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I watched with great interest the series about, (The Trees That Made Britain;) by Mr Tony Kirkham and Jon Hammerton of Kew gardens it was to bring back many happy memories for me from the late 1940s, at a time before the Dutch elm disease took a hold and destroyed them all in the area to where I live, especially when they were climbing up the ones in Brighton, followed by going down inside the hollow trunks of them, I did not realize there were any Elms left still alive in the country.

In my early youth during the late 1940s I started climbing tall Elm trees just for the fun of it, as well as for the odd rooks egg for those that collected them, for me to go to the top of the very tall ones in a strong wind, when every thing was swaying about, was quite exciting and exhilarating, to hear the noise of the wind in the boughs, along with the calls of the rooks and crows that filled the air, an experience that not many have had the privilege of doing so.

They made a remark about the effect that it had on the landscape in England, when the Dutch elm disease struck in the late 1960s and through the 1970s.

In the area of Northamptonshire where I was born and raised, it not only altered the landscape, but was to create terrible problems for every Undertaker throughout the land, as at the time Elm Boards were mainly used to make most of the Coffins with, as I will mention about later in this letter, along with all the different types of timber that we used and worked with when I left school.

From a very young age I have always taken interest in trees and timber, as my Grandfather was a carpenter in his day, when the time for me came to leave school in 1954, I was to start work at John Ward & Son Church Lane Bugbrooke, training to become a Ladder maker, along with making Coffins for the Undertaking side of the business, with a take home pay of £2 5s 0, the standing joke for us at the workshop, was Ladders for going up and Coffins for going down.

The timber we used to make the pole ladders with were of Norwegian Spruce, from very small pole ladders from eight to ten feet in height, example for window cleaners ect, to very large pole ladders with up to 75 rungs in them, reaching over fifty feet in height or more, the builders ladders were to have the round side of the pole on the outside making a better grip on going up or down them.

The farmers ladders that were used for thatching and building Ricks etc, were to have the round side on the inside making them more comfortable to work on all day, as well as having the distance of the rungs made to measure, so it fitted the knee comfortable, especially when thatching with them, with the flat on the outside giving them a straight edge to work from, they also had metal shoes with points on them to stop them sliding along the ground.

2.

When cutting these poles up the centre, there was always a lovely smell of Pine and resin coming from them, as well as from the sawdust, this was followed by stacking them out in large sheds to season or dry, the resin from them, stuck to every thing and anything, and it took some shifting to remove it from off your clothing and skin, after cutting and stacking about 1,500, of them, the soreness of ones shoulders and arms from doing this very heavy work, was to take some getting used to as a young boy.

The timber we used for making extension ladders with was Columbian Pine, known in the trade a clear and better as there were no knots in the wood grain, some were fitted with ropes in order to make it easier to extend them, especially the large triple extending ladders, a local Blacksmith was to make all the metal fittings for them

In the winter months we would spend the odd day along the river Nene's banks and its tributaries, we would be lopping large Willow Poles from these very ancient willow trees that would contain anything from wild ducks to foxes in and about them.

These Willow Poles were cut up the centre to dry, and later used to make Load Ladders with; these were used on the farms during the harvest and hay making times. Being made from curved willow poles, when thrown away from a loaded cart they would not break but just rock like a rocking horse, as well as being towed along the ground behind a wagon or cart, so it was quick and easy and ready for use every time.

The other use for this wood was for Cricket bats, one old boy that I used to work with would say, that if they had lined the outer skin of the old wooden battle ships with thick willow planks, most of the cannon balls would have been deflected, He had never seen any other wood that could take such a bashing or pasting, (food for thought), on the odd occasion when lopping these willows some one would have to fall into the river, if and when the cold water hit you, it would make you draw breath.

Getting back to the Elm timber, nearly all the coffins that I help to make or made, were to be of Elm, the odd wealthy person might have ordered an Oak coffin, but that was very rare, the other wood we used especially for cremations was to be Popular timber, due to the small amount of smoke that came from it when being burnt, as well as it being a very quick burning timber, when making these coffins for cremations, we had to join them together with wooden pegs, for at the time no nails were permitted to be used, or to be put into the Furnaces, for if any nails or metal was to get into the machine that crushed up the bones, (to produce ones ashes), it tended to get it jammed up as well as damaging it, (not a pleasant topic but it has to be done by someone).

