

Trust Me – I'm A Dealer...

Staying ahead of the game...

As a contractor, how sure can you be that your dealer isn't trying to sell you a pup – especially if nobody else has got the new head he's offering?

Wouldn't you at least want to see the head first?

Not so for contractor Dave Smith from Hampshire.

He's just spent tens of thousand of pounds buying a Kesla 30RHS from Caledonian Forestry Services without even seeing it.

Dave explained, "I buy most of my harvesting equipment through Caledonian simply because I ask for a price, I'm given a price and I know it'll come in at that price. I trust them, I know they won't sell me rubbish. I've known them for a long time now and have not heard of anybody who has ever had a problem with them."

He explained, "I've now had four heads from Caledonian, who are Kesla dealers, and I wanted a good quality well built head. Their timber cranes are very good – and as

I've had Kesla machinery before, I thought I'd go with them again. It was a bit of an unknown quantity for me and the dealer, although I've had the head a month now and I'm over the moon with it – it's built like a tank.

It's been very easy to pick up the computer system that's installed (a Motomit IT) – the head's build quality is very good and it's very simple compared with the Lako which, whilst very well engineered, was over complicated.

With this head the access to the hydraulics is very good. If you have to replace anything – not that I've had to yet – there's so much space in the head you can easily get your hands in. Also, where they could probably have used 15mm plate they've used 20mm. The amount of steel in the head is unbelievable – it's very, very robust."

He added, "I've just been clear-felling Scots pine where the average tree size was a tonne and a half. I've been felling trees up to and



Dave Smith has felled 1800 tonnes in his first month with the 30RHS.

over the maximum felling diameter by putting three cuts into the tree which the head is handling well, with no problems at all.

"I'm hoping this head will be trouble free for at least the first twelve months. In the first month I've done 1800 tonnes, which for a machine I hadn't driven before means it's been very quick to pick up. I'm very impressed.

"Everything in forestry can be over complicated but not in this instance: Kesla have made it nice and simple. The 30RHS is exactly the same as the 30RH but the feed rollers of the S version use less oil. That reduces the output slightly but not dramatically. I needed to keep as small a base as possible because of moving it on the roads in the South of England – the lanes we use for access aren't used to having arctic with 9 foot 6 inch wide machines on the back. I didn't want to have anything wider than that and the oil flow I can get out of a 1270B is enough to run the head with the smaller rollers on it. We're doing everything from thinning to clear-fell. That's why I chose a 1270 – a 1470 would have been too big."

Dave started in business by buying the company of which he was manager.

He recalled, "We started off hand cutting thinnings in the area from the New Forest up to Windsor and from the Horsham area across to the Reading/Newbury area. Now my main area of operation is from Petersfield across to Horsham. At one point we had 18 hand cutters but now it's just myself driving the harvester, one forwarder driver and a hand cutter when I need him for the over sized trees and difficult bits and pieces. The output is the same.

If the forwarder driver catches me up then he does any hand-cutting required. You have to be as efficient as possible and by sitting in the machine I'm actually earning

money rather than spending my time in the increased paperwork and administration that goes with additional employees."

Dave's first machines came from the company he bought.

He explained, "I started off with one old Massey Ferguson tractor with an FMV crane on it and trailer that was built by Mark Osborne for a sawmill that we worked for at that time. We took the tractor and trailer out of the sawmill yard. Later we changed the tractor for a Valmet 8000 – an agricultural tractor – which was the first thing I bought from Caledonian Forestry. They converted the Valmet tractor for me and put a crane on the back of it, we put a drive trailer behind it, which I also bought from Caledonian."

Dave's current Timberjack base came from John Deere Forestry, who took his very old 1270A machine in part exchange.

Said Dave, "John Deere have been very good. There have been one or two problems with the base, but even though it wasn't anything major they've come all the way down from Carlisle to solve the problem.

"One of the reasons I had another 1270 is that John Deere's parts service is brilliant.

