the marking looked a bit strange – it had been done using several different colours and we were used to trees marked with a slasher (not that we took much notice of marks). Some of the trees had crosses on, some almost had a coat of paint, but by bait time it was clear that whoever had marked the crop might just have been sniffing the paint fumes. When dinner-time came around we sat on some old timber near the gate, as it was a warm September day. Tim ventured his opinion that the marking had been done by various different students who couldn't be bothered to do a decent job. In fact, when he had been on such jobs, they had often gone through the stand as fast as they could and then headed for the nearest pub. This made perfect sense to us so we decided to ignore the marks, which had been applied in wet weather anyway, and would readily rub off. The entire job was a break from the norm as it was a fell and convert contract. KB had employed another local contractor to forward the timber out. Once the timber was stacked no one was going to take much notice of the marks. Naturally the twins didn't agree and it was pointless arguing with them as they would employ

their usual tactic of agreeing to do exactly as they were told only to do what they wanted once I wasn't looking.

With the situation fully under control we settled down with our dinners only to be interrupted by a car stopping on the roadside. Several minutes elapsed before an annoyingly dressed man appeared through the gate. His attire was made annoying by the yellow helmet that topped off his altogether too neat outfit. I had never seen anyone outside the FC wearing such a thing, and the fact that he was wearing it voluntarily filled me with dread.

"I don't like the look of this," Pete said without apparently looking up.

"Good afternoon gentlemen. Having lunch I see, and reading the paper. You can tell a lot from the paper a man reads."

I was reading the Sun. The twins were reading the Mirror, just one between the two of them. Tim was reading the Guardian.

"You're not reading a paper?" he asked Pete.

"I can't read." (An obvious fib.)

"Well what's that?" Pete was holding a small green book.

"This is Spons' Architects' and Builders' Pocket Price Book 1910."

"How do you know?"

"Simon collects old books. He lent me it." Pete nodded at me. "I'm just looking at the pictures but he told me all about it."

It was quite obvious the pages Pete had been studying had no pictures on them, but our visitor chose to disregard this.

"Who's in charge?" he asked directing his question at Tim who, he had obviously decided, had the best paper, and so was most likely to be the boss.

"Who wants to know?" Five voic-

es in perfect harmony.

This caught him off guard. It was clear he wasn't making the impression he had intended.

He explained that he was the area manager of the forestry company who looked after the woodland on behalf of the owners, and he was making his first site visit.

"Oh, I thought KB would have told you to ask for me by name. I thought you were some nosy local who didn't want the wood felling," I said ignoring the clipboard and the yellow helmet.

This was the briefest of his site visits and as we watched him pull away Pete said, "I know his type. He'll dish out his share of bollockings before this job's finished."

Just then we saw the Christian symbol of the fish on the boot of his departing car and Tim spoke some more prophetic words. "There's nothing worse than being bollocked by a prat with a fish on his car."

They were both right and his almost daily visits became like little battles.

It wasn't long before we all began to run out of marked trees, but this caused few problems until the twins called me into their strip. I walked past the neatly stacked piles of pulp and the pallet wood that was laid tidily across carefully placed sawlogs until we reached the cause of the problem that had almost brought on a stereo nervous breakdown. Where they had stopped felling there were about twenty trees all with marks on them.

It took a while but they decided the best thing to do was to start another strip and wait for the man we now called Fish to make a decision on what to do with the mini clearfell.

Fish made his next site visit the following day and this time he was prepared. He was not alone. He came straight to me while his two assistants headed off, clipboards at the ready. It wasn't long before I was getting the ticking off Pete had predicted but this was interrupted when the two assistants appeared and Tim and Pete both strolled past obviously heading for the van.

Tim shouted, "Early lunch," while Pete gestured over his shoulder at the two minions with one hand and at the same time made a distinctly disrespectful gesture with the other, all this in full view of Fish.

We were all guilty of felling unmarked trees and not treating stumps, except the twins who were not treating stumps, but had slavishly followed the marking.

