

Just the job

A machine is born...

There are jobs – and favourite jobs. And contractor Paul Denning is quite sure which is the latter. It's the clearfell of Army firing ranges that's been going off and on now for five years.

The ranges, near Aldershot, Hants, are the setting for a heathland restoration project funded by the local county councils which hope that once the trees, mostly birch and pine, are cleared the heather will re-establish itself.

Over the last hundred years 75% of ancient heathland in the area has been lost and the idea is to restore as much as possible, funds permitting. The seeds lie dormant for years but when the area's cleared they can then grow again to restore the area to its original heathland state.

Said Paul, "A lot of it was on MoD land. There was public access but not many people realised that. We've done one bit one year, another bit the next year, opening huge swathes of open heathland and joining big areas of it together. That type of work is very fulfilling.

"It seems fairly harsh on the surface but when you understand what's going on it's great. Also the scrub we were taking off was being chipped and going into the power station at Slough.

"I like the bigger jobs like that and two years ago we had to clear 56 hectares of a military range in 31 days, and we did it, which was a fair achievement. It's the biggest one we've done yet. It's good to see a lot of machinery on site and it's nice to be able to do something where you see the system working well and the chip appearing and disappearing off to the power station – doing the whole job from start to finish."

Currently Paul's working to improve the pheasant shoot on the vast estate of the Duke of Norfolk at Arundel in Sussex. In a spectacular setting high on the hills the original work was to clear an area of ash.

Head forester Mark Aldridge explained that when the previous duke died in the '70s, "They just closed the gates and let things go."

When the estate started expanding again – it's now 7,000 acres, much of which is AONB and SSSI – the favoured method for thinning was a Hymac and a loader. But, he says, Paul's machine makes a far better job of both clearing the resultant brush.

Then came the work on the drives. Here the main machine is Paul's Ahwi RT 100, which hails from Germany. It's almost a one off,



Paul Denning's Ahwi busy clearing the Duke of Norfolk's pheasant shoot near Arundel.

being one of only two in the UK. The head was adapted and the base machine constructed by Paul Vidgen of Ahwi UK before being converted and then finished in Germany. Now it's a purpose-built tracked carrier with a 100 horsepower air-cooled Deutz engine.

It drives an FM 500 1.4 metre mulcher via the hydraulic system. The rotor has a set of fixed teeth on it, carbon tipped, and it spins and chops the material. The head has a set of counter knives in the back that re-chops the material as it goes round the head and leaves the fine chopped material in front of it. Unlike wood chip, though, the mulch doesn't have a lot of other uses.

Paul Vidgen, Ahwi dealer in the

UK, explained, "It was a prototype which we built to prove the concept of a small purpose-built carrier particularly to do inter-row weeding of young plantations. Ahwi manufactures the head and the rotor but at the time the smallest machine they produced was 350 horsepower with a 2.3 metre cut. We had quite a lot of interest from estates that had planted after the '87 gales. At the time the ground preparation was quite poor and there were a lot of stumps and litter left on the floor. They planted in amongst it and what happened was what everybody expected – the brambles, the briars and the birch regrowth outstripped what was planted by about ten to one, and they wanted a method of mechanically weeding



(Left) The tree surgery team tackles a large cedar at Aldermaston. (Above) The Hitachi EX120 excavator working with the International 100B Drott track shovel on one of Paul's favourite heathland clearance jobs. (Below) The EX120 with a brush grab loading the County with a forwarding trailer in Oxshott, Surrey.



it. We collaborated with Ahwi who supplied a lot of the components and did a lot of work on it as well. We built the hull and the frame and the chassis and then sent it to Germany to be finished. Paul then bought it from us and has been using it ever since.

"The head had been a PTO driven model and we converted it for hydraulic drive. It was an amalgamation of bits and pieces but basically it was built from scratch. Subsequently Ahwi went on to build a 130 horsepower machine so they now produce one of a very similar size. It works very well and the idea of a machine of that size has proved very popular. As a production machine it's been bought, for instance, to go under power lines."

A similar machine now would cost around £80,000, being the smallest of a range which includes machines of 400 and 550 horsepower.

On the Arundel estate the first job was to mow between the rows to get them clear. Then the lower branches were taken off by hand so that the estate could use its own tractor to keep the rows under control.

With the undergrowth cleared the beaters are now able to drive the pheasants through the mixed broadleaf and conifer to the guns.

