

Trials & tribulations from a 200-year old forest nursery – Ronald Christie, Christies (Fochabers) Ltd

200 years and still growing, it is a huge achievement and I would just like to cover some of the highs and lows of a nurseryman. Our nursery was est. in 1820 by Thomas Christie. He worked as a gardener for the Duke of Gordon, born 1794 as a young man had a passion for horticulture, he served his time as gardener and was guaranteed an assured life on the estate. No, he wanted more, new varieties were arriving at the castle and he saw potential. He wrote to the Duke of Gordon requesting the lease of 1 acre of ground to produce fruit trees, bushes and vegetables. This was granted in the spring of 1820 at a cost of £2 11 shillings and sixpence and the Duke received the first payment on 7th December 1820 – Thomas was now in business and Christies was born.

Plants were constantly being sent back to Great Britain and his connections to the castle paid off – dahlias arrived from Mexico, fuchsias from South America, roses & chrysanthemums from China, rhododendrons from USA – business was good. He bought more land and built a house in 1835 at a total cost of £65, it stands today and is home to Neal & Janice and their Family.

He worked hard and began to realise that Forestry was the natural growth point and started growing Scots Pine for local estates. He managed to fit in a love life too and in 1845 at the age of 50 he started to propagate. Over the next 10 years he was a man of intense energy, producing 9 children!

By 1860 the Railway Age had arrived and the market for Forestry grew overnight.

Thomas died in 1870 at the age of 75 but had set the seeds for today. The next generation was now at the helm, it was heyday for private estates but, for the oldest son, William, it was a constant struggle to get enough seed.

Remember, the telephone was only invented in 1876 so orders were still being sent by penny post. William married in 1879 and had 3 sons, Thomas, William & James. James became a doctor in Glasgow and Thomas & William started a nursery in Forres now known as Christie Elite. Sadly, in 1891 his wife died suddenly and William, like all Christie men, needed a good woman by his side so he remarried in 1896 and had 3 more children. It was the eldest, George, that was to follow in his father's footsteps.

William continued to travel around shows in the UK and in 1906 went to source stock and seed in Holland and France, his life was rich and full. Suddenly, like millions, he received a sudden jolt with the outbreak of war in 1914. Food shortages developed, the demand for trees came to an abrupt halt and any available labour was used to fell timber. The Nursery was used to produce potatoes, grain and vegetables. They were difficult times, but William was assured by the seed he had stored from his good years and after the war finished in November 1918, he was ready to sow in Spring 1919.

I'm sure you all know from your studies that the Forestry Commission was established and passed the Forestry Act which helped the Nursery Industry to stabilise and removed the high risk. Unfortunately, William died, aged 70 years, not reaping the benefits.

This established the 3rd generation at the helm, but George was only 23 years old. And had a lot to learn – quickly! How he managed, we don't know, it must be in our blood.

He survived the Depression of 1930 during which time he had to find another source of income, so he built his first Greenhouse with heating pipes, the first of its kind in Scotland. This made growing early lettuce, tomatoes and chrysanthemums possible. Another greenhouse was built 2 years later plus the Forestry Market started to flow in 1934. By wise foresight seed sowing had been maintained. Business started to grow suddenly.

In September 1939 Great Britain declared war on Nazi Germany. In 1940 the Nursery automatically came under government control, the nursery had to concentrate on growing crops again and, despite shortages, the greenhouses received enough coal to produce tomatoes. Demand for Forestry trees had dried up and thankfully, the war ended in 1945.

Ford Ferguson Tractors were introduced, and mechanisation was on its way.

The nation was trying to make up for the years of planting lost during the war and business was again on the up. Propagation was now on my father's mind – he married in 1952 and I was born in 1954. The Fifth Generation has started followed by 2 brothers and a sister. My father had great vision. He expanded the nursery but also saw the need for other forms of income.

He opened a Garden Shop in Elgin, a Chemist Shop, 3 Florists and a hotel – this ensured jobs for all the family. I left school to join the company in July 1970 and worked 43 ¾ hrs a week – finishing Saturday lunchtime for £8 per week – 20p/hr. In August 1971 I was sent off to Merrist Wood Agricultural College in Guildford. I had just passed my driving test and had one of those old split windscreen Morris Minors (FRS 998 – 11people) It was a bit daunting as I came off the motor rail in the middle of London. I eventually found Guildford and spent 3 years studying Horticulture.

Looking back on it now it was the best training possible, plant identification every Saturday - I had huge problems being understood. Middle year was all practical. I got a good job at Tillhill Forest Nursery near Farnham. At this time, the Tillhill nursery was expanding and had the first cold store (Jacketed) for trees in the UK. A huge irrigation system was fitted, and I worked on Nissula Roll systems - early cells. Trees were grown for Wales 60/90cm Sitka. for Rolls Royce pension Scheme. Ireland started planting and of course the trees were sent to Scotland. I met my first wife, managed to get my OND in Horticulture, returned home, got married in 1974, Neal was born in 1978 – here starts the 6th Generation and our daughter Catherine was born in 1980.