I walked through the site with

Fish and he headed straight for the first strip the twins had felled. He lectured me on how bad it looked until we reached the end and he suddenly stopped and stared at the clearfell that had so perplexed the twins. I handed him my diary and pointed out the entry that would remind me to ask his opinion on this problem at his next site visit. I explained what we had done and he agreed our self select was much better than what had been marked, but it almost choked him to admit it.

This still left the issue of stump treatment. I had already spoken to KB and the contract said no stump treatment, but Fish insisted he wanted it done all the same. I brought up the issue of contracting rates. I told him I wanted another three pounds a ton which he rightly said was between me and KB. I pointed out that the owners would have to drop their price to cover my increase. He quickly pointed out that the contract was signed and he couldn't change it. A quizzical look was all it needed to make him decide to drop the stump treatment idea. He soon riled when I pointed out we deserved some more money as we were doing the marking for free, and I thought he would explode when Tim added that students shouldn't have been used to mark a final thinning. He went bright red and spluttered, "They usually do a pretty good job."

That was the end of the visit, but he rang KB as soon as he got back to the office and demanded a meeting with him ASAP. This seemed to worry the boss until I told him about the students which he found very amusing and not a little useful. I suspect this was why I heard very little about the meeting except that Fish didn't like my attitude, or indeed that of my staff, towards authority.

We all worked over the weekend, so by the time we had the next site visit the job was just about finished, which was lucky. Fish didn't turn up but one of his assistants sneaked onto the site from the blind side. The first we knew about the visit was when Tim came up the track, saw in one hand and felling bar in the other, its shaft stuck through his combi can handle. Fish's assistant was just a few paces behind and the look on Tim's face spoke volumes. The assistant pointed his finger at me and barked "Are you in charge?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You know who I am."

"I know you're going to be short

of a finger if you don't stop pointing it at me. Now, tell me who you are and what you want."

He begrudgingly explained he was making a site visit to check on our progress. He had been looking at some planting on an adjacent site so had come in from there. This was why he had come up behind Tim who was trying to lever a tree over.

"This man asked me to help him push a tree over and when I did it took at least another six trees with it."

"At least six!" Tim said grinning. The others murmured in approval despite the assistant's stony stare.

"Well, I don't consider it a safe method of working, do you?" he asked triumphantly.

"No, but you shouldn't have been helping him push it over either."

"That's got nothing to do with it." There was a noticeable pause. "I want you to discipline this man. He should be made an example."

By now the whole gang were gathered so he had a full audience. I looked at Tim who was struggling to keep a straight face.

"Tim, put your gear in the van. You're sacked."

Tim threw his saw onto his shoulder and without a backward glance he muttered, "About f\*\*\*\*\*g time."

We all looked at the young man who suddenly realised he might just be out of his depth.

"You can't sack him."

"What do you suggest I do, slap his legs and tell him not to do it again? Hanging one tree up is bad enough... but six."

"At least six!" someone added helpfully.

"That's dangerous."

"It's irresponsible!" the helpful voice added.

"You don't have to sack him, a ticking off would do. There's no need to go quite that far."

"I'm sorry – what's done is done. You were quite right. I'll put it in my report to WMS's agent. You can take it up with him."

"But I didn't ask you to sack him."

We all picked up our gear and within a few minutes four Husqvarnas were singing out and the young man was left to consider what his surprise visit had achieved. Shortly after he left, a fifth saw joined the Husqvarna chorus.

Tim said he watched Fish's assistant walk forlornly down the road to where he had parked his car and just for a moment, (a very brief moment), he had felt sorry for him.

I got a phone call from Russ, the forwarder operator, the following night to tell me that Fish and his assistant, the quiet one, had been looking for us on site and had been surprised the felling was all done. They didn't know we had worked until it was almost dark to get the job finished. We all agreed it was best if we didn't have to go back again after Tim's 'sacking'.

WMS bought numerous parcels of timber from the same company in the following years, but for some reason I was never invited to price jobs in one particular area.

*Simon Bowes*

Tim Turnbull is now an award winning internationally renowned poet and performance artist who lives in Perthshire. He has had numerous works published, including an early poem which describes an officious manager he once encountered, entitled simply *Fish*. You can read *Fish* and some of Tim's other stuff at [www.timturnbull.co.uk](http://www.timturnbull.co.uk).



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