Like so many in the business, JDB Contractors is nowadays basically a father and son firm – with maybe the grandson to join in later. The firm was started in 1974 by Paul's father John and his business partner Don Breakspear and they carried on until April '03. Then Don retired and the name was changed to its present title, JDB Contractors and Son Ltd, when Paul took over as MD running it with his father on a 50/50 basis.

Said John, "My partner and I had actually started part-time in 1968 when there was a lot of work to do with dead elms. It was all chainsaw and winch and then it went to the Aldermaston sawmill. We had a Super Major that seemed just right for the job. As the work built up we hired a machine for a weekend and in the end we started full-time."

Paul explained, "Dad and I are equal shareholders. He's trying to take a back seat and semi retire but he still quite enjoys some of the work, so he still comes out and drives some of the machines and runs parts of the business. I've got two children, Ryan and Mia, and Ryan is a budding addition to the firm. He was 10 in September, and he's very keen.

"He thoroughly enjoys being involved in the work when he can be, and he's in the yard on Saturdays. For most kids, seeing a tree come down would be exciting. He's seen so many now it's not a novelty but he thoroughly enjoys it. Recently we had a situation where the school needed to talk to us because they thought that some of his stories were a bit of an exaggeration, and they couldn't quite believe that he was doing what he is, but after they talked to me they realised he was doing these things. They were just about being around the trees and the machinery, though obviously he can only do it when the situation's safe. He's seen a lot of things your average ten year old would never see."

Said John, "You'd hardly believe how much tree surgery has changed. There's so much more Health and Safety than when we started and all the climbing techniques have changed. It's all totally different now."

What doesn't change though is the appeal of the industry.

Said Paul, "There's an old saying that once you've got sawdust in your blood you'll never get away from it. If you're born into the trade you've not really got much chance of getting away from it. It's a bit like farming in a way. You tend to find that a lot of people run businesses and their sons follow on. I know a lot of father and son businesses. Most people have got a connection. Some go back generations. I got into it straight from school and then went off to college to get a National Certificate in arboriculture. Then I had a brief time away from it when I went off and was a field service engineer in agriculture. That was a very valuable trade to have because, although I did it for four years, it gave me a good grounding in the repair of general machinery. Then I returned to this and never looked back since."

Currently the firm has two teams of tree surgeons on a domestic and commercial basis. 'Domestic' covers gardens and 'commercial' includes schools and colleges but the firm also does a lot of work for the construction industry, removing trees before the work can start, then remedial surgery before the project is handed over.

Now it's the machinery side of the business that is forging ahead.

The firm has a series of excavators – a two-and-a-half ton, a twelve ton and a twenty ton machine, and all three machines have root forks and timber equipment.



The County 1164 feeding the TP 250 on a site clearance at Croydon.

The two-and-a-half ton machine is a Case C23, the twelve tonner is a Hitachi EX 120 and the twenty tonner is a Komatsu PC 210.

Said Paul, "We use root forks because they're better than digging buckets. We can take out the woody material and leave the soil behind. The two-and-a-half ton machine is for working alongside the mulcher. Mulchers require a 360 excavator to prepare the material in front of it to get the most out of the machine and that involves putting the material into windrows in front of the machine. A typical job would be an area of scrub where we'd go through first with the excavator to grub it all up, dig it up with its roots, then lay it all in a heap for the mulcher to come along and do its job. All three machines are used for that. Obviously the size of the job dictates the size of the machine, as does access to the job, so sometimes you've got a big job but the only machine to get the access is the mini machine – so we've got machines to cover the whole scale."

The firm's other equipment includes an 1164 County forwarder – a 1978 machine that's fitted with an FMV timber crane. There's also a Mercedes Unimog fitted with a TP

250 chipper.

Often Paul has four machines on a job and drives them all himself, though on occasions another driver is also recruited.

But what of the industry's problems? How is the firm coping with those? Paul contends that the firm's work is spread so widely over the range that there's not one problem that is a matter of life and death.

He admitted, "The whole industry has had a bit of a problem with timber value and timber sales inasmuch as a lot of the hardwood went into the St Regis mill which was closed down about a year ago, but because we're not solely dependent on selling timber that didn't cause us any problems. We're also involved in biofuel, supplying Slough Heat and Power with woodchips along with many other people, but again we don't depend on that. We've got many outlets for the woodchip – for instance we sell an awful lot to the landscape market. They use it for cover and borders. Because we're involved with so many different parts of it, there isn't really anything in the industry that affects us"

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The Ahwi mulcher clearing a site at Camberley.