

# Continuous Cover Forestry delivers numerous pay days

This Limerick farm shows how mixed species forestry can deliver a whole range of valuable benefits.

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**T**he 2023-2027 Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) Forestry Programme, which includes a massive €1,300m to help landowners integrate forests into their farm businesses, encourages diverse types of forest and innovative ways to manage them.

The aim is to produce wood, but also a range of additional benefits to landowners, the environment, and society in general. Limerick farmers Betty and Jonathan Sykes have shown how this can work.

"Twenty years ago, we planted some of our less productive farm land with mixed tree species as a way to diversify income, enhance the local environment and complement our farm's hospitality business," says Betty.

"Today, the woodlands are well established and are an integral part of our farm operation and our daily lives. I could not imagine the farm without our woodlands."

The Sykes' woodlands complement 78ha of well managed grassland at Springfield farm near Drumbcolliher.

"We initially planted seven hectares of broadleaves, including beech, sycamore, oak and some cherry on very heavy land in 1993," says Jonathan.

"In 2000, we added a further 17ha of mixed species with oak, ash, spruce and beech, with some larch and Scots pine.

## Initial management.

The first thinning was carried out within the Woodland Improvement Scheme funded by DAFM. "It included the removal of many of the larch trees that we ultimately used as fence

posts," adds Jonathan.

"The main benefit of selective thinning, of course, is that the best trees reach their potential as valuable saw log timber."

He points out that the majority of the small diameter hardwood thinnings removed so far have been sold as firewood to local contractors, with some used to heat the large house on-site.

The house is used as tourist accommodation for groups of up to 25 guests. The wood-burning boiler is saving up to €20,000 per annum, while helping reducing the business's carbon footprint.

## The medieval tower restoration

Many mature trees, up to 300 years old, have been retained on the farm and are valued for their landscape and biodiversity role. Some, particularly the wind-blown oak trees, were sawmilled on-site and used in the restoration of a medieval tower, which is located near the house.



Interior of Springfield medieval tower refurbished using local oak. \Mark Moore



Jonathan started the restoration of the medieval tower in the early 2000s. At the time, the roof was missing and some of the stone work needed







Jonathan Sykes and Jonathan Spazzi discussing forest management in the oak section. \Mark Moore

substantial upgrading. Through the years, and with great dedication and skill, Jonathan has been able to fully restore the tower, which is now available to visiting guests and forms a big part of Springfield farm's hospitality offering.

All the timber for the internal work was sourced and milled on the farm and skilfully crafted by local carpenter Barry Hamilton.

### Hardwood focus

As the hardwood logs have developed, following from the initial thinning, Jonathan has become involved with a local discussion group, started and facilitated by Teagasc. Its focus is on adding value to small diameter hardwood thinnings and helping the development of intermediate hardwood markets, in addition to firewood.

"Many of the participants had applied Woodland Improvement thinning to their forests, managed trees



Traditional dresser made from one small diameter sweet chestnut tree. \Mark Moore

in their plantations to good size and quality and were looking to explore added value markets," says Jonathan.

The group secured support under a DAFM forestry promotional programme for a range of activities, including a study trip to Wales to meet forest owners, businesses and agencies involved in innovative hardwood processing.

"Following the study tour to Wales, we decided to invest in some sawmilling equipment on the farm," says Jonathan.

With this installed, he has been able to convert some of the timber from thinning into posts, beams and planks for the medieval's tower up-keep, as well as producing timber for other farm constructions.

The latest venture is the manufacture of a traditional design dresser in partnership with Barry Hamilton.

"This beautiful piece of furniture was made with only one small size sweet chestnut tree, felled as part of routine thinning. It shows the potential to add value to small/medium diameter hardwood logs," says Jonathan.

### Management outlook

Jonathan describes how he now manages the forest under continuous cover forestry (CCF): "The idea is to allow the forest to develop long-term as a diverse and a healthy ecosystem. This will ensure not only productivity, but also biodiversity and resilience. The timber is harvested by selective felling of individual trees or small groups," he says.

"Over time, this approach enables quality production, ensures a permanent forest cover and a high landscape value. The latter is particularly important for our hospitality business.

"As trees mature further and come into seed production, the selective tree felling approach will create the opportunity for new trees to naturally regenerate and grow in the gaps."

CCF management at Springfield is ongoing and a second thinning will be carried out in the coming months, with the help of the Woodland Improvement Scheme funded by DAFM.

### Knowledge transfer and innovation

Over the years, Jonathan has partnered with a German organisation called Bildungshaus Heideiland HVHS through an Erasmus programme that periodically brings forestry students from Germany to do work experience and learn about Irish forestry. They are qualified in tree felling and plan to work in the forestry industry after their training.

This year, Betty and Jonathan will be further collaborating with a new Masters programme run by the School of Architecture at TU Dublin. This collaboration is facilitated by Teagasc and will explore opportunities for utilising small diameter forest thinning in new building practices based on regional construction methods to reduce embodied carbon in buildings.

The project will involve four Masters students and will aim to dovetail with the continuous cover management model adopted in Springfield.

Other landowners interested in finding out more about the forest development work at Springfield will have the opportunity to attend a National CCF open day planned for 6 July in Co Limerick, organised by Teagasc Forestry Development Department (FDD).

On the day, a new online training facility will also be presented. This new forest management educational resource is targeted towards owners and other groups interested in CCF management. This is the result of an Erasmus-funded project, a collaboration between the FDD and forestry development agencies from Belgium, France and Germany.