

## My father, the timber merchant

Dermot Byrne<sup>a\*</sup>

My father, Paddy Byrne (Bawn) was a farmer's son from the Vale of Clara in Co. Wicklow (Figure 1). He began his timber career during the Second World War using horses to extract hardwood trees to the roadside, in what is now the Vale of Clara Nature Reserve, for the then Forestry Division of the Department of Lands. The "Dept.", as the locals referred to the Forestry Division, had a sawbench in the forest and firewood was produced for State and private customers as coal and oil were very scarce during the war years.



A relative who worked in construction in Dublin was visiting Clara one day and remarked that he had been laid off because scaffolding was unavailable. Steel was extremely scarce during the War because all the steel was going into making ships and guns. Paddy said that they could use wooden poles as he could get some which had practically no taper in a plot of Norway spruce in Clara Wood. The building contractor agreed to try them out and so 50 poles were delivered to the "Pidgeon House" Generating Station in Ringsend in Dublin. The engineer on the site tied two poles together so that the 25-foot pole extended to about 40 feet. It was a success and the contractor ordered another 300 poles from Paddy. While house construction work was very quiet due to the War, several builders who saw the poles at the Pidgeon House ordered them for their sites in the absence of steel scaffolding. The Forestry Division was eager to help and the Regional Inspector found several suitable plots in the Aughrim area that were spot thinned and the poles were sold on the roadside in the late 1940s.

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**Figure 1:** *The picturesque Vale of Clara is where my father lived and spent all his life. This image dates from winter 1995. In the foreground are Clara Bridge (1744), church (1799) and the old school (1899). On the night of October 25<sup>th</sup> 1940, a lost German bomber dumped its pay-load in the valley and one bomb fell in Clara Wood. The crater is still visible today. Luckily, there were no casualties.*

My father purchased a second-hand lorry for £200 from T. & C. Martin, Timber Merchants at the North Wall, Dublin to transport the poles. As there was no such thing as hire purchase back then, he had to get a loan from ACC which put a charge on his parent's farm as security. While inspecting the lorry in T. & C. Martin's yard, Paddy noticed small diameter poles which had come in from Sweden which T. & C. Martin distributed onward to some Dublin hardware shops as "rustic" poles. The yard manager agreed to buy a load of Irish poles as long as they were straight and the bark was not damaged. Demand was strong right away, but it was a very seasonal business with orders coming in spring and summer but then none for the rest of the year. With two different products, i.e. scaffolding poles and rustic poles, it was possible to purchase standing lots and to sort them as required. In the early 1950s my father purchased a lot of poles in Co. Wexford as the land produced very good quality trees and the forest roads were excellent. As a child I recall being with him in Bunclody Forest office, just off The Mall, for a meeting with the forester, Mr. Swords. The timber was in a place called Tombrick, which was close to the Bunclody-Enniscorthy road.

In the late 1950s chainsaws began to appear in Ireland and Paddy bought a McCulloch and a Solo. The Solo was not popular as it was too heavy to carry around for felling but was alright on the roadside for jointing. The chainsaw greatly speeded up the work – after a few months nobody would look at a Bushman saw again! In 1960 Joe Stagg, the forester in Saggart Forest, whom Paddy knew when Joe was the Assistant Forester in Aughrim, sent a telegram to Paddy looking for continuous supplies of spruce wood. Joe had just left the Forestry Division and been appointed timber buyer for Clondalkin Paper Mill. They wanted 250 tons a week from Co. Wicklow forests. As there was no credit facility with the Forestry Division back then, my father asked the local Bank of Ireland in Rathdrum for a £3,000 loan. Needless to say, he was refused.

However, some good orders came in about 1959/60. Smiths of Cavan were big builders and they got the contract to build St. Patrick's College in Kiltegan and wanted 1,000 scaffolding poles. Appropriately enough, Paddy sourced them in Aughavannah Forest, which he said was only a short distance from the College and when the truck reached a high point on the road in Ballygobbin he could actually see the College.

Around this time, Raidió Teilifís Éireann had announced that they would put a TV transmitter on Kippure Mountain. Wicklow County Council agreed to build the access road which was nearly three miles in length across a deep bog. The engineers decided on a "Corduoy road" which comprised 12-foot poles laid crossways, one beside the other. The poles were then covered by branches and finally with a thick layer of gravel. A deep drain was dug on both sides of the road. The weight of the traffic squeezed the bog down and pressed the water into these road-side drains. My father and a friend of his, Dinnie Kenna from Moneystown, drew poles from all over Wicklow for the job. It had a tight time schedule as timber lorries were small and a load did not go very far in making the road. Roadstone drew the gravel in 25-ton loads and the road was completed on time for the station to open on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1961.

