



FEATURE

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTENARY CONFERENCE



The Institute's Centenary National Conference 2025 looked back at the last century and ahead at the future of forestry, providing delegates with plenty to chew on. This personal reflection shares some overarching 'meta' themes that emerged for the author.

For many of us, the ICF National Conference is an important chance to decompress from the daily round of action, reaction and problem solving that is part and parcel of the forestry industry.

While modern forestry embraces a broad spectrum of people and backgrounds, I entered the sector to be in the natural world rather than be among people. In my day, the well-trodden path involved completing the academic qualification, acquiring a canine familiar and heading off into the wilds, leaving the complexities of the world behind.

Things have changed: forestry and arboriculture, whether urban and rural, now involves human contact and daily interactions with people. And though my younger self sought isolation, I have come to value those interactions. The opportunity to step aside from the daily grind is an important one: to share a space with others struggling with the same challenges and to understand that we are not isolated in those struggles.

As always, the National Conference provided much food for thought. Being a classic introvert, I tend to be a slow and internal thinker. I shrink away from asking questions in front of a large audience – by the time I've formulated my question, everything has

moved on. But many of these ideas and discussions sit with me and arise in conversations in days or weeks after the event, creeping into seemingly unrelated discussions.

Everybody at that conference would have had different interests and took away things pertinent to their daily professional lives. For me, what marked out this year's conference from those previous to it was the opportunity to reflect on the road we have travelled, where we now stand and what lies ahead. I've long been interested in how we function as a community of foresters and arborists, where we fit into society and how this differs from other countries and other cultures.

The big issue of land use

Several overarching themes emerged for me, though I recognise that different ones may have emerged for others. Often, it was not in the content of the presentations, but something that emerged in the Q&A, a chance phrase or a candid remark.

The first theme goes back to the dawn of time in modern forestry terms, and was highlighted by Dr Julie Urquhart in Session Five, in response to a question about what had made the



David Henderson-Howat FICFor, Dr Daniela Kleinschmit and Ross Hampton in the Session One Q&A

greatest impact over the last 100 years. She replied simply and without qualification: the separation of agriculture and forestry. This was such a profound and far-reaching statement.

When outlining the birth of modern forestry after the First World War, we tend to focus on this from our own perspective. The Acland Report, the establishment of the Forestry Commission, the target of a million acres, the strategic reserve. The only real constraint that was placed on the nascent forestry organisation was that it should not compete with agriculture, as food production was even more crucial to national security than timber.





Professor Julian Evans OBE FICFor receives The Institute's Medal



Delegates had many exhibitors to speak with throughout the conference



Dr Keith Kirby FICFor speaks in Session Five – Environment



Dr Helen McKay OBE FICFor CEnv receives The Institute's Medal



Ben Gunneberg MICFor introducing Session One – Policy on Day One of the conference



Delegates raising a toast at the Conference Dinner during a speech given by Geraint Richards MVO FICFor



Dr Julie Urquhart speaks during Session Five – Environment

For long, this disaggregation was not an issue, but in time it led to an entirely artificial division which characterises the British land use sector in a way that simply does not occur across most of continental Europe.

After 1919, there were only two directions that forestry could go: up the hill and out onto the very poorest land, or into the old woodlands that had been devastated during the wartime fellings. A century later, that pressure for planting land is as pressing as ever. However, as forestry seeks to move back down the hill, it comes into direct conflict with the aspirations of the farming community, who see their own culture and legacy as under threat.

Understandably, this tension and competition over land has flared up from time to time, creating an ideological battle ground: the need for food production versus timber production, both claiming an ancillary justification under biodiversity and recreation.

Going forward, the momentum is in one direction. It is unlikely that farmland will be created out of forests. That tide turned many years ago. We need to be mindful of this going forward. Our gain is always somebody else's loss and it is important that these sensitivities are navigated with respect and due diligence. We need to reintegrate land use and our approach to land use.

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The best and the worst of forestry

This brings us to my second theme, articulated by Dr Keith Kirby FICFor, who has borne witness to the best and worst aspects of forestry practice. He was right to point out the legacy of shame that still dogs the sector. I came into forestry just as Nigel Lawson's Big Bang budget of 1988 closed the door on the Schedule D tax loophole, thereby tipping afforestation into a terminal nose-dive.

