



Far left: Chris Vicary

Centre: The service team standing in front of the Fendt tractor and whole-tree piles awaiting chipping. Left to right: chipper operator Andy Gowthorpe; foreman, saw man and machinery operator Terry Stead; Jenz 820DL chipper operator Andy Wilkes and Chris Vicary, who fills in on any machine when necessary.

Right: Pyramids of logs for next season under the second of two new purpose-built farm sheds.



Efficiency at work

J & S Vicary Agricultural and Forestry Contractors operate from a yard between York and Hull, near Market Weighton. From the road, there is little to indicate the scale of activities carried out behind the long, low hedge. Carlyne Locher discovered exactly the nature of the business when she visited recently.

OVERSHOOTING the first entrance, the second leads into a large turning area, wide enough to accommodate two 44-tonne artic lorries, two purpose-built, open-fronted farm sheds and a hardwood roundwood log stack. Built last year, as large as planners would allow, the first shed is filled with 400 dried tonnes of woodchip awaiting pickup. The second contains 200 tonnes of hardwood firewood, a hillock of loose logs for bulk sales and a supersized pyramid of white cubic metre bags containing 8- and 10-inch hardwood logs for sale next season.

The 150-tonne ash and sycamore log stack obscures a hardwood processing area, where a 27-tonne New Holland 360 digger's grab arm is placing logs on the infeed log deck of a Pinosa 600 firewood processor ready for splitting.

Following an artic delivery lorry across the dyke and further into the yard, a

considerably larger softwood processing area is revealed. A dedicated log chipper – an artic-mounted Jenz HEM 820 DL drum chipper and screens, with an infeed diameter of 830 mm and capable of processing 100 tonnes of softwood logs an hour – marks the nearside of a stacking area, which accommodates up to 5,000 tonnes of softwood.

Looping left, the road bisects a 'wet' woodchip processing area, a spacious area of hardstanding, flank walls lined with multiple bays containing large hummocks of woodchip, G50, G40 and G30 (pristine and high grade), awaiting force drying down to the correct moisture content at one of three local farms. One bay of fresh G100 whole-tree chip, the biggest growth area in J & S Vicary's chipping business, is ready for delivery to customers. Surprisingly, it does not contain as much 'green' as expected.

The 44-tonne artic, with walking floor, deposits bought-in, mixed-up, multi-sized

sawmill chip in the middle of this processing area. The first job will be to grade this delivery through the Baughans barrel screener, separating the load into distinct and uniform products. It may need further processing (chipping and regrading) before being shovelled into bays.

At the far end, the JCB loads buckets of chip into a dedicated 44-tonne delivery lorry (with walking floor) bearing the Vicary logo. When full, the lorry rumbles down the road, past empty forest machinery storage sheds and out through the first entrance.

Chris Vicary appears from the office back door, mobile phone to his ear, offers a coffee and shows the way to the meeting room.

J & S Vicary (JSV) first featured in *Forestry Journal* in 2011. At that time, Chris had just finished his agricultural engineering degree at Harper Adams University (Shropshire) and, under the guidance of his father Jon and mother Sue, the business was already a considerable player in contract chipping and woodchip supply, underpinned by considerable chip-processing machinery.

Chris, now 29, has been involved in the business since the age of fifteen. He became operations manager (and third partner) in 2010. In 2014, when his father passed away, he took over the business, and has been reinvesting and upscaling ever since.

Giving a brief overview of the business today, he says, "There are still two sides to the business. We have the product supply side, woodchip and wholesale hardwood firewood. Then we have the servicing side – contract wood-chipping, a full site-clearance service, and forestry contracting, thinning and harvesting. Seven years ago, chipping was 60% of our turnover; today it is 25%. Woodchip sales were 25% and are now 60%. Our forestry contracting is a lot more mechanised, doing bigger machinery jobs."

In the last five years, JSV has chipped over

Hardwood processing area. 27-tonne New Holland 360-degree tracked digger. Logs on the infeed log deck of a Pinosa 600 firewood processor, ready for splitting. The machine is fully automated and optimised, allowing the operator to control what is cut – especially important when selling to retailers who will net the logs.



a million tonnes of timber. Well over half has been processed on the larger articulated Jenz HEM 820 DL drum chipper and Jenz 820DQ chipper truck which operate throughout the UK, contract chipping for power stations such as Wilton International in Teesside (who burn up to 1,000 tonnes a day). The remainder has been processed on the small chipper, a Jenz HEM 593Z, booked by smaller, local end-users who, for example, hire JSV once every six weeks to process up to 250 tonnes at a time.

Local chip-buying customers include farmers who buy woodchip for animal bedding. Small boiler owners buy high-grade G30 (25% moisture) chips, which account for 25% of all sales. Medium-sized end-users have helped JSV's year-round sales. "We have customers with baseload boilers and CHP boilers that run year round, evening out winter supply peaks and summer troughs. We have kept our lorry and three others owned by a local haulage company busy all week, every week, for the

last eight months. Chip sales are going up like mad, whole-tree chip especially."

The timber needed to fuel the increase in chip sales comes as a result of mechanising the service side of the business and forestry contracting operations. "We normally have service contracts booked in a month in advance. At the moment it is six months. Now that local landowners know what is happening with Brexit, they are getting on with forestry works. Not only are we contract chipping for others, we are creating our own products, chipping the lop-and-top for biomass and bringing hardwood back to the yard to keep the firewood team busy."

Chris launched JSV's hardwood firewood business shortly after finishing university, doubling sales every year for the first five years. "We sell bulk lorryloads of firewood to retailers around the country (Exeter, Thetford, Nottingham and more) or to firewood merchants (Yorkshire), 3,000 cubic metres upwards a year. Investing in the Pinosa 600 processor and log deck eighteen



months ago, we went from splitting five days a week on a small PTO-driven processor to splitting two days every fortnight. This frees up the men to do other activities."

JSV employs a team of six. Sue looks after the paperwork. Two men, Andy Watts and Russell Wood, work on products in the yard, in addition to a full-time woodchip delivery driver John Gatherum. On the service side, foreman and machinery operator Terry Stead works with Jenz HEM 820 DL chipper operator Andy Wilkes, and Andy Gowthorpe who operates the Fendt 939 tractor and Jenz HEM 593Z chipper full time. Chris has the relevant competency tickets to operate all machines, and when not managing operations and contracts he fills in where necessary.

Prior to 2005, JSV worked all service operations manually. "We cut everything by hand, hand-feeding the trees into small tracked chippers. We invested in our first tracked digger in 2012/2013. We prefer tracked machines. They cause minimal ground disturbance and when the weather turns bad we can keep on working. When roadwork is required, we add a set of rubber pads onto the machine."

This week, the smaller chipper has been catching up with JSV's local thinning jobs, and chipping the lop-and-top (and whole trees) produced by the JSV service team who are working in a five-acre

COMPANY FEATURE

Right: The smaller Massey Ferguson tractor with smaller 5-tonne trailer. JSV's larger tractor and 12-tonne trailer would not navigate narrow bends in the drive.

Below: Chipping whole trees: JSV's chipping operation on a local estate.



Far left: At the far end of the softwood processing area, JSV's JCB yard machine loads buckets of chip into a dedicated 44-tonne