

## Private Visit to the Estate of Comte du Pontavice

By M. McNAMARA

ON the night of Wednesday the 2nd September, 1964, my wife and I visited the home of Count and Countess du Pontavice at Foyges des Salles Gollavec, Cotes du Nord where they live with their two children Stephanie aged 6 and Gilles aged 4.

The original chateau which dates back to the 16th century was extended in 1924, great care being taken to match the new with the old. It is surrounded by the estate's woodlands and its terraced gardens overlook a picturesque lake. Inside, the walls are panelled and the parquet floors are made from hardwoods grown on the estate. In the hall we saw two perfectly preserved examples of the old Breton bed, beautifully carved out of native timber. The unique feature of this type of bed is that its ends are high and one end has a double door through which the occupant enters. Since the house of the Breton peasant had only one bedroom, the bed was designed to provide a measure of privacy.

The estate consists of 3,800 ha. of which 2,800 ha. is forest. The soil is derived from Cambrian rock low in calcium with an average pH of 4. Over sections of the woodland the soil particles are rather small and water retentive. Formerly the woodlands consisted of high forest and coppice. The timber from the high forest was used for constructional work. It was not converted in the estate sawmill but was sent to a mill which specialised in sawing for hire. The estate sawmill which was water powered originally (it is now powered by a 50 H.P. deisel engine) was reserved for the pulverising of coppice for tanning. The timber from the coppice was also used for the making of charcoal. The charcoal was used for the heating of the chateau and for the smelting of iron, an industry which flourished on the estate up to 1880. The produce of the latter industry was sold at Port Lorient. The sale of firewood also provided a profitable outlet for coppice.

With the closing down of the iron industry and the decline in demand for timber for tanning the coppice fell in value. The final blow to the coppice system of woodland management was the failure of firewood to command an economic price on the market. The estate still sells approximately 3,000 cubic metres of firewood annually but the price obtained does not cover the cost of felling and preparation for sale. It is now sold in order to clear ground for conifer plantations. These changes in trends called for a drastic revision in management aims and the estate embarked on a policy of planting Japanese larch (*Larix leptolepis*), Corsican pine (*Pinus nigra* var. *laricio*), western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) and Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) to replace the coppice. The outbreak of war, scarcity and cost of labour made the implimentation of this policy very

difficult and it was only since the present Count took over management that any substantial progress has been made. He had, however, a fine example of how conifers could grow on the estate. An 80 years old block of Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), planted when his grandmother was owner, is now mature and for growth and stem form it compares very favourably with the best plantations of the species to be seen anywhere else.

The count has prepared well for his task. He holds the Diploma, Ecole Supérieure de Paris, but he attributes much of his knowledge of forestry to the fact that from early childhood he followed his father through the woods and absorbed a fund of forest lore from him. His head keeper has been with the family for 40 years and his father before him held the same position. The tradition goes back as far as the history of the family can be traced. There are two assistant keepers.

The forest and sawmill carry a staff of 25 men in summer and 35 in winter. The extra men go to Jersey for seasonal employment during the summer months.

The Count's annual planting programme varies. Last year he planted 60 ha. and while he has not completed his plans for this season he hopes to achieve a comparable target. He said that the availability of workers, ground, plants and money are the governing factors. He meets his plants requirements from the estate nursery. His main problem is the clearing of scrub and in order to get rid of that material he sells firewood at an uneconomic price. For getting rid of light scrub (2" diameter or less) he experimented with three different machines:—

(1) Bulldozer with angle blade.

(2) The use of an attachment to his tractor which operates a revolving blade.

(3) The Debroussailleuse.

Of the three he finds the latter the most satisfactory for the type of scrub he has to deal with. This machine weighs about a ton, consists of two rollers each with six blades fitted to a robust chassis which trails behind his tractor. The blades are not square to the line of travel but are angled inwards slightly. As the rollers travel over the scrub the blades break it down and crush it sufficiently to make planting possible without the necessity for removing the scrub. With this machine he can clear 3 ha. per day.

The plants used in planting ground cleared in this manner are larger than those in general use in Ireland. They average about 3ft. in height and, while the cost of handling such plants must be high, the advantage of having the young trees standing well above the scrub is calculated to reduce the cost of subsequent cleaning and more than offset the initial additional cost.

The problems which Count du Pontavice is dealing with confront most foresters and woodland owners in Brittany and their progress will be followed with interest by all who took part in our study tour.