The now largely forgotten book by Steve Tomkins, *Forestry in Crisis: The Battle for the Hills*, published in 1989, drew attention to the problems of the forestry industry at the time and caused quite a stir. But despite not being involved in forestry when all this was taking place, I still carry the burden of it, and for years have had to defend our industry against the charges still brought against us, 40 years after the event.

Why is this? Surely in the drive for production, virtually the whole rural community was lured in the same direction, spurred on by a succession of governments. Farming intensified, woods and hedges were grubbed out, and deep peats drained under the auspices of government subsidy and 'improvement'. So why are we plagued by the shame and farmers are not?

The mistakes of the past may not be completely indelible, but they are certainly durable. Our legacy remains on full show, and only now are we starting to deal with many of them.

I think the answer lies in the visibility of the scars and shifting baseline syndrome. Once hedges and woods are removed from the landscape and replaced by larger fields full of wheat or grass, it is almost as if they never existed. Their echoes linger on old maps, in crops marks or as remnant vegetation, but by and large there is very little reminder of what was lost, and world moves on.

Not so for the forester. The mistakes of the past may not be completely indelible, but they are certainly durable. Our legacy remains on full show, and only now are we starting to deal with many of them. From the lodgepole pine covering the Flow Country and forest boundaries straining against the contour in the Southern Uplands, to the pockets of spruce lurking in the ancient woods of the lowlands – our legacy is likely to be everywhere for decades to come.



Several Past Presidents of the ICF received special recognition in a ceremony held before the Conference Dinner

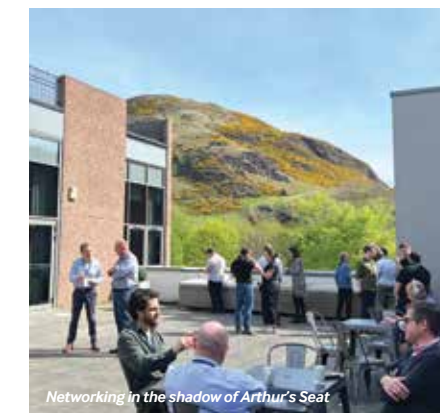
Wrestling with the profit motive

So, is it any wonder we have struggled to secure a social licence – the third theme I'd like to pick up on? Again, the farming community has been very successful in being forthright regarding their contribution to society and the national interest. We've been less convincing in this respect, despite the massive strides made in the last 40 years. And to a degree it is this enduring legacy of shame that has dogged us. But there is something else.

Farmers are businesspeople. Yes, they grow food and provide other services valued by society. But they must make a profit, or their businesses will fail to function. Foresters seem to be measured by a different standard determined by perceived motivation. In general, the public can get behind a native woodland scheme and love the idea of trees, but often struggle with the notion of a conifer scheme.

For some reason, it is deemed acceptable for farmers to make a profit, but not forest owners. Making money from trees is often viewed as a profanity, a sacrilege.

Very often the language works against us: commercial conifers, exotic conifers, productive conifers – euphemisms that are constantly refreshed as the last one becomes stale and tainted with the smell of profit. For some reason, it is deemed acceptable for farmers to make a profit, but not forest owners. Making money from trees is often viewed as a profanity, a sacrilege.



Networking in the shadow of Arthur's Seat

This duality is not helped by some organisations that nobly forego the profit from their woods and are financially sustained by the generosity of a grateful public and private benefactors. This allows them to remain free from the taint of profit, but it hasn't done the rest of us any favours. Recognising the need for proactive management, some of these charities have recruited foresters and have started to manage their woods – not for profit, but accepting that management can result in a financial outcome that need not be ignored.

This remains a work in progress, but part of that work is to convince the public that environmental benefits and business are not mutually exclusive activities. I was pleased that Robert Penn was able to trot out the old saw that the wood that pays is the one that stays. It's as true today as it ever was.

Professionalism in the AI age

I shall finish almost where the conference started. Inevitably, the emergence of AI threaded its way in and out of the conference. I have no doubt that this will have as much impact on forestry as it will elsewhere, although the extent remains to be seen. In the early part of Day One, Ben Gunneberg MICFor claimed to have asked an AI programme what the difference was between expertise and professionalism. The pithy response was: "expertise gets you through the door, but professionalism keeps you there". When I got home, I asked AI a similar question but received a less witty response. I was rather stodgily informed that expertise is related to knowledge, but professionalism was related to conduct. Both answers are equally true, even if one was more memorable than the other. Our knowledge will open the doors to the future, but it will be our conduct that will allow us to participate in it.