

TIM MALYON spent many years as a forestry contractor and has represented the Forestry Contractors Association on numerous occasions. Here he muses on the outdoor life and man's impact on the countryside.

Everyone likes a day out in the country. For almost everyone that means nice scenery, trees, flowers, some sort of animals – if only of the farmed variety – and, of course, reasonable weather.

How many of us plan a day out in the country, subject to good weather? There are, however, some people who work outside in the country, regardless of the weather, most days of the year.

Forestry workers, especially forestry contractors, are possibly the only group of people who work entirely outside. There is certainly no handy building to slip into for a brew or toilet requirements; in fact, the list of what they make do without, compared to most jobs, is endless: no landline phones, often no mobile reception, no work address or postcode, no electrical power, no street lighting etc.

Forestry contractors carry out virtually all of the nation's tree harvesting and dangerous tree work.

They are distinct from the Forestry Commission, whose managers are almost entirely office-bound and whose employees, with wet time and guaranteed minimum wages, are relatively feather bedded.

Contractors earn entirely on piece rate. That means working long hours, regardless of weather or what other people describe as 'holidays'. As a young forestry harvesting contractor in the 1960s I put in 116 hours in one week working with a cab-less petrol/paraffin Fordson Major.

In those days forestry contractors were very much part of nature. We could identify different species of trees by the smell of their resins. The work was brutal, injuries were common and

heath issues such as white finger and rheumatism were understood but ignored.

Large-scale tree harvesting today has become mechanised, but even so their every activity takes place in the forest. Fuelling up, maintenance and repairs are all done in whatever conditions prevail. Of course, today's harvesting contractors are not so much at one with nature as those of yesterday. For tree surgeons, swinging about on ropes and dealing with dangerous trees, little has changed.

Can it be that forestry contractors are more in tune with nature than anyone else?

In order to survive they have to be able to read the land.

To a layman, for example, reed growth (juncus) means wet or boggy ground. To an experienced contractor, reeds mean more than wet ground; they mean water, yes, but often water lying over hard standing underneath.

Similarly, it is not widely known that there are more species of birds in densely planted conifer plantations than were in the open ground that preceded it.

The experience and knowledge gained by working hands-on in nature every day, rather than on the occasional field course or PPI day, is invaluable. It is a sad fact that the laws relating to the countryside in the UK are formulated by persons viewing the countryside from within the cities.

Can we make use of the vast, cumulative knowledge amassed by forestry and other land workers through the years? Perhaps we should.

Perhaps that would prevent stupidities like building houses on flood plains or planting fast-growing trees on motorway central reservations.

Many questions can be answered by the Forestry Contractors Association, the FCA. It is an organisation entirely separate from the Forestry Commission, run entirely by people who work in, or who have retired from, forestry-related activities.

Its members include arboriculturalists, drainage, fencing, tree planting, haulage and harvesting contractors, professional foresters and many others.

The shape of the British countryside is not natural, and hasn't been for over 1,000 years. It is now largely an environment considerably removed from what it would have been without man.

Landowners started things off; mechanisation led to fields and man-made forests with straight boundaries, and remorseless urban and road building further influenced the picture.

The distribution of wildlife species has altered to match environmental changes. Some have disappeared in recent years and some have thrived.

We should not wonder at the ability of life to adapt to the changes that we force on our landscapes. Darwin and his followers explained it to us 150 years ago. Just enjoy it.