

# Not just timber production

Forestry has opened up a range of opportunities on this Westmeath farm.

**Liam Kelly**  
Teagasc Forestry Advisor,  
Mullingar.



**A**t the beginning of the century, Dermot and Florian Leavy, dairy farmers on the outskirts of Kinnegad, Westmeath, started to review their farming enterprise.

Their four daughters were busy with their education and careers, and had shown little interest in taking over the farm. In 2001, Dermot and Florian planted 18.8ha of the more marginal land on an out-farm.

"The main species we planted was Norway spruce on 12ha," says Dermot. "On the upland area, we planted a mix of broadleaves including 4ha of sycamore, 1.5ha of ash and 1.3ha of a mix of broadleaf species including birch and beech." The front of the planted area was adjacent to an archaeological site.

In 2005, an opportunity to retire fully from farming appeared and the Leavy family set the home farm.

This allowed Dermot more time to manage his crop and he spent a lot of time shaping his broadleaf trees, which has certainly benefited the crop's quality. Sadly, in 2014, Florian became ill and passed away.

## Olive

Olive, who had completed a PhD in immunology in Trinity College, subsequently worked as a scientific editor with *Springer Nature* in London for 11 years. In November 2016, she decided to return home to help her dad.

"My initial plan was to start a local business outside the farm," says Olive. "In early 2017, dad brought me to see the forest – this was the first time I had ever set foot in it since its establishment."

Even though the forest was somewhat overgrown and access was poor due to the archaeological area on the front of the site, Olive says she was mesmerised by its beauty and potential. Both Olive and Dermot started to open up the site and improve the

accessibility of the forest.

"I wanted to know more about forestry in order to manage the plantation and attended some Teagasc events," says Olive.

"I also got to know the Westmeath Farm Forestry Group, a group for forest owners that was formed in 2010 with the help of Teagasc.

"I was delighted to be able to subsequently join the group as it is great to meet regularly with like-minded growers."

In 2017, Olive completed a five-day chainsaw course along with five other Westmeath group members. She received a five-year felling licence in 2017. As well as the confidence generated by completing the chainsaw course, this allowed her to commence felling trees on the site.

"One of the difficulties with the forest was access," says Olive.

"It was 500m away from the public road with access through an agricultural field, which was currently set. I applied for a forest road in 2017 and it was approved in 2019."

The Forest Road grant allowed 470m, but Olive applied for an extra 130m to allow some internal access into the forest. She was fortunate to have some gravel in the field adjoining the site, which greatly facilitated some of the road building. Olive took an active role in dealing with the road building process and says she learned a lot from the experience.

## Continuous Forest Cover

"From talking with other members and attending Pro-Silva events, I became interested in Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF)," says Olive. "I decided to thin the crop under CCF principles."

Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) offers four main benefits:

- **Financial** – having a continuous income rather than one big cash injection.
- **Environment** – retaining diversity.
- **Legacy** – having a beautiful forest to pass on.
- **Resilience** – a forest is vulnerable with a low level of species; CCF increases species diversity.



Olive Leavy.

Olive applied for the CCF scheme and received approval in 2020. She took an active role in both the marking of the trees and was present when the harvesting was taking place on-site. All felling was carried out by a harvester, which was operated by CCF-trained operator.

"The conifer thinning produced mainly pulp and some pallet wood material," says Olive. "The thinning of the Norway spruce provided an average return of €650/ha."

## Firewood business

Once Olive got her chainsaw licence, she started to generate firewood and realised that there was a local market. The harvester also felled broadleaves during the thinning operation. She sold one-third of it to the harvesting



contractor, retained the rest for her firewood business.

"I built up a customer base that takes about 100m<sup>3</sup> a year," says Olive. "That's as much as I can physically prepare and supply. I ensure it's good, dry firewood with less than 22% moisture – which is important if you want to keep your customers."

#### **Ash dieback**

The ash unfortunately has ash dieback, like many crops in the country. During the first thinning, Olive hoped to have about 100 hurley butts, but this was reduced to 32 due to the disease and associated stain that was found on the rest of the stems.

"I applied for the Reconstitution and Underplant scheme and am awaiting approval," says Olive. "The ash, once

removed, will supply the firewood business for a season or two. I will replace the ash with a native woodland mix, namely oak, birch and a number of other native species."

#### **Forest Owners groups – local and national**

In 2017, as previously mentioned, Olive joined the Westmeath Farm Forestry Committee, where she picked up a lot of advice and found the group to be a great sounding board.

"I cannot overstate the value of the Westmeath group and would like to thank its members for encouraging me to get involved in forestry," she says.

Olive became secretary of the Irish Forest Owners (IFO) – an umbrella group set up in late 2020 to support

most of the existing forest owners groups and their national co-ordinator since last June. She has also taken on a part-time administrator role with Pro Silva Ireland.

#### **No regrets**

"I have no regrets about returning home," says Olive. "Forestry has given me a new lease of life and I can't overstate the benefit and importance of producer groups in encouraging forest owners and the central role they play in the forest industry.

"I greatly enjoy the interaction with the various foresters and contractors. It is important to have regular conversations with your forester and contractor, and allow time when on-site with them to ensure good management of your forest."