When asked to write about my job for this issue of the Journal, with its focus on appropriate technology, I found myself in just the right place—in front of a book called *The way home: tales from a life without technology*, published in April 2019 and written by ‘moneyless man’ Mark Boyle. At first glance, this may seem to have nothing to do with an article about horse logging. But I think it really has. Mark conducts a self-experiment to live completely without technology (he even worries about the pencil he writes his book with) in a world that cannot think of anything else. And as I read, I found that a lot of his experiences occur in my daily life too. Don’t get me wrong, horse logging is definitely not free from technology and my life is far from it. But working horses are perhaps as far removed from the harvesters and forwarders we see out on the hills as Mark is in his homemade wooden cabin.

“We run our horse logging business in the south west of Scotland with four working horses. We have a small holding, grow our own veg and go out contracting with the horses. They also do some of the work on our land and mow lawns and roll bracken. Our employers are mostly private estates and farms, I guess those who recognise the impact of big machines on the land, especially if this land is just beyond their front door. We do a lot of thinning and small clear fells where we fell the timber with chainsaws and extract the timber to the roadside with horses. We also work in our own woodlot (see issue 59, page 34).”

Dr. E. F. Schumacher
New normal
Horse logging is at the other end of the scale from the ‘normal’ way of harvesting trees. Modern machinery mirrors what happens in agriculture, cutting whole hillsides as if they were fields of corn. This is a completely foreign concept to trees and woods. Woodlands have been covering most of the earth for most of time. Trees fall over and young ones replace them, filling the gap. Big open spaces are unusual in a woodland setting. What we now call continuous cover forestry, a rather ‘new’ invention on this island, is the way foresters all over the world have looked after their woods for generations. It is a way of forestry that only takes a sustainable cut and leaves nature to patch the gaps.

Horses have been used in forestry for a long time. They are, in many ways, a very human tool. Our horses are only a forestry machine if I stand behind them. Horses have some amazing advantages over machines, the main one being that they do not cause any compaction of the soil they work on. This is one of the big problems in forestry these days with machines weighing 25 tonnes and more going over the same track numerous times. On the soft soils in our woods this leaves metre-deep ruts, brush mats and all. This is the external sign of something we cannot see: the lifeless soil below. Compaction can be so intense that the soil may take decades to recover, if it ever does. Meanwhile, water runs off taking nutrition with it and trees cannot get their roots into it. So ‘big forestry’ is a fairly short-sighted experiment—how long can we keep doing this?

I started my three-year horse logging apprenticeship with the British Horse Loggers about eight years ago. I always liked the idea of working horses but as I was running a big organic farm, I could not fit them in. Experiencing horses in the woods on an introductory course opened my eyes to the fact that there really are ‘horses for courses’. Horses in forestry can do things that we cannot achieve even with small machines. And that is why I believe horses are one of the most appropriate technologies in forestry.

Horses work very differently, in all respects. They have hooves, not wheels, they find lots of different ways between the trees, need no tracks and bring nutrition to the wood rather than wash it out. Because they are small and agile (in comparison to machines) we can get single trees out and leave the rest of the wood untouched. There is also a big difference for people working with a horse instead of a machine. You get wet. You get dirty. You are never alone. You leave the wood a better place than you found it.

Scaling up
The forestry industry we are part of is a challenge for working horses and their humans. The scale at which

Time is a thing that seems to matter more than anything nowadays and this is what has changed forestry more than any other invention.
forwards cart wood out of the landscape has become the norm, and to get five to ten tonnes of timber roadside a day with a horse is hard work and feels negligible at the same time. Stacking lorry loads of timber at a collection point is not a huge challenge for a modern forwarder, but rather more difficult for three humans. Sites that had machines on previously are usually near impossible to work with horses, and those designing 100-hectare clearfell sites obviously did not think of horses harvesting the timber. As we do not value the quality of timber anymore, preferring quantity, time is all that counts. And obviously horses cannot compete here. The jobs we do are quality, and only people who appreciate this will understand and employ horse loggers.

Saying all this, we are not running out of work but possibly out of horse loggers. I believe it is the best job in the world but walking behind a horse in a muddy wood in Scotland might not be everyone’s idea of fun. Not to speak of the weekend mornings when you have to feed and talk to your forest machines. I am hopeful there are more people out there who will take on this challenge.

The work is there, and it is not all as hard as it sounds. For example, we make our lives easier with small horse-drawn forwarders and arches—beautifully-manufactured appropriate technology. Becoming a horse logger is a long learning process and there is a lot to it. It is more a craft than a qualification. But in the end all it needs is time, experience, patience, some good boots, a coat and of course a good horse. No huge financial outlay. Not a lot of fuel.

Some readers may be wondering what size of woodland is too big for horses to log? In theory, nothing is too big and there are literally no limits. Not so long ago, all the forestry in this country would have been done with working horses, donkeys or oxen. Nothing was too big. You just went out to find enough other horses to help yours. Things are a little different now. We have four horses, and if I need any more I must drive for hours to find another logging horse. I can only think of one other in Scotland. And the other factor, of course, is time. No woodland or timber would be too big for horses if you had enough horses, people and time. Time is a thing that seems to matter more than anything nowadays and this is what has changed forestry more than any other invention.

When horses were the technology used in woods, the woods were also full of people. We have lots of people working in comparison to other sites. We chat, because we can hear each other, we have coffee on the fire as the horses take their essential hour lunch break, and we cannot work in the dark so winter days are short. We get to go home. Everything takes time but I would not want it any other way.

**Steffi Schaffler** lives and works in Scotland, running a horse logging business along with her partner David Roycroft and four horses.

E: steffi.schaffler@gmail.com.