

**N**FU Countryside member Keith Blacker may have taken early retirement in 1999, but this was not a cue to sit back and take things easy. The former manufacturing consultant, who had just turned 56, was keen to find a new project that would satisfy his and his wife Decia's long-standing interest in forestry.

Little did he realise that 10 years on they would be running a successful business selling a sturdy log store that they developed themselves. In April 2001, the couple took possession of 29 hectares of mixed woodland on a steep valley side near Lake Vymwy in mid-Wales.

By the end of 2002, they had laid nearly 6km of all-weather road and many thousands of tons of rock were hewn out of the hillside to create a level woodyard. To build the roads, it had been necessary to harvest about 300 tonnes of timber, most of which was sold as round wood to a sawmill in nearby Newtown or to a paper mill near Chepstow. That experience led Keith and Decia to realise that harvesting trees and selling the sawlogs was unlikely to yield sufficient income.

So a decision was taken that all timber harvested in the future would be converted within the woodland and made into products for sale directly to the public. Initially, they designed and made their own range of garden furniture. These were taken to several shows, but sales were sluggish and the competition intense.

By now it was early 2004 and they had about 10 hectares of beech in urgent need of thinning. This was matched with a lot of disquiet about the quality of woodfuel available



## Business branches out

Countryside member Keith Blacker explains how early retirement enabled him to start a woodland business

**POPULAR.** The integrated log store developed by Keith Blacker, pictured above delivering a box of logs

and dissatisfaction with the way logs were delivered – loads were always unmanageable and required too much re-handling. Beech makes very good firewood but they needed to find ways to address the shortcomings that potential customers were expressing.

A prototype of a new firewood delivery system was developed to address many of these problems. Dried logs would be delivered pre-stacked in boxes that would look like a log store. It was launched at the Oswestry Show in 2005. Keith says: 'Not only did we get our first customers for log delivery but we were asked to adapt the boxes for customers who had their own supply of logs. There were four more shows that summer – the next one only a week away. Within a few days, we had repackaged the log box and roof set into an integrated log store.'

The website was launched the following March. One of the first orders was from Reading – but little thought had been given to packaging the store for transport.

'We went back to the drawing board to revise the design to make a flat-pack that could be self-assembled without compromising

its sturdy nature and stylish character,' says Keith.

Now, after nearly a thousand have been delivered all over the UK, that same design is available off-the-shelf and delivered within a couple of days of ordering.

The log store design has moved on because it was not long before requests were coming in for units of a different size. So apart from running the log delivery service that has grown and matured, the home team now concentrates on made-to-measure log stores to a range of different designs and sizes.

There are several new projects under development. They regularly get phone calls from around the country asking for their log delivery service. During 2010, they hope to package the service so it can be licensed to wood fuel suppliers around the country. They have also just registered the design of a log hod that will replace nets for the casual user of log fires.

The ten years of Keith's first retirement were celebrated on the last day of 2009. With the new business still growing and many ideas still to be tried, the second retirement is many years off.



### Further information

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