While making all these Elm Coffins by the hundreds, it never occurred to any one of us at the time, that this type of timber would ever be in short supply, for every hedge row all over the county was full of them, row upon row, for most of the ones that we were to cut down, along with cutting them into planks to season or dry out ready for coffin making, they all came from hedgerows that were planted during the early years of the enclosure act that was being enforced from about the 1760s, for if and when we counted the rings on them, they were to be about 160 to 200, years of age, they were nearly all the same age and size, give and take a few years, from two and a half feet to three feet thick in diameter about six feet up from the stump, this was about the average from what ever district we were working in.

3.

In some of the local Parkland, where trees of all kinds had been growing long before the enclosure act came to be, were to be of a tremendous size, Some of them of Elm what I had helped to cut up after the Dutch Elm Disease had killed them, even after great attempts to inject them with different chemicals to try and stop the disease, hoping to save some of them but to no avail.

These big Elm trees were to be over eight to nine feet in diameter just up off the stump of the tree that would be torn up from out of the soil after time, especially during some of the bad storms after the disease had took its toll.

These large trees were to be six to seven feet diameter, ten to twelve feet or more up the trunk of them, some of the boughs from them were to be thicker than the Elms we cut down in the hedgerows, and were to be double the age or more, by counting the growth rings.

The very old boys that had been in the timber trade all their lives, would point out to me the good growing years that these trees had over time, by explaining about the different sizes of the rings that were left from each growing season, also the dark rings that were left every eleven and twenty two years apart, as every eleventh year due to the suns activity or sun spots would leave these dark rings, every other eleventh year the suns activity was to be stronger or weaker according what cycle you were counting from.

One old Wheelwright that I worked along side of in the workshop, used Elm for wagon wheel hubs, as the wood did not split readily, split or clefted oak for the spokes for the woods strength, and Ash for the fellows as they took the shock and pounding from the road surface.

He would not use any Ash wood when building or repairing carts or wagons, that was to be over nine inches thick, eighteen inches up the trunk from ground level, as any thicker it was liable to snap under pressure, or heavy work load, he would cut away wood between tenant joints, so it was thinner than the tenant that was to be inserted into the mortised parts of the wagon, for if the wood was thinner than the tenant making the joint, it would always flex and not break at the shoulder joint, hence all the lovely looking scallops that look decorative on wagons or carts, are not for decoration or to make it lighter, but to make it more supple and stronger.

The other thing the old Wheelwright taught me, was about what sorts of timber to use on certain jobs, and what part of the tree to look at, to get whatever timber you required, as the North side of the trees grew slower with more growth rings to the inch, and for certain jobs was to be more suitable, as nearly all tree trunks grow egg shape, as the area that gets the most sun grows the fastest, One old fellow could tell you what part of the tree the wood came from, by just looking at it, down to when it had been felled.

4.

I was to spend hundreds of hour's woodturning ladder rungs, either from clefted oak that the tanning from this wood would turn your hands and tools that you used, to a very dark Blue in colour.

If I remember rightly, the Oak Bark was to fetch as much money as the wood did, for the tanneries in and around Northampton that is well known for its shoes and leather would purchase all the Bark from these trees that we felled for this purpose.

The other wood that I spent hundreds of hours turning ladder rungs out of, that we mainly used for the extending ladders due to its lightness in weight, was to be from these very young Ash trees that turned everything pink, for if turned fresh the wood itself would turn pink.

The old fellows would only fell these young Ash trees, between the two Moons mid summer, as the spores were open fully that helped give the wood its durability and strength, when Kiln Dried, the hard woods were felled mainly between the two winter moons, this helped to stop wood worm from entering the timber through its spores.