"If I ring for something it's here within two days. However if I'm desperate and they've got it in stock, then provided I can contact them by five o'clock I'll have it next morning. It's the same with Caledonian Forestry. If I ask for parts and they haven't got them in stock then Kesla will send them directly to me, which a lot of companies won't. That is more important than anything.

"Ian Murray at John Deere, as well as the other people I've spoken to there, will always help you out, as will Jim Watt of Caledonian Forestry. They've been so good to me which



Access to the hydraulics on the 30RHS is excellent.



(Left) Dave Smith's 1270B was bought direct from John Deere. (Right) Dave Smith is particularly pleased with the robust construction of the Kesla head.

is why I've got two Timberjacks and, touch wood, if this head continues the way it is going now, then in another three years I'll be having another one."

Most of Dave's work is for a small woodland management company or small jobs of his own for private landowners. If necessary he also works for the Forestry Commission, but not often.

He explained, "I don't like to get into battles with large harvesting companies over prices – Tilhill and Euroforest can always pay more than me as they are able to guarantee volumes to customers. I do some work for Tilhill, and am quite happy to work for them but due to the way the tendering systems work, if work is short you either work for a large company, or you have put in an unrealistic price to get the job.

There's no point in doing that. You usually end up losing money, and may as well have just sat at home. A lot of my work comes through a small woodland management company, Commercial Woodlands, and in the last eighteen months I've probably only done four or five jobs that weren't for them. They're only a small company but the jobs are good, the rates of pay are reasonable and I get on well with the manager Tom Bitchenor."

But how's business?

Said Dave "At the moment it's fine. Commercial Woodlands have a main supply contract with Giddings at Cadnam – logs go there, with bars going to Charlton sawmills in Frome and the chipwood going to Kronospan who make MDF."

But no gripes?

He admitted, "I have to say I read the FMJ feature on Gary Rooke and he's right in one aspect – the FC really seems to have fads that change every five or ten years. At the moment they're thinning hardwood and removing softwood in

this part of the country for heathland restoration etc so, as Gary said, we're going to have a shortage of softwood. I can see that in ten years' time I won't have a business in this area.

I understand there's a lot of public pressure on woodland in the south east for recreation and environmental reasons but it just seems mad that we're not planting clearfelling when there's a global shortage and increasing demand from developing countries. Unless there's a huge change in the world economy the market for softwood is always going to be there. This country has always imported timber and will do so for the foreseeable future, so why are we planting things that we can't sell? I really don't understand it, but then again I don't work for the Forestry Commission. At the moment they just seem to be following the latest fashion and working on a short-term basis, rather than working for a sustainable forestry industry in this part of the country."

Like many a contractor Dave thinks the Forestry Commission produces too much paperwork. He said, "It's part of the reason we don't work for them as much as we could."

But Dave's biggest gripe is walkers who ignore warning signs. He explained, "People just ignore the signs, and all we get is abuse. The public seem to believe they can go wherever they like, be it day or night.

If you're working on a private estate where they allow public access you put up signs but people ignore them. When I've asked people why they've ignored the warning signs I've had answers like, 'Well, we're allowed to go wherever we like' which they're not. Right to Roam doesn't mean the right to go absolutely everywhere or the right

to ignore warning signs. I've had people say, 'I've got a better lawyer than you've got' and a couple of weeks ago I had two old people walking toward the machine as I was felling some trees off a bank, who had walked straight past all the signs so I had to stop the machine. I told them to turn round and go back and one of them just said, 'They weren't there yesterday'. I pointed out that none of the footpaths were shut and they could use those, but she still kept on about the fact that the signs hadn't been there the morning before. That's my

biggest gripe – it's always the contractor that's wrong and the public's right, even though we've done everything above board. It's gone beyond a joke now – they wouldn't walk through a factory would they? I really do think we should be able to close areas of woodland for health and safety reasons because it won't be the Forestry Commission or owner that ends up in court – it'll be me. Health and Safety has made sure the contractors are responsible for absolutely everything. It can't be fair and something should be done about it."

Graham Mole



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