



ASHKIRK TIMBER COMPANY BRANCHES OUT

*Skeldon - Owner of
3 Different Models of
Bryce Post Drivers*

WHEN YOU MEET THE SKELDONS BASED AT ASHKIRK NEAR HAWICK IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS, YOU UNDERSTAND FULLY WITHIN THE FIRST MINUTE OF SPEAKING TO THEM THERE IS NO MESSING.

They are very well organized and focus on high daily tallies with the minimum of effort. Quality well-maintained equipment and a reliable workforce are top priorities for these guys.

Working in remote and rugged country where at times you never see even a glimpse of a human being, requires hardy souls and reliable, high output equipment. John, Neil and Michael Skeldon's late father Adam was a woodcutter with a speciality of felling big hardwoods. Opportunities arose and Adam took them, so in 1972 he bought an ex-gravel quarry and with a new house under construction, and with foresight and the ability to clinch a deal, Adam started building what was to be known as Sandyhaugh Sawmill. Home-sawn timber was cut and these large timber-framed sheds sprang up like mushrooms. The original Yankee rack bench is still there but with demand for fencing material and with big contacts with the Coal Board rolling in for pit props (for the coal mines) 4 Stenner saws were installed to cope with demand. – one of which was a 4-headed multi. This could rattle

through 5000 1m x 100mm x 19mm boards/hr. Indeed – they could produce an artic load in 4/5 hours. 2000 x 3.6m rails/day was another impressive statistic for a small family mill with the 3 boys working at night and weekends until they left school – and they couldn't leave quick enough! With Adam's wife Margaret also working in the sawmill it made for a formidable team.

Michael went out on his own and into timber harvesting with 3 harvesters and 3 forwarders but with the disease in larch and a big problem finding careful reliable operators, that business was wound up so he is now back home working with his 2 brothers. Days start by rising at 5.30am and often not home till 7-8pm in the evening.

Timber Treatment

All the fencing materials that they sold required treatment so a creosote plant was installed. All timber was air-dried in drying sheds then loaded into the tank which was then filled with creosote heated with the sawmill offcuts. Yes – green energy was on the go way back



John & Neil Skeldon with 2 of their 3 Bryce post drivers

in the 70's and well before that too ! Unfortunately this simple treatment plant had to be mothballed because of regulation requirements and also because the Skeldons couldn't deal with the volume required to keep a very busy fencing contract business running at the speed required to cope with the output of a very mechanised system used to keep up with the workload.

Now they take all their timber to Robertson Timber of St. Boswells to get what is regarded as the best modern day treatment available in Scotland. Robertsons offer a 20 year guarantee from Arch Timber Protection on all redwood timber supplied and treated by them.

New Fencing Business & Mechanisation

So in the mid-90s times were changing, coal mines were closing down and the demand for pit props dried up. For father Adam and 3 strong boys, Michael, John and Neil, fencing was the obvious next step. Adam supplied fencers with materials and as some were starting to retire he took the opportunity to start up a fencing contract business. They bought a new Kinghitter post driver from Jock Bryce and they started picking up a bit of work here and there which tied in well with their existing sawmill work. In 2001 they bought their first Bryce Suma as they needed something that was quicker and made the job easier.

On lower ground but still hard and all rockspiked. Dave runs out the wire and John does the posting for 12 exercising paddocks for bulls



Business really started to take off and in order to achieve high outputs of erected fence, ramping up mechanisation was the only way to do it, or start losing business. "My late father offered sound advice – think hard before you spend it – go and look and listen" says John. High investment in equipment now gives them the weekend off – fencing at least, but you might just find them in the sawmill on a Saturday pointing stakes or peeling posts. These guys are born and bred to graft. David Gillon worked for Colin Robertson for 29 years – firstly fencing and manufacturing gates, sheep troughs, potato boxes etc and for the last 20 years was yard foreman in full charge of the treatment plant. With his prior experience and knowledge of fencing and treatment Dave was the perfect fit and 4 years ago became the 4th member of the Skeldon team. Two teams of two when required – and no time for hangers-on!

