

# The Beavercroft Combine Harvester

This account has been extracted from *The Lad from the Lea* written by Wendy Maddox of her father Sid Wilkinson's reminiscences of living in Pack Lane Kempshott and working for Thornycrofts and Eli Beaver from 1939 to 1949

*My motto has always been "If you can't buy it - make your own", but the biggest project I was involved in was the building of the Beavercroft Combine Harvester.*



**The Beavercroft Combine Harvester with Harry Middleman, Norman Beaver, Sid Wilkinson and Eli Beaver**

In late 1947 Mr. Beaver applied to the Ministry of Agriculture for two extra combines, but was refused as he already had four trailer-type Allis Chalmers in use. Six of the Company got together to discuss the situation, and it was decided we would build our own, the six of us were Mr. Beaver's sons Jack and Norman, his sons-in-law Cyril Sutton and Harry Middleman, Reg Sutton and myself. It was decided that the combine should be self-propelled, I think it may have been the first to be made in this country, with an eight-foot cut and an overall width of ten feet to enable it to go through standard farm gates. Up until this time most combines in this country were of the trailer type, having to be towed by a tractor. The only self-propelled combines in production were foreign and were too large for use in our

country lanes and farms, the entrances being too small. It was left to four of us to build the combine.

We worked every day until about 10 p.m., and weekends. It completely took over our lives, and trips to the seaside with the children and to Churt and Badshot Lea to see our parents had to be squeezed in between.

Thornycrofts were interested from the start, and I could go to their stores, collect any parts I required and charge it to Beavers. We ran into a few problems on the way, and it was nothing unusual for some hours to be spent trying to find a solution, then the moment we gave up for the night the answer would come to me, and I would draw it on the garage door. Sometimes if paper was not immediately available at home I would draw a sketch on the fireplace, and even occasionally on the tablecloth! All the metal-work was shaped and beaten by hand.

There was a rush to complete the combine in time for the 1948 harvest, but we were a bit late. We managed to start in barley first, and then some clover. It did a very good job on both. Then it was tried on some late oats and thistles. This meant trouble as the radiator was down low by the crop and the thistles blocked the radiator, so it got overheated. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Agriculture were sending an engineer to see the combine on the following Monday, so it meant a working weekend to put the radiator on top, to be clear of dust and rubbish. This worked well. Then came the bombshell; the Ministry wanted the combine tested in Scotland as their crops were later than ours in the South. Norman Beaver and I spent three weeks in Scotland with the Ministry test engineer who took notes all the time of acreage and performance of the machine.

Faults were found on the header because the ground was uneven as they were working above coal mines. The other faults were only minor problems. Following a meeting with the Agricultural Ministry representatives, Norman and I made our way home, leaving at 3 O'clock in the afternoon and arriving home at 7 O'clock the next morning, the 8th October which was our wedding anniversary.

The necessary modifications were carried out, and then the combine was sent to Thornycrofts, to be completely dismantled, patterns were made of all parts and drawings made. Thornycrofts had partly financed the project. There were six combines made to these specifications, and they were sent to different areas for tests. Thornycrofts would not build any more unless they had orders for 200. They were hoping for a Government contract for wheat crops abroad where the ground-nut scheme had fallen through. Unfortunately, Claas got the contact, so the Beavercroft was dropped from production. Knowing how farmers tend to hoard their old machinery in odd corners, I would love to know if there is still one in existence.

Edited by Geoff Palmer 14 March 2017