
Esmond and his wife Jeanette


Esmond with his MBE medal at Buckingham Palace, June 2009


At Faskally, July 1959


Esmond, aged 10

A century lived

One of the most significant woodland conservationists of our time is approaching his 100th birthday. Here, we celebrate **Esmond Harris MBE** and his many achievements in shaping UK forestry

By I-Cheng Austen

Centenarians are rare. Even more unusual are those among them who are sharp as a tack and still contributing to society. Esmond Harris is all that and more.

You may know of this very special man from our annual Small Woods award, which is named after him. Perhaps you remember when he was Director of the Royal Forestry Society in the 1970s and '80s. Or you might have one of the many books he has written on trees, woodland management and wildlife conservation.

If you have done a chainsaw course, you have Esmond to thank for ensuring safety was on the agenda when they were first introduced all those years ago. And if you have enjoyed the forests and woodland in the Vale of Glamorgan, the Rhondda Valley, and at Hockeridge, in the Chilterns, you will have witnessed the living evidence of the influence Esmond has had.

I have been lucky enough to speak at length with Esmond on two occasions – first at Staverton, during a Small Woods members' visit in 2023, and again recently for this article. Each time has been an honour, a privilege, and a lesson in history from one who has experienced it firsthand.

Early years

The son of a doctor, Esmond was born on December 4, 1926, and lived in London through the Blitz (a time he describes as "pretty grim"). As a small boy, he loved playing with bits of wood.

"I used to play around with my father's tools in the garage, and I started making jigsaw puzzles," he remembered. "Father would take me for a walk on Sunday afternoon and taught me about trees and shrubs. I collected wood specimens – I still have about 50 of them. That's how it all started."

A supportive careers' master introduced him to a forester who had completed a degree in forestry at Bangor University – a path Esmond decided to follow. After military service in the Navy at the end of the Second World War and training to be a woodwork teacher at the same time, Esmond's first forestry roles were in teaching for the Forestry Commission (FC), in Scotland.

"I was never happy going straight from university to teaching," he said. "I was teaching young foresters who had already done two years of forestry – more than me! Eventually, I did get them to post me in a field job."

Impact

This took Esmond to South Wales where he was planting out woodlands after the War. The land acquired by the FC from the Coal Board, when it closed, is now extensive forestry above the Rhondda Valley.

"What I am most proud of is (transforming) the derelict woodland in the Vale of Glamorgan and the Rhondda Valley. There were miles and miles of open moorland and sheep grazing in the Rhondda Valley with wild, open land owned by the Coal Board. I prepared and planned a whole load of planting there. A lot of it is fine, well-managed woodland now."

After planting and managing five forests in his districts, including the Rhonda Valley, today Esmond is able to personally appreciate the fruits of his labour from that time.

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"When they built my extension (in Suffolk), they used wood from one of them," he said "So, now I sleep at night underneath the wood of the trees that I planted."

Towards the end of his career, Esmond became the first Director of the Royal Forestry Society, leading it through difficult financial times (see p21). Despite retiring in 1989, he continued to share his extensive knowledge by writing multiple books on trees, woodland and wildlife conservation.

Key dates

1926 Esmond Harris was born on December 4 and grew up in North London

1944 –1947 Served as a telegraphist in the Royal Navy and was on reserve for years after

1955 –1969 Worked for the Forestry Commission (FC) as a field district officer and in education at three FC schools, finishing as Principal at Gwydyr

1960s Post-graduate research at the University of Oxford looking at tree growth and climate, rainfall and temperature, as reflected in tree rings, which was new at the time

1968 –1972 Head of the Forestry Section of the Agricultural, Horticultural and Forestry Industry Training Board

1972 –1975 Director of the Economic Forestry Group (Northern division)

1975 –1989 Appointed and served as the first Director of the Royal Forestry Society (RFS)

2000 Awarded the RFS Gold Medal for lifelong work in championing education in forestry circles, schools, and with the public, and for promoting wildlife conservation as an integral component of forest stewardship

2003 Awarded The Institute's Medal, by the Institute of Chartered Foresters, for commitment to professional excellence in arboriculture and forestry

2009 Made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for services towards forestry and conservation in the South West


Hornbeam planted for Platinum Jubilee, 2022


Planting at Hockeridge to mark RFS at 140

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Many of the titles were co-authored with his wife, Jeanette, who was an expert in agriculture and zoology. Their efforts to bring wildlife conservation, woodland management and productive farming together led to Esmond being made an MBE in 2009 for services to forestry and conservation in the South West.

SWA connection

It was during his retirement that Esmond first became involved with the Small Woods Association. At the time, he had a farm and a small wood in Cornwall. He remembers: "The chap who was running courses for the Small Woods Association asked me if he could come down and use our woods for chainsaw training, and that's how I got involved. There were quite a lot of trees that needed felling and we went from there."