The Skeldons now run three Bryce post drivers – a Forest Supreme, a Profi with all the extras and an HD180, and this combination gives them the perfect fit for all the different fencing they do and the different types of country they fence in which can be either hard, steep or bog - and on some jobs, a combination of all three.

As John Skeldon says "we wouldn't go

past the Bryce. We have looked at other makes that on paper appear to tick a lot of boxes, but when you get down to the nitty gritty, their overall rating falls way short of the Bryce machines in terms of very fast cycle times, performance and reliability. Bryce machines aren't worn out after 2 years use – think 10 years plus, and you still get strong money for them. If you look at the build quality, the attention to details, the rockspike systems and quadshift, what can you say – there's nowt else to touch them.

We have considered a lighter tracked machine that we can tow with the pickups. It would be handy but it simply wouldn't work as the ground we work on can vary so much, even on the same job – soft and easy then very hard or stony. We need the output and can't accept a compromise – if you can't get the strainers in the ground the full depth then you are not a professional contractor.

You can't single out one machine as the best – they are all topnotch and all have a big part to play. Having said that, the HD180 is the one that gets the most use day in and day out. It can just about go anywhere, get into the most inaccessible places and it takes the rough with the smooth in its stride. We can drive stakes for upwards of 2000 mts per day with the 180 and still drive heavy strainers with ease – it's

a masterpiece. We now have our sights set on a 2nd HD180.

John continues "I don't think Jock Bryce gets enough recognition for what he has achieved. For a working man to do what he's done deserves the highest recognition. I remember when he holed up in an old caravan in 1976 up the top end of Ettrick Valley. He erected 20,000 mts in 4 months all on his own and he's now on the World stage – takes some beating does that. He was a grafter. He has revolutionised the way fencing is done with his machines all over the World. Jock has set the bar and he keeps raising it. The rest now try to copy what he does and I don't have any respect for these kinds that do that. They haven't got what it takes and look on others for ideas, but they will never beat the man that kicked it all off. I know he has spent a fortune on protecting his ideas and I really hope it stands him in good stead."

Wire Dispenser

Like post drivers the Skeldons have looked at net unrollers/tensioners. Two problems here says Neil – "they tie up a tractor and with a lot of our fences having many turning posts, you would be in and out the tractor lifting net round the back of posts all the time, plus on these twisty fence lines you can't pull the net to one end – you have to pull it to the middle with the clamps to get even tension at both ends. We can often be unrolling net down steep banks, through a burn (a stream in Scotland) and up the other side." Apart from tricky high hill country, a lot of their work is round forestry and woodland with many twists and turns. The last 2 stretches of the current job they are completing had 17 strainers in 250 metres and 7 strainers in 100 metres. "There is no way you could use these modern unrollers with 500mt rolls of net efficiently where we operate, so we made our own net dispenser and it works perfect. Pulled behind the Gator, it goes anywhere and we also always have the tools and clamps etc on board the Gator to strain the fence and get the

An end strainer on a stock net fence with a hot wire still to run. Traditional expertise is still practiced in its simplicity.



job done quickly". It is easy to load up the machine with 500metre rolls and no forklift or loader required.

Summary

The more you speak to these guys the more you are convinced of their arguments. They are always thinking and trying to find a better way to make it quicker and easier. When you consider another recent tally on a hill farm of 4400 metres double scare wire on dyke backs (double guard wire on drystone walls), 385 metres of high tensile stock net and 10 swinging gates in 5 working days, you can't take it away from them.

The Skeldons appear to have the perfect team – all have been involved in timber all their lives and when on the job each one knows the next move instinctively. They all work in harmony, they cover big distances fast, forward planning and logistics is key and they have the willingness to invest to cater for their large customer base.

**Ashkirk Timber Company
Sandyhaugh Sawmill
ASHKIRK
Selkirkshire TD7 4PE**

Tel : 07796 470100



A typical HT stock net fence often encountered with many turns. In this case 17 strainers over 250 metres.



Skeldons Wire Net Dispenser