Another product line from the early 1960s was Norway spruce tops for Christmas trees. The load was packed on the lorry the night before because you had to be at the Dublin Fruit Market by 6.30 am. It was like a lottery trying to sell the trees. If no other lorry turned up you got a great price that day, but if there were half a dozen lorries at the market, you had to almost give them away. My father dealt with a firm called Shamrock Foods. They had a space in the Market called a "Bank" and they sold the trees by auction to shopkeepers who took them away in vans. All business was transacted by 9.00 am and the traders would depart to open their own shops. After a few years of unsatisfactory trading my father started to call to the shops directly and he cut out the Dublin Fruit Market altogether.

In about 1966 Dunnes Stores took over a half-built warehouse in Cornelscourt near Cabinteely and my father called in one day to see if they would be interested in selling trees in the run up to Christmas that year. The Manager, Mr. Don Tidey, who would later become very well known as a kidnap victim in 1983, ordered 5,000 trees from Glenealy

Forest at five shillings each. After he supplied 1,000 Norway spruce tops, my father called in to see how they were going. He was very surprised to find that they were being sold at 4 shillings and 11 pence in old money – the trees were what is now called a “loss leader” in the retail trade. Dunnes Stores sold all 5,000 trees and wanted more but my father had none left. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1967 he got a cheque in the post for £1,250 from Dunnes Stores – “very decent people” he always said after that.

In those days, timber was sold “standing” with white marks to identify the trees that were to be removed. There was a story that a merchant had once tried marking additional trees with the same white paint in Aughrim Forest. He almost got away with it until one day the forester, while out walking in the wood, noticed that the trees had paint on different sides. Traditionally, and carefully, trees were all marked on the same side.

In the mid-1960s it was the practice that an elderly forest worker would be sent to “paint the butts”. This had to be done on the same day as the trees were felled. It was supposed to prevent butt-rot diseases in tree stumps spreading to the rest of the crop. My father was of the opinion that it was also to prevent theft. He was aware of the practice of felling unmarked trees but did not encourage it. He said the term among some merchants was “to let the light in”. Sometimes an extraction gang on piece rate would take extra trees near the forest road and leave trees that were growing a long way from the road untouched. I recall one instance of this where he got rid of the gang as they were too troublesome. On occasion a sale of timber would be “measured short” by the Department and he would be left at a loss. I recall that this happened in Glendalough in 1965 where an amenity forest was created out of a planted area beside the Upper Lake. In general however, short measure was rare.

The sale of timber was conducted by secret tender which closed at noon on a Thursday. Up to that, one could inspect the timber for sale by appointment with the forester-in-charge. As they would generally be well-known to my father they would tell him who had looked at it and what interest they had. If it was steep ground or rocky, then it would be hard to extract and there would usually be little or no interest in such lots. However, the Department rarely sold at bargain price and if there was little interest in a lot they would hold the timber for a better price.

The removal of a lot of timber was operated on a tight deadline, which my father usually failed to keep to despite the written Agreement. I recall that he bought palletwood in Clonkeen, Glenmalure Forest in 1967 and cut it in 1970 as sawlog. Foresters did not like this as it obviously upset the Management Plan for the forest. My father would get a letter from the Department reminding him the time for removal was up on the timber sale (Figure 2). He was well known to J.C. Tucker, Head of Marketing and would tell Mr. Tucker that he had health problems. This was true as he suffered from curvature of the spine or *ankylosing spondylitis*, a very painful condition, and this would usually secure him extra time to complete the removal.

DEPARTMENT OF LANDS  
(FOREST AND WILDLIFE SERVICE)  
22 UPPER MERRION ST.,  
DUBLIN 2.

Telegrams : "Inforesta, Dublin"  
Telephone : 65821  
(Address any reply to the Secretary  
and quote the following number :-

No. .... D125/1/79 (2)



AN ROINN TAILTE  
(SEIRBHÍS FORAOISE AGUS  
FIA-DHÚLRA)  
22 SRAID MHUIRFEAN UACHT,  
BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH, 2.

9 Aibreán, 1973.

Enniskerry Forest Co. Wicklow.  
Lot 3197 - Sale Agreement dated 15th May, 1970.

A Chara,

I am directed by the Minister for Lands to refer to the purchase by you of the above lot of timber. It has been noted that 17% of the above lot still awaits removal. I am to remind you that the removal date for the above lot was the 31st March, 1973.

I am to request that you recommence removal of this lot immediately and to have finished with it in the shortest possible time. I am also to remind you that a balance of £1,000.00 of the purchase price of the above lot is outstanding.

Mise le meas,

Mr. P. Byrne,  
Clava Vale,  
Rathdrum,  
Co. Wicklow.

P/C

Figure 2: An example of a timber sale contract enforcement letter with a "gentle reminder" from the Department of Lands.

My father was always deferential to foresters and always referred to them as Mr. So & So. He said the foresters were always very straight and solid citizens. However, during his 38 years in the round timber business, he never once shared a drink with a forester. He tended to drink heavily in three or four bouts a year, usually lasting a week. On those occasions he would easily put away a bottle of whiskey in the course of a day but with no food, and then do the same the next day.

