

# BROTHERS IN ARB



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1. Preparing to swing in a section of crown over the classroom at a Fife primary school.
2. Lowering the remaining stem at a Fife primary school.
3. Time for a breather on the Fife primary school job dismantling a mature oak.

**THE KELLY BROTHERS** – Kevin, Kieran and Matthew – are well used to references to the film ‘Kelly’s Heroes’ when people meet them for the first time but when James Hendrie spent a morning with them on site, it was clear that there is nothing ‘oddball’ about their arboricultural business, Kelly Tree Care. The boys operate out of Auchtermuchty, in Fife, covering central and eastern Scotland offering a complete range of arboricultural services to both private and commercial clients

All three brothers have a background in mountaineering and rock climbing so, they explained to me, it seemed natural for them to seek a career that involved climbing and being outdoors all the time. That said, it is Kieran who has been involved in forestry and arboriculture the longest since leaving school. Kevin spent some time in IT and Matthew completed a degree in media design, and then worked on a farm, before they both decided that tree work was a career that interested them.

Kelly Tree Care has been operating since 2006 when Kevin and Kieran, who had both worked together before as freelance climbers, decided that working for themselves was an option that they both wanted to pursue. “We were approached about tackling a tree in Edinburgh,” Kevin told me. “I was working at this stage as a manager with Lowther Forestry and Kieran was doing freelance climbing in Northern Ireland. I wasn’t settling into regular employment and Kieran could see that the life of a freelancer is a finite thing so, after a conversation one weekend when Kieran was home, the job was booked in and Kelly Tree Care was born.”

From the outset the brothers have targeted commercial work more than private and this now accounts for around 80% of their turnover. Clients also include estates, councils, the Forestry Commission, the National Trust, construction companies and ground maintenance firms.

“We still deal with small private work. It is where we came from and the origin of our reputation, but with the kit that we have now it is not always the most profitable of work. However, we are reluctant to turn our backs on the private client looking for a contractor to tackle one tiny wee tree. It may be a small job but our clients still deserve good service from a professional outfit,” Kevin said.

In setting up the business, they were determined not to be just another boom and bust outfit, but to be a company that gave the customer exactly what they were looking for – a good standard of work at a competitive rate. The business has grown rapidly from humble beginnings – operating out of a shed in Kevin’s garden with a couple of Stihl 020s, a long-lasting Husqvarna 365 and two L200s, to a fully equipped forestry and tree surgery operation with a diverse but loyal customer base.

The business has been built on sound financial principles of monitoring operating costs, setting and meeting cash targets. Kevin was very clear in telling me, “If you are not cutting, pricing and invoicing every week, you will see a break in your cash flow and cash is king for the small firm.” I wondered with three brothers operating the business together how the responsibilities broke down.

Talking to them it was clear that while they can all do the various jobs required in the business, there are roles that they each specialise in, with the agreement of the others. Kieran is very much seen by the other two as the site manager, the brother who can see what needs to be done on the job and plans the way forward. Kevin, with his management experience, is the customer face of the business while Matthew is the reluctant administration manager!

Kevin said, “We all influence each other; each brother has a different way of looking at things that when combined with the outlook of the other two makes for a formidable mix of skills.”

The brothers can also call on the services of their father Pat, from whom they have inherited their hard work ethic. Pat is a dab hand at moving the brush and keeping the chipper operating at full pelt!

The business currently has a staff of four and when things get hectic, or for larger contracts, they can call

KELLY TREE CARE PURCHASED A VIMEK 608.2 FROM CALEDONIAN FORESTRY IN TIME TO HAVE THE SOLD SIGN ON IT AT APF2012.

The Vimek will allow them to develop the business further, offering low impact forestry solutions. This will enable them to carry out work on thinnings and small stand forestry harvesting, in woods that to date have not been commercially viable to harvest. Later in the year we hope to feature some of jobs that they have undertaken in a feature for Forestry Journal.



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#### 608.2 SPECS:

Engine: Kubota D902-E 18Kw/3,600 rpm  
Speed: 0-25 km/hour  
Transmission: Variable mechanical  
Length: 6.20m, loading area 1.65 metre square  
Loading capacity: 4,500kg  
Weight inc crane: 3,500kg  
Crane: Mowi P25 max reach: 5.2 metre  
Lifting capacity @ 5.2m: 330kg  
Gripping area: 0.16 metre square  
Turning angle: 250 degrees.

on a number of trusted sub contractors. Currently business is good with a steady flow of interesting and enjoyable jobs.

I visited them on site at just such a job on an estate in Fife, where they have been involved in tree surgery work, felling and timber extraction over a period of six months in a mature broadleaf wood setting. It was clear watching them deal with a mature beech that had blown down in a storm, and crown reduce and tidy up another mature oak, that this was certainly a job that was allowing them to excel. These guys work quickly; evidenced by watching the three of them all operating in unison each knowing what was required to be done.

"We've been able to climb, skid, use every saw in the shed as well as our new forwarder, as this job has been a mixture of big tree surgery and forestry with tons of wood being thrown around," Kieran enthused. The job that they have been doing as well as being interesting and worthwhile from their point of view, has been appreciated by the client too.

Kenny Stewart, head gardener on the estate, told me, "The Kelly brothers are as good as their word; they do what they have been asked and more. They work safely and are able to get the jobs done on time which allows us to follow on after them doing what we need to do." While this job is one that they have enjoyed, not all of the work they have carried out in the past has been so.

