

FRANCIS, GWYN JONES (1930 - 2015), forester

Name: Gwyn Jones Francis
Date of birth: 1930
Date of death: 2015
Spouse: Meryl Francis (née Jeremy)
Spouse: Audrey Gertrude Gemmel (née Gill)
Child: David Francis
Child: Kay Francis
Child: Richard Francis
Parent: Margaret Jane Francis (née Jones)
Parent: Daniel Brynmor Francis
Gender: Male
Occupation: forester
Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture
Author: John Morgan

Gwyn Francis was born on 17 September 1930 in Llanelli, the son of Daniel Brynmor Francis and his wife Margaret Jane (née Jones). He was educated at Llanelli Grammar School and went on to obtain an Honours Degree in Forest Botany in 1952 at the University College of North Wales, Bangor. After graduating he served for two years as a National Serviceman in the Royal Engineers.

In 1954 he married Meryl Jeremy from Carmarthen with whom he had three children, Richard, Kay and David. After Meryl's death in 1985 he married Audrey Gertrude Gemmel (née Gill) of Toronto, Canada.

On the completion of his national service in 1954, he joined the Forestry Commission as a District Officer in Neath, with responsibilities related to the Commission's extensive young forests in the Afan, Neath and Dulais valleys of what was then the county of Glamorgan. In 1960, he was appointed Principal of the Commission's Gwydr Forestry Training School, a residential college for the training of foresters near Betws y Coed. He insisted on high standards, while modernising the course-work and greatly enhancing the reputation of the School. One of the big training priorities of the 1960s was the introduction of mechanised working methods. Francis realised how much the industry could learn from harvesting practices in North America, and in 1964 he took a year out to study for an MSc in harvesting technology at Toronto University.

On his return to the United Kingdom in 1965 he was posted to the Ruthin District of the Forestry Commission as the District Officer in charge of managing the forests of North East Wales including the extensive Clocaenog Forest. Thereafter it was only a matter of time before he got involved in the management and development of timber markets. First on his posting to Cardiff in 1969 dealing with the forests of South Wales, and then in 1976 at the Commission's UK headquarters in Edinburgh, he was responsible for harvesting and marketing, latterly across the Commission's forest estate throughout Britain. In 1983 he became a Forestry Commissioner, and in 1986 was appointed Director General and Deputy Chairman of the Forestry Commission.

Within a few years of his move to Edinburgh the Forestry Commission was plunged into a major industrial crisis when its various markets for small roundwood closed down in the economic recession of that time. Building on some entrepreneurial work by the Economic Forestry Group, Francis negotiated the export of British-grown pulpwood to Sweden. In the 1980s, he embarked on a development programme that attracted to Britain the likes of Sweden's United Paper Mills in Shotton, Flintshire, Norbord near Inverness, and later what was then the biggest ever inward investment in Scotland, the Finnish-owned Caledonian Paper Mills at Irvine, altogether over one billion pounds of investment.

Although organisational efficiency and hard economics were always his preoccupation, Francis was also alive to the softer side of forestry, and the benefits it could bring to people and wildlife. As the Commission listened to its critics and adjusted to new ideas, his tenure as Director General brought with it some of the most profound changes in forest policy since the war. With the introduction of a new tree-planting scheme in 1988, and much that followed from that, the social and environmental objectives of forestry were finally put on a par with its traditional timber-based role that had existed from the Commission's founding in 1919.

All these developments took place against the backdrop of political changes that threatened the very existence of the Forestry Commission, and involved the top team in a hugely time-consuming saga that dragged on for more than a decade. 1981 saw the UK Government's first step towards privatisation of the Commission's forests. Francis saw it as a damage limitation exercise and was at his intellectual best finding workable solutions to the demands of government ministers. Despite the threat of forest sales, one of his small triumphs before retirement was to get the government to agree in 1990 to the Commission's organisational status quo in response to a House of Commons Agriculture Committee report arguing for the separation of its two main parts, the Forest Enterprise and the Forest Authority. Francis was determined that the Commission's dismemberment would not happen on his watch, although of course, in a changing world of funding squeezes and devolution, subsequent events reversed this.

Gwyn Francis never wavered in his belief that the Commission had a vital role to play in the creation of a successful forest industry in Britain. The Commission was indeed fortunate to have had the benefit, over many years, of his vision, tough-mindedness and professionalism. In 1990 he was awarded a CB for his services to forestry.

Gwyn Francis was a prominent member of the Edinburgh Welsh Society serving as President in 1993/4. In his retirement he pursued his interest in birds, becoming a council member of the RSPB and chairman of its Scottish committee. He died on 27 November 2015 at Murrayfield House Care Home in Edinburgh.

Author

John Morgan

Sources

Forestry Commission records

Who's who?

Professional and personal acquaintance

Information provided by Gwyn Francis's daughter Ms Kay Piper, and by David Foot and Graham Hamilton of the Forestry Commission

Additional Links

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