

Unpopular Poplar

No one really wanted the stuff before Sudbrook closed. Now it is even less sought after.

Christmas seemed to be a long drawn out affair this year with one job coming to an end right on cue on the Thursday before, which allowed for a decent break over the festive period. The follow-up job for the new year was put off by a decision that the roads in the wood where we had been working would not stand up to another contract until the summer, which left the whole work programme high and dry as three out of the four jobs lined up to start in 2006 relied on extensive road improvements or the end of the pheasant shooting season.

One job was available for an immediate start but it was poplar planted in 1990 that would have to be extracted across a previously harvested sugar beet field and then up a slope across a grass paddock. Wagon access was through a farmyard, and in my experience loading 44 tonne arics on grass in winter has never worked out well. One plus point was that the site was just a mile from the A1(M) so persuading hauliers that it was a good idea was never going to be too difficult.

A letter had arrived from St Regis over the new year that had drastically cut my allocation of volume into Sudbrook in January to a round figure – zero. This had been increased slightly for February but looking back it is clear now that the writing was on the wall... but then it seemed inconceivable that Sudbrook would close.

I had already decided to have a

decent lay off in January as 2005 had been a hectic year with about 50 weeks worked, so most of the month was spent in glorious inactivity much to the annoyance of others who had to go back to work straight after the new year.

In between doing a few days of paid work here and there, a quick visit to view the stand of poplar was arranged and I managed to surprise myself how well I am able to conceal my satisfaction when viewing a parcel of timber these days. It may have only been poplar but at 15 years old and averaging almost a metre per stick it was pretty impressive. I listened impassively as the owner explained that it was an experimental plot that had been nurtured with a great deal of TLC through its short life. I was doing well until he explained that it had been thinned about 4 or 5 years ago and the improvement in its growth rate had been quite marked after that. I mused that it hadn't been exactly snail like in the first ten years. We made an agreement on price and set the start date for as soon as he had the required paperwork. I was already working on the assumption that getting the entire volume into Sudbrook might not be possible and so I had a fall-back option, but the price was more fall down than fall back.

The felling licence was duly granted and the volume estimate was 200 cubic metres. Myself, Ralph and the Baron set about felling and converting all but the outside



The Baron showing good directional felling skills narrowly missing a neighbouring tree.

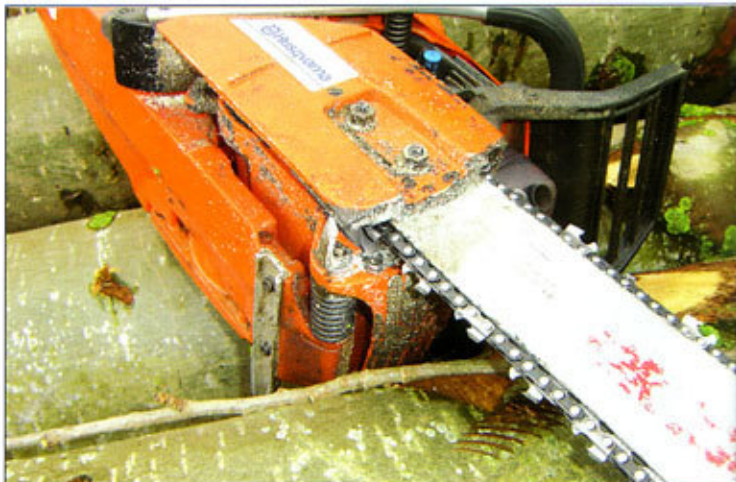
two rows on the first Monday in February.

This was the kind of felling that could convince me that the chainsaw has a future in forestry. We used the usual saws to fell and convert the poplar with the Baron using his favoured 365 until he achieved the seemingly impossible and had a quite spectacular equipment failure which we quickly put down to over zealous use of the tuning screwdriver in an effort to improve fuel efficiency. He completed the job using my 385XP while he waited for a new 365 to be delivered from A&B Services. Usual service: ordered the saw on Wednesday morning and it was delivered on Thursday morning. Not bad. Annoyingly he chose to leave his brand new 365 in the box and use my 385XP for the rest of the week and by Friday he was musing that he would probably have to have one if he had much hardwood or big softwood to do. Changing the roller type chain catcher for an older alloy L bracket – one from a 266 – has made the 385 much better to use but the soft inserts in the handle I like so much

have proved to be a pain as they seem to have a knack of popping out when you're not looking.

By 10 o'clock on Wednesday morning everything except the outside rows were felled and converted and I could start forwarding out over the rather daunting looking sugar beet field which was a broad expanse of bare mud spread thinly with the chipped remains of the spoiled roots from the beet lifting operation, which gave off a peculiar odour of yeasty bread which became more noticeable when the sun came out and the fermentation process began in earnest. I did notice some rather unsteady pheasants meandering about the field one warm sunny Saturday afternoon whilst I was forwarding the last of the timber.

Although this fast grown poplar was incredibly easy to cut and easy to brush it was also very heavy. The fact that some of it had been high pruned by someone who took his job very seriously also made the work easy, but perhaps the most impressive thing was the story the owner told of how the site had been



(Left) The Husqvarna 365 minutes before it blew up and (above) the modified chain catcher on the 385XP.