Kieran recounted tales of needles, nappies and used contraceptives on a job in Shettleston in Glasgow which saw them cut out what he described as a 'mega privet' hedge. A building site in East Kilbride one Christmas was another job that he told me was grim! "The site was a mud bath and I had to balance on logs in a river next to a sewer overflow, reaching round them to choker them up, shoulder deep in blue water and all manner of delights. It was so bad it was funny. There was even a single dead rat, somehow strategically placed in the car park such that everyone kept slipping on it. You have to love urban forestry!"

The boys love the challenge of tricky work and have always been attracted by what they told me are 'the interesting jobs'. A couple of these have included the removal of a mature diseased copper beech in Perth, which had to be sectional felled and lifted across a burn to be processed on a nearby road. Another was a mature but healthy oak that was deemed a threat to a nearby primary school in Fife that received similar treatment and was taken down in a day and a half.

Kelly Tree Care operates with a wide array of equipment. They have recently replaced one of their Transit vans with a new Isuzu Gafter with an LVB-manufactured custom box. They have a Zetor 7340 with a front loader, usually running a Farmi 5T forestry winch on it.



*Kieran standing by the felled butt of a Monterey cypress – a tree that due to its size took a whole week to fell and remove from a private garden.*



*This beautiful copper beech unfortunately was badly compromised by kretzschmaria deusta.*



*Preparing to crane down the final section of the crown of the copper beech at Perth.*



*Several tons of diseased copper beech floats away at Perth.*

Having started with a Timberwolf 150 tow behind, they complemented this with a 150TW but soon realised that with their speed of operation they needed to change kit.

They now operate a Jensen A540 tracked chipper which Kevin described as being 'turbo charged to 45hp and with geared 7 x 9 infeed rollers it is a powerful bit of kit'.

With regard to their saws, like many in the arboriculture game they started with Stihls for up the tree and Husqvarna on the ground. They still proudly work with a 385 which is ten years old, not bad for a larger saw that sees daily use. They moved to using Stihls on the ground with the advent of the 441, these being replaced by the slightly lighter 361s, and recently to the 362. However, in the brothers' opinion, reliability seems to be an issue with the new 362, and the revised tree saw MS201T, giving problems.

This has led them to look again at Husqvarna, opting for the 560XP which has impressed them. "It is a stunning wee saw and popular with the whole squad," Kevin explained. For the bigger fells and cross cutting, the MS880 is used because of its power. The saws and kit are transported around in the Nissan Kubistar that the boys operate, which is regarded as a pricing van for running around in as it is much easier on the diesel than the Land Rover Defender 90 that it parks up next to!

While there was definitely an air of brotherly love and camaraderie during the time I spent with the boys, I could not help wondering what happened if there was a disagreement over a business decision. Kevin quickly told me that while there was no boss in the team, if they differed in opinions, normally what happened was that two would agree and the other would eventually acquiesce and fall into line.

One area where this has not happened is over climbing gear, with Matthew and Kieran preferring the Lockjack system which they both described as being the fastest way to climb a tree, once you become accustomed to it, and Kevin favouring the more traditional DMM hitch climber system. It was clear listening to the three of them that each was passionate about their particular choice and nothing was going to change their opinion.

The brothers are confident of the way forward for both them and the industry in general, citing the changing weather patterns and the recent storms as offering opportunities for storm damage recovery work. "We took 40 tons of wood out at Queen Victoria School at Dunblane after the storms in early 2012. When we got on site there were giant Douglas firs blown all over the place. Healthy mature trees just ripped out of the ground," Kevin told me, to emphasise the point.

With their business, they have always tried to be innovative and they did for a time open an arboriculture supply shop in Perth for six months. "We learned quickly that we couldn't get down to the prices required to generate enough sales. We were constantly undercut and even having an online

presence couldn't help make the shop profitable. In the end we closed up shop and experienced our busiest day when we put the sale tickets on the gear," Matthew told me ruefully.

Kelly Tree Care itself has always had a website which offers potential clients a complete overview of the company and the services that they offer, which they consider an important part of their marketing strategy. "It is a real necessity to be able to showcase the company, particularly to prospective commercial customers on the web, and we see our website as another way to promote Kelly Tree Care," Matthew said.

The business has just invested in the purchase of what they believe is the first Vimek 608.2 forwarder to be put into operation in the UK. "We hope to bring forestry machinery into a traditional arb setting whilst tapping into a new market of low impact, low cost, extraction work that would suit the small stands that have up to now perhaps been less economical to harvest, due to volumes of timber versus machine costs," Kieran explained. While it is early days, the brothers have just completed their first extraction job using the 608.2, and where they never had a saw on site.

The brothers clearly enjoy what they do and told me that climbing big trees, skidding logs, working with big machines and nailing what they described as the 'nervy money shot fells where things have no option but to go the right way' were amongst the things that they love about forestry work. On the other side, what they see as the divorce of health and safety from the actual process of work – reducing it in their eyes to just a paper-shuffling exercise, is something that clearly frustrates them.

Kieran, Matthew and Kevin are clearly committed to continuing to build the business and to drive it forward in a new direction with as much passion as they have done in their first six years of trading. "We hope to make inroads into the forestry game. Tree climbing is a young man's game and as the years advance so does the wear and tear. We would be looking to invest more in machinery so that the future of the company does not rely on climbing trees for the rest of our days," Kevin explained, as I left them working in the woods doing what they all so very obviously love doing.

[www.kellytreecare.co.uk](http://www.kellytreecare.co.uk)



*The KTC team – left to right Adam Stevenson, Kevin Kelly, Pat Kelly (dad), Matthew Kelly and Kieran Kelly.*