The other thing the old Wheelwright would make with this fresh Ash wood, was to be mud guards for horse and pony traps, as well as shafts, along with the odd scythe and rake handle, this was done by steaming them in a long box with a kettle boiling out its steam into one end of it, I found this sort of work fascinating, for the timber when fetched from out of the steamer would bend to any shape required just like rubber.

All these woods that I worked to make things with, had their particular smell when working with them, as well their colours according as to where they had grown, as Oaks were different colours, be they were grown in clay soil, stony, sandy soil, over Lime stone or iron stone, even to wet or dry areas.

The odd tree would have grown so its grain was to be crossed, the value of it would be low, as it would normally be cut up for fire wood, or for cheap fencing posts and rails, the cross grained poles that were not good enough for making ladder with, were used to make Rugby posts, football posts, or flag poles with.

One old fellow told me that it was very rare for a tree that had grown naturally, to grow cross grained, only trees that had been replanted did this, due to the natural magnetic field from the earth, for if a tree was to be planted, not taking in what was its natural North side or whatever, they always grew peculiar, so he said, it would be a interesting protect for some student to take up to see it this theory is correct.

I noticed that from working with Norwegian Spruce to make ladders with, they all grew clockwise, from having to work with the grain when we had to plane them up by hand, this was well before machinery like wood planers came along, by nailing the pole sides to a tapered jig was take all the very hard work away, but to produce tremendous amount of dust, when pushing or pulling them through a moulding machine.

I found most Northern Hemisphere timber grew Clockwise, but wood from the Equatorial areas the grain went in every direction at once, Southern Hemisphere timbers nearly all grew anticlockwise, for it was part of the skill of knowing how to work with the different types of timber, because of the grain from where ever the wood came from was to be so different as the colours of it.

5.

One job that I did not like doing, was turning ladder rungs from out of the reclaimed timbers, that came from old farm carts and wagons that were scrapped, this was when tractors came along, making all the horses on the farms redundant, and due to the very small wheel lock, and the high towing bar where the shafts once were, these wagons and carts, were not suitable to be pulled by tractors, hence the reason for them to be scrapped by the hundreds,

The dust from the lead paint that was on them would come off; giving you bad headaches or making you feel sick, (No health and safety in those days).

But having the experience of working alongside of the old Wheelwright, he would talk about the wind of change, the change that had come along making his job a thing of the past, part from coffin making, he said even that would change drastically in the future of what it did, especially when certain types of timber were no longer available. Where it used to take us a whole day to make a coffin, with modern methods they now make dozens a day.

For at one Royal Show, we were to see a stand with Aluminium Ladders for sale on it. This was to be the start of the end to making the types of wooden ladders that I had been taught to make, for within less than six months the demand for wooden ladders had ceased to be what it was, and the job went the way of the Wheelwrights, Wattle Hurdle makers, and many other crafts that were involved by making things from out of wood for a living, along with many Blacksmiths, due to the loss of all the horses that were once used on the farms.

One can see at times, some of these old crafts being kept alive at shows, but not at the pace that would have been expected from them, that had to be done to get a living from doing so, at the time when I left school.

Over the years while working in the timber oriented trade, we were to set hundreds of different trees, especially Ash, that were expected to be used at a later date for the trade, but due to the wind of change they are still growing, and have gone well past their normal felling date for what they were planed for.

The only good thing that Aluminium ladders did for the firm was to boost the undertaking side, for when they touched overhead electricity cables when carry them about, or when they slipped away from a building with someone up them, (please take note), they also do not make any noise like a wooden ladder does, if and when starting to break, hence warning you it is not safe to be used.

I spend many hours writing or recording for prosperity, this story about Elm Trees and the work that I have done is part of it.

Stanley Joseph Clark.

6.

It would be interesting to see if there were any dark growth rings that the sun spots normally left every eleven years, with the pulse from strong activity every twenty-two, from the period of 1940, to 1963, for information gathered I since have learnt that this was a very quite period, Hence the period of ever increasing cold weather that we had during this period.

As the information that was put over on Channel 4 of the television on Thursday evening the 2007-03-08, regarding the global warming subject, fits a pattern that I have had great interest in from observing these growth rings and patterns over the years of being involved with tree felling etc.

S.J.Clark.