In 1986, my father decided to become company consultant and I took over running the nursery.

The Industry was changing, people wanted mixed woodlands - CONSERVATION was the buzz word of the time. We started importing hardwoods, approx. 1.2 million/year, it was and still is a bit of a rollercoaster ride on the growing front, it all depended on grants. It came to a head in 1988 tax changes. We destroyed over 6 million trees over the course of 3 years, had it not been for my father's diversifications years before our business would have been finished. Many Nurseries closed. Looking back at records, from 1920 there were 39 private tree nurseries, today only 6 remain. The Forestry Commission had 9 in Scotland, now there is only 1.

The 90s saw many changes. Neal started working for the business in 1994, passed his tractor driver's license and never looked back. His first son, Conor, was born in 1998 – enter the 7th Generation. He perfected the technique and had a daughter and a further 3 boys.

A nurseryman needs good health, a good wife & family, good staff, good bankers, a good accountant and the rest should work. With this in mind I found my new partner, Christine, now my wonderful wife. They were difficult times, but time is also a great healer – Christine came with a budgie, cat, goldfish, dog and three lovely daughters. My brother Derek, decided to retire at the age of 40, my sister married a serviceman and moved south and by 2005 my brother Gordon and I had built up the business with the addition of a crematorium and two more caravan parks.

Gordon's daughters, however, had no interest in the business so we decided to split the company and expand in our own specialities. Christine, Neal and I borrowed £1 million to expand the Garden Centre that was being very successfully run by Christine, helped immensely by Nicki & Hannah.

Everything seemed to be going well. Forestry re-stocking had picked up, grants were good for new plantings and then came the financial crunch of 2008! Our bank, The Bank of Scotland, did not like retail (Garden Centre) and certainly not Forestry and they gave us 6 months to find a new bank or force foreclosure. Understandably, it was a very difficult time for the family, but Clydesdale Bank came to our rescue and have been very supportive ever since.

Plant health is always a priority and all nurseries have had to change. The main one was Red Band – Dothistroma. Our nursery operation was almost stopped in 2011 had it not been for Anna Brown and Hugh Clayden from plant health working with us to implement a spraying regime and planting programme, Scots Pine would not be grown today. Production of Ash stopped and Larch production reduced from 2 million to 150,000 plants because of Phytophthora. What alternative species have we left?

By 2012 Neal wanted to expand the mechanisation of the business as can be seen in the video. I did not realise he was going to expand my family also, falling in love with Janice who came with 2 cats, 2 boys and 2 girls – a minibus was required.

By 2015 Forestry, with the help of Fergus Ewing, seemed to have more stability, but employing good people has become more difficult with restrictions imposed by health &

safety, welfare units, chemical handling, dust, plant passports, ministry inspections... the list goes on. I am glad it is Neal's problem 😊

Christies is doing their bit for the environment having supplied over 1 ½ billion trees over 200 years and still supplying!

Covid forced us to close our Garden Centre business on 21st March 2020, all 45 staff on furlough, £400,000 worth of stock ready for a busy spring, £1.2 million Forestry stock ready for despatch, 35 full time staff and 40 Eastern European workers also on furlough.

6 staff remained. Huge changes were required and within a month Neal reorganised the shed, bought welfare vans, new staff rooms, etc. Changed planting machines with partitions (Husband/Wife – Brother/Sister – Pods)

Although the Forestry Land Scotland shut up shop the private sector saw opportunities and worked on. I thank you for that.

We managed to supply another 2 million trees, unfortunately, the remaining stock had to be lined out again.

We were able to source a substantial loan through Clydesdale Bank with the support of the government. This loan enabled us to safely continue our forestry operations and honour our commitment of £250,000 pre-treated seed which was ready for sowing in May – this stock will produce plants in 2023/2024

Finish on a positive note

The Garden Centre reopened on 1st June with sales up 20% week on week. Everybody, with the help of good weather, started to live in their own gardens. There was a huge demand for plants, compost, pots and garden furniture. The sawmills were also very busy with replacement garden fences, garden sheds, bike sheds, garden offices and decking – garden heaters are sold out throughout Europe!

Forestry

Stock was already scarce due to COVID and it was going to be difficult for all nurseries for 20/21 and 21/22 seasons. We missed weeks of Spring planting. Pre-COVID we had and are increasing production, sales this season should reach 22 million, growing to 25 million 21/22 and 28 million 22/23.

The Scottish government are offering 40% grants to nurseries, thank you to Confor, Stuart Goodall, through Jamie, James Nott, Fergus Ewing for pushing this forward. We are looking to invest £1.2 million if all grants are approved, to build much needed cold store, Gazelle treatment plant to treat Hylobius, lifting machines and new, state-of-the-art grading benches with elevators and counting machines, our target is 30 million plants by 23/24. The UK has committed to plant 30,000 hectares by 2025, the last time that this was achieved was in 1975.

Rest assured, with your support, Christies will be part of this for years to come!