Woodlands & Rural Development

Rural Development Practice Note No. 3

LAKELAND COPPICE PRODUCTS
Summary
This Practice Note highlights a coppice workers business in south Cumbria. It illustrates the history and drivers of the owner for establishing the business. The required tools and capital investment are outlined along with marketing techniques deployed to make and sell the wide range of coppice products produced. Future opportunities for higher value, lower volume production are detailed along with a flavour of the business financial position.

History & Business Development
During 1998 redundancy threatened Ian’s livelihood as a senior computer programmer for a leading insurance company. Though relocation was offered as an option the necessity for 2-3 hours of travelling per day was not an inviting prospect and consideration was given to seeking alternative employment. With 18 months lead in to the redundancy date it was possible to investigate a number of options, and inspired partially by the television programme “Spirit of Trees”, further research was made into the possibility of developing a new business as a coppice worker. With no previous experience Ian joined the Coppice Association NW who helpfully were able to put him in contact with a number of active coppice workers for informal chats and some hands on experience as well as offering information on available courses and practical training.

Equipment
As with any business starting with the basic equipment ensures that the overheads and running costs are kept to a minimum, and whilst it is possible with the appropriate skills to produce all coppice products using only hand tools, a balance must be struck between tradition and mechanisation that is appropriate to the individual’s lifestyle and other commitments (family etc.).

Initial purchases included a suitable vehicle for accessing woodlands, in this case a Land Rover, chainsaw (with appropriate safety clothing and training) and a ring kiln for making charcoal. During 2002 a Massey Ferguson 135 tractor and a firewood processor were acquired and most recently a Rail-o-Matic portable chainsaw mill. The total approximate expenditure on equipment is tabulated below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equipment</th>
<th>Approximate cost</th>
<th>Year of purchase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land Rover</td>
<td>£6,000</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand Tools</td>
<td>£250-£300</td>
<td>2001-2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chainsaws/safety equip/ training</td>
<td>£1,500</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ring Kiln</td>
<td>£700</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tractor</td>
<td>£2,000</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firewood processor</td>
<td>£2,900</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portable chainsaw mill</td>
<td>£1,200</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total capital purchases</strong></td>
<td><strong>£14,600</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Work Sites
Obtaining work sites has not proved difficult and in most instances it is possible to secure the material for free, particularly where the woodland has been neglected or the terrain is difficult to work. Coppice woodlands that are managed may incur a cost as they are in greater demand, offering quality timber and diversity of product.

Markets
Investigation into local markets with the assistance of other coppice workers indicated that charcoal and firewood were perhaps the easiest to exploit, and due to their potential size could easily absorb another producer. In reality charcoal proved difficult to sell due to a poor summer and the fact that many niche markets already stock locally produced charcoal, despite this Ian has some 32 local outlets receiving 500 bags (approx 1.5 tonnes) per annum. Supply of materials and markets for coppice products are often seasonal and often depend on the weather. Cutting of hazel for example is generally only undertaken during the winter months and supplies of firewood and charcoal material must be cut far enough in advance, normally 6-8 months, to allow for a moderate amount of air-drying.

Ian indicated that he could sell as much firewood as he could produce and that he intends to exploit this market wherever possible but is aware of the problems of seasonal production. Additionally, recent enquiries from a leading supermarket chain in the north have currently ensured markets for his total charcoal production, though bulk selling reduces the price considerably.

As well as the main market mentioned above sales have also included oak beams, cleft oak trellis and fencing, bird feeders and bird boxes, besoms, hurdles, pea sticks and a bespoke handcrafted gazebo. To date however, sales of craft items have been fairly slow.

Advertising
Ian has an excellent website at www.lakelandcoppiceproducts.co.uk with regular diary and photo updates as well as product information and prices. Web site advertising accounts for approximately one quarter of all enquiries, mainly charcoal, firewood and hurdles, and remaining enquiries and sales are made via word of mouth, return custom, through other coppice workers and when attending shows. Advertising can be expensive and does not always produce the desired results. Mail shots and e-mail advertising during 2002/03 developed no additional market outlets.

Employment
Currently the business employs only the owner though he is fortunate to be assisted two days a week, free of charge, by a retired friend. During 2001 the business made a loss, in 2002 it broke even, though this included no drawings for the owner. It is hoped that the business will make a profit in 2003 giving the owner a small income. If this is achievable, and if prospects look encouraging for 2004, Ian would like to employ an apprentice full time with assistance from “The Bill Hogarth MBE Memorial Apprenticeship Trust”.

Future proposals
Wherever possible Ian would like to concentrate his efforts on the production of high value craft and bespoke items (hand crafted beams, gazebos etc.), however he is realistic enough to know that he must also maximise his bulk markets (firewood and charcoal) at least in the short term to continue in this line of work. To enable him to display and market high value items it is proposed, finances allowing, to move to larger premises.

Ian sees great potential for on site conversion of large trees particularly where access is a problem. Whilst most of the timber would be earmarked for his own use or re-sale he also envisages sawing of material for local landowners who wish to utilise their own timber.

Grants
All capital purchases and setting up of the business was undertaken through private finance; however approval has been given through Cumbria Woodlands “Forest Futures” Grant to assist with half the cost of the chainsaw mill and half the cost of an additional ring kiln.

Conclusion
This Practice Note illustrates the development of a young coppice lifestyle business. It shows that limited start up costs can generate a livelihood providing appropriate marketing is undertaken. There are large areas of woodlands in Cumbria requiring the type of management undertaken by coppice workers and grant mechanisms in place to promote appropriate management, business start-ups and capital investment in existing enterprises.