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Providing timber in World War 1: the role of North Northumberland

World War 1 cut Britain off from its main sources of timber, 90% of which came from the countries around the Baltic Sea. With the German navy blocking access to the Baltic, and increased demand for timber for pitprops in the mining industry and the construction of railways and trenches at the front line, a major effort was needed to increase British production very rapidly. North Northumberland had extensive forests. Soon our area was dotted with timber felling and rail lines to help move the timber down to sawmills, often specially built, and then on to the main rail system.

Glendale Local History Society was treated in November to a lively and detailed account by Roger Jermy, a specialist in railway history, of where all this happened and how it was organised. He re-created for us through photographs and documents a vivid picture of how the local landscape must have looked at this time. Camps were created near forests for a labour force who worked long hours and days at the physically demanding work. This involved cutting down the trees, loading them on to carts drawn by teams of horses or increasingly by steam engines, which pulled them along temporary and often rather precarious rail tracks. The journey to a sawmill might involve several changes from one mode of transport to another, though in some cases a sawmill was built as part of the camp. In this case, the camp boilers could be fired by the sawdust from the mill. A major problem was to find a labour force to do this work. The Government of the time created the post of Controller of Timber Supplies and asked for help from Commonwealth countries. Two main sources were found: Canadian army recruits, who served as lumberjacks in Britain rather than in the trenches on the continent, and less-skilled bands of internees and prisoners-of-war. The latter were referred to as 'Finns', although they came from many different countries. Our speaker explained that officers were required to keep weekly records of what happened at each camp. These are full of detail about daily life in these conditions, including frequent mention of altercations among the 'Finns'. They seemed to be seen as having quite a low status, yet it was these workers who often managed to create vegetable plots at the camps, as well as managing pigs and chickens, improving the overall diet of all involved.

Timber extraction was concentrated in places such as Harbottle, Chillingham and Whittingham, reflecting the location of the forests in North Northumberland. Conditions at Harbottle seem to have been 'cold, damp and generally unpleasant', our speaker suggested. At Whittingham, things were a bit better, as the camp buildings were more substantial. There was also a chance to mix with local people, especially young women, while the officers could be entertained at Callaly Castle or the Bridge of Aln. But the resources at Thrunton Woods were quickly extracted, and the camp moved on to Amerside Law and Hepburn Bell at Chillingham.

Yet little remains of all this activity. A traveller along the A697 in WW1 would have seen a large camp and sawmills in the field opposite Bridge of Aln, with rail tracks connecting this to the woods at Thrunton Crag. The campsite is now a calm field and all that remains of the rail track is the smooth path round the base of Thrunton woods. Our speaker said that signs of rail tracks can be found by the determined investigator here and there, but few buildings remain, as if when peace returned all the activity evaporated. Of course, much of the forested land laid waste by all this effort was later replaced by Forestry Commission plantations. Our speaker encouraged us to go out in search of signs of this vanished past.

In conclusion, Roger Jermy made a few comments on forestry extraction in World War 11, particularly in the Belford area.

A group of GLHS members followed this up a week later, bringing history into the present and the future with a visit to Wooperton Sawmills, which many will know as they drive along the A697 south of Wooler. The sawmill was started in the 1960s, when the Scott family bought the station and yard of the old Wooperton station. Starting from small beginnings, this has now grown into a major enterprise, employing well over 150 people and now among the largest sawmills in the country. We were enormously impressed by the skill and complexity with which the logs, delivered daily by lorry from a radius of maybe 150 miles, are sorted, shaped and then sawn into different kinds of products at incredible speed. We could also see how computerisation and innovation in machinery underpinned the speed and scale of production. We were quite mesmerised watching logs being sliced into planks, and planks into specific shapes and sizes, all controlled by someone in a cab high up in a huge building. On the ground, logs were piling up to be sorted, and nearby sets of fence posts, pallets and building timber were stacked up to be loaded on lorries for deliveries all over the country. With considerable investment in state-of-the-art machinery and in staff training and apprenticeships, the sawmill is set to be part of Glendale's future for many years.