He got on well with two other timber merchants and did quite a bit of business with them. John Brady of Rathdangan was one of them. John Brady has since become well-known in the trade as one of the founders of Woodfab Timber, but he began in 1967 as a sole-trader merchant. My father said he was the most efficient man he had ever dealt with. J.P. Nugent in Dublin was another. He was a qualified Civil Engineer.

My father once looked at a lot of timber in Lugduff, Glendalough Forest on behalf of J.P. Nugent. The forester told him that he would prefer if Mr. Nugent did not get the sale. Apparently they had dealt with him a few years before and, whatever about being an engineer, he certainly hadn't been regarded as being very civil!

In 1971 the Forestry Department asked all its main customers to attend a meeting in the Montague Hotel near Emo, Co. Laois and a field day afterwards in Emo Forest. The purpose of the event was metrification and to switch the industry from measurements in cubic feet to cubic metres. My father said that there was an attendance of about 25 which indicated the small scale of the timber trade then.

At that time the transport of timber was changing rapidly and for the better. In 1970 my father bought an AEC Marshall truck from CRV Dundalk and fitted it with a crane. The truck could carry 20 tons without any difficulty and as it had two driving back axels it had much better traction on forest roads than the old 7-tonners. Also the crane eliminated hand-loading which was always tough, dangerous work.

A glance at my father's business records for 1968 shows he had five timber gangs working. These gangs consisted of three or four men and a horse or tractor or both. The gang leaders were Pat Cullen, Knockrath (Figure 3); Nick Fogarty, Rathdrum; Johnny Toomey, Kirikee; Alec Wolohan, Roundwood and Miley Byrne, Bolinass. Lorry drivers were Jimmy Cullen and Jack Doyle, both from Glendalough. Operations were going on in five forest districts and customers during mid-1968 included Clondalkin Paper Mill (Figure 4), J.P. Nugent's Sawmills Dublin, Parks Department Dublin Corporation, McKenzie's Hardware Dublin, Athy Wallboard and McKeon Housebuilders. Each customer wanted timber for their own particular specifications and my father relied on the skill of the gang leaders to sort the crop that they were harvesting into suitable lots for each customer. I would expect that very few of the foresters that he dealt back then with are still with us. Some names that I recall were Dowds – Rathdrum Forest, Healy – Glendalough Forest, Gaffney – Roundwood Forest, Harding – Delgany Forest (see Obituaries section), Alman – Auhtrim Forest, O'Sullivan – Glenealy Forest, Grant – Clonegal Forest, Swords – Bunclody Forest and Roycroft – Glenmalure Forest.

My father retired in 1978 after 38 years working in round timber. Prior to that in 1972, he had established a specialist sawmill to produce garden fence panels from home-grown timber. He remained involved in this business until he passed away in 1984 aged 72 years. After his passing the business was managed by his daughter-in-law, Mary O'Neill Byrne.. In 1987 the mill was sold to the leading garden shed makers – Kellys Sawmill, Glenealy.

In recalling his days at the timber my father said the two best orders he ever received were one from the Parks Department of Dublin Corporation for 100 flag poles from Ballard in Laragh Forest. They were erected on both sides of the Liffey for the visit of Princess Grace of Monaco in 1961. They were left up for the JFK visit two years later. The other



**Figure 3:** Pat and Joe Cullen, from Knockrath near Rathdrum, with a 13-ton load of 2-m spruce on a single back-axle 1961 Dodge truck leaving the forest in Drumgoff, Glenmalur in September 1968. The photograph was taken by Jimmy Cullen, the truck driver and brother of the two men in the image. Pat Cullen worked for my father for 20 years from 1958 to 1978. Joe Cullen (deceased) was the All-Ireland Sheep Shearing Champion for 1966.

Though smaller than today’s timber trucks, and without a crane, the Dodge was quite advanced for the time. It was fuel efficient and the two-speed Eaton back axle gave it ten forward and two reversing gears giving it an excellent load capacity considering the size of the Leyland diesel engine.

No 2684 THIS SIDE TO FACE FRONT CLONDALKIN PAPER MILLS LTD. PULPWOOD LOADED WITH: c/Pine 20-172 Grade 1		W.B.D. NO..... DATE..... 17-5-78 TIME IN..... TIME OUT..... VEHICLE NO..... R.N.I. 871												
NAME P. Byrne	SENDER or CONSIGNEE Knockrath C. Stafford	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>NUMBER</th> <th>KGS.</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>GROSS</td> <td>2684</td> <td>3 1920</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TARE</td> <td></td> <td>10700</td> </tr> <tr> <td>NET</td> <td></td> <td>2 220</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		NUMBER	KGS.	GROSS	2684	3 1920	TARE		10700	NET		2 220
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**Figure 4:** Delivery docket from Clondalkin Paper Mill.

order was for Japanese larch poles to a Dublin souvenir maker. The buyer cut the poles obliquely into one inch lengths so that they were shaped like rugby balls, he then varnished them and printed the message “A present from Ireland” on each one. They were sold in the Duty Free shop at Shannon Airport and exported to many countries. One five-ton load of larch poles literally made thousands of souvenirs which went all over the world!

*Dermot Byrne*