Our Small Woods annual award for innovation in small woodland management and green wood craft is named after Esmond, who has been involved in selecting the winners since its inception in 2022.

Looking at woodland management today, Esmond is encouraged that people are taking an interest.

"Woodlands are now seen as wildlife habitat, and that's excellent," he said. "If someone tries to fell a woodland now, they will need a proper licence, including replanting conditions. It is very much on the right course."

Photos supplied by Esmond Harris and the RFS

Cutting-edge memories

Esmond Harris remembers his first encounter with a chainsaw:

"They used double-handed saws during the (Second World) War and I remember the chainsaw coming in. After the War, I was an instructor at a school in Perthshire when the Forestry Commission (FC) sent up a Jo-Bu chainsaw for us to try out.

"This chainsaw arrived in a crate, and the head forester opened it up, pulled the starter cord – *splutter, splutter* – it didn't work. 'Send it back,' he said. One of the lads wanted to have a go. He got it out and instead of just pulling the starter, he closed the vent on the carburettor and, as soon as it started, I opened it and got it going.

"Later on, I was on the FC training board and the first thing I did was to set up chainsaw training courses. They are very dangerous but very efficient if used properly. I wouldn't use a chainsaw now!"

Published books

Esmond Harris is the author of the following titles:

- *Trees (Spotter's Guide)* – 1978
- *Guinness Book of Trees* by Esmond and Jeanette Harris – 1981
- *Field guide to the trees and shrubs of Britain* (Reader's Digest nature lover's library) by Esmond and Jeanette Harris – 1982
- *Trees: A beginner's guide* (Kingfisher Fun-to-spot) – 1986
- *Wildlife Conservation in Woodlands and Forests* by Esmond and Jeanette Harris – 1991
- *Spotter's Guide to Trees* – 1996
- *Wildlife Conservation in Managed Woodlands and Forests* by Esmond and Jeanette Harris – 1997
- *Cyfres Canfod ac Adnabod: Coed* (Welsh edition) – 1998
- *Oak: A British History* – 2003

A lasting impact

Before Esmond Harris retired, he spent 14 years as Director of the Royal Forestry Society. Spokesman **Joe Roberts** reflects on his swansong


Esmond and Jeanette on a study tour in China

Esmond Harris traces his love of trees back to Sunday walks with his father through the Chilterns. After training in forestry at Bangor University and completing an MSc at Oxford, he joined the Forestry Commission, beginning a career that would span more than half a century.

Esmond went on to serve as the first Director of the Royal Forestry Society from 1975 until his retirement in 1989, steering the RFS through a formative and at times challenging period.

"When they took me on, they were in financial difficulties, although they didn't fully realise that," Esmond recalls. "When I pointed this out, we were in really difficult water, and I struggled to keep the RFS going." Esmond navigated the Society through several financial challenges during this period, drawing on outside expertise and introducing new business models to put the organisation on a stable footing.

Education

During his tenure, Esmond shaped the Society's Annual and Overseas Study Tours. He is noted for developing the excursions to include a greater focus on nature conservation within the context of forestry. This was partly driven by his wife Jeanette, a respected field ornithologist and botanist.

Esmond also played a direct hand in securing one of the Society's most treasured woodlands. Hockeridge Wood, covering 80 acres in the Chilterns, belonged to Ms Wellersby, great-granddaughter of the Duke of Wellington. With her nephew unable to inherit it as a Roman Catholic monk, Esmond persuaded Ms Wellersby to gift the wood to the RFS instead. Decades on, Hockeridge remains in the Society's care and continues to support the RFS's education work. "They are doing a great deal in education now," Esmond notes.

Recognition

His contribution to forestry was later recognised with the RFS Gold Medal in 2000, awarded for his lifelong work promoting forestry in schools and with the public, and championing wildlife conservation. He was also awarded the RFS Duke of Cornwall's Award in 2002.

Also a prolific author, Esmond and his wife Jeanette co-wrote the best-selling *Reader's Digest Field Guide to the Trees and Shrubs of Britain* in 1982, while he was Director at the RFS. It continues to have relevance and widespread recognition as a respected reference book: as recently as this July, Esmond was contacted by a Japanese educational publisher seeking to use an excerpt from the *Guide* in a forthcoming textbook for college students. In 2003, Esmond completed *Oak: A British History*, building on foundations laid by his RFS colleague N.D.G. James, the Society's former president.

On behalf of everyone at the RFS, we wish Esmond a very happy 100th birthday and thank him for a lifetime of dedication to Britain's trees and woodlands.



RFS Gold Medal