

EDITORIAL

Bring Back the Hunch Men!

Oak is grown in West Germany on a rotation of 240 years. That is an exercise in faith. That confidence, that faith, is refreshing.

No one can predict the demand or price of anything 240 years from now. Economists who lash about, attempting exercises in extrapolation over long time distances delude themselves. Worse, they try to make a science out of fortune-telling. They produce no more than a shimmer and present it as 'the best there is' — not understanding that even 'the best there is', is also worthless. We simply do not have at our disposal the means to predict the price of anything 200 years hence.

What other industry must wait that length of time before decisions bear fruit? The production of modern aircraft from the time of inception to the issuing of passenger tickets now occurs in the space of 25 years: reason enough there to attempt to predict price and demand. Twenty five years — yes! Two hundred and forty years — surely not!

Decisions to establish long rotation broadleaved forests must be done as an act of faith. End-price cannot be part of the debate. At best we can only go with the idea that there will always be a quality price for quality broadleaved timber. Even that could be wrong: we have no control on the fickleness of fashion. Other than 'gut reaction' we have little to guide us. That too is a problem. It is now no longer fashionable to back 'a hunch'. It's not scientific. Indeed the 'hunch men' are suspect. Don't give me intuition — give me reports — is the motto of modern management. But perhaps, given the scale of uncertainty that clogs up the question of long rotation crops, playing a hunch may be the best card we have.

If we are then to devise a strategy for broadleaved forests we should channel forestry skill — into finding the best silviculture — finding the most suitable soils — finding the best choice of species — and into deciding the correct size and the correct location of broadleaved forests needed to sustain a future broadleaved industry — and let us forget the senseless arguments on possible prices for a cubic metre of oak two centuries from now.