

WHEN Chris Reeves jets off to Italy or wanders across to Holland it's all in a good cause. He's saving his clients money. For he's found that it's around 30% cheaper to buy trees there and have them shipped back to the UK, loaded onto a lorry and delivered to the client's chosen spot. On some occasions Chris has even taken the client with him to inspect the specimen he's chosen from photographs. Recently, he's acquired an exotic seven-metre silk tree plus limes, hornbeams, evergreen oak, Turkish hazels and fruit trees. Now, he's even invented a special arrangement of chains to make sure there's no damage done in loading or unloading. And there's even another advantage. Chris explained, "When the trees come into the UK they get inspected, so we've got the relief of knowing they're in good condition. It helps me, I can be competitive and pass on the saving to the client. It's win, win, win."

But Europe is not Chris' only foreign venture. Years ago, when he was working in London as a young tree surgeon he felt that something was wrong... He confessed, "I was partying a bit too much and needed to get myself out of my comfort zone." So, he upped sticks and went to work in South Africa for a couple of years. He recalled, "I ended up in this seaside town where a lot of wealthy folk had second homes. Often their trees were getting in the way of sea views, meaning there was plenty of work."

In 2013, it was back to London to set up his own business. He recalled, "It was hard going to start with. We spent a lot of time calling people, asking for meetings, trying to establish ourselves and trying to make sure we'd be working for people we could get on with." It was also difficult learning about business. Said Chris, "There's no school that tells you how to do it. You're learning as you go along and you don't know the right way, or the wrong way and you don't know how other businesses are doing things either."

Chris had started in his early 20s as a landscape gardener in London and found that boring but, along the way, he saw tree surgeons up in the trees and decided that was for him.

He got his certificates at the Cirencester Rural Skills Centre, then found himself a job in Gloucestershire, staying with the firm for a couple of years. But a lot of time was spent on caring for veteran trees and he still wanted to climb so it was back to London with all its problems of traffic and parking and general congestion. He said, "Working there isn't easy. The traffic is a problem, so is parking and there are roadworks and, recently, with the Grenfell Tower business, we couldn't get to a job because it was all



All Chris' logs go to biomass.



Chris' fiancée Kat – bookkeeper, receptionist and admin roles, to name but a few!

Aim for happy

closed off. The lads always prefer working round here."

'Round here' is in the area of the Surrey Hills – deservedly classified as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There, he rents a yard from the local estate while also looking after their woodlands.

Said Chris, "An average day – if we ever get one – is probably a reduction or a felling and/or pruning."

The wood gets chipped back at base and then goes, via Stobart, to biomass, while the winter sees a concentration on planting, with over 3,000 trees planted in 2016 from whips to mature specimens.

Tools of the trade are a variety of Stihl saws, together with a couple of

Husqvarnas, two Forst chippers, 7.5- and 3.5-ton lorries, a couple of Predator stump grinders and a Land Rover tipper.

One speciality is veteran tree care. The firm has a whole spectrum of aids to at least slow down deterioration which, increasingly, is a crucial role now that the country has a whole catalogue of tree problems from bleeding canker and leaf miner on horse chestnut, honey dew and conifer aphids to say nothing of *Phytophthora* and ash dieback. One of the firm's specialities here is to carry out a soil assessment and then aid matters by improving its quality.

He has a wide range of clients – from estate and property managers to schools, private estates and country houses. Then there are customers like companies dealing with block management, landscape designers and construction. The firm covers both the idyllic area of the Surrey Hills with its host of wealthy commuters and – as a stark contrast – street work in



the middle of London. A more constant snag is that working in London also costs him money.

He explained, "We start at 7am but then we have to get there and often we're not back 'til late so I make sure the staff get compensated for that."

Currently there are nine employees. Office admin, accounts and reception is run by Chris' fiancée Kat, while the general manager is Gillon Laidlaw who, if targets are met, could soon become a partner. Said Chris, "Right now, we can send out two teams a day and the idea is to – eventually – get that up to five."

A classic example of the firm's work was the way they dealt with a massive cedar of Lebanon showing signs of age, pictured on the previous page. It was blocking views from neighbouring properties and several large branches had snapped due to age. The firm got rid of the dead wood then did tip thinning to lighten the weight on lateral branches. It was all done simultaneously

with installing bracing in key areas to help the tree support itself.

While many firms can't wait to expand, Chris is reluctant to join the throng. The reason? His passion for looking after his staff. He explained, "It just makes so much sense in every way. I want to feel proud of the business and to be that I can only be as good as the guys I've got. So, I make sure they're justly rewarded and that makes the business better. You don't want clients seeing disgruntled staff feeling underpaid and not valued and grumbling and not working very hard all the time, because that doesn't do the company any good and we won't get the work again. And it's not just me that wants to be proud – I want all the staff to feel the same way."

Independent proof of that policy came from the examiner who conducted the Approved Contractor assessment for the Arboricultural Association. He said he had, 'very, very rarely seen a company invest so much in looking after its staff'. Staff



Above left: Dismantling a beech.



Top: The Reeves arb team.



Above: Installing cobra bracing on a cedar using a tracked MEWP.



Ash dismantle due to fungal infection.



Turkish hazel imported from Holland, being lifted using strops.

perks include health insurance, an annual allowance for PPE and extra payments for any overtime.

Said Chris, "The industry's got a very high turnover but so far I've managed to hold on to the staff. For me, I want that feeling of familiarity and trust. That way they'll be trusted to do the job properly. It's very much an emotional investment and it comes before the fruits of being the boss."

But there are blots on the landscape.

Said Chris, "What bothers me is the lack of regulation in the industry, and that is worse when you're just starting up. If you've registered for VAT, and you're trying to do things properly and you've got your staff on PAYE as you should, it's very hard to compete with Joe Bloggs down the road who's got a van, no insurance, a chainsaw and he's not charging VAT - it would be

really good if the industry was so regulated that if he butchered a tree he could be banned from doing tree surgery. The way it is at the moment - with that lack of regulation - it makes it very hard for people doing it the right way to get ahead. And that lack of regulation shows up in other ways. Every industry has its cowboys but if it's found that someone has butchered a tree there should be repercussions and right now there aren't any."

Meanwhile, for the future, Chris' aim is to keep the firm and its people happy. He explained, "I don't want the firm to become massive. As it is it's ideal - we can keep in touch with each other. And how many firms can say that?"

www.reevesarbservices.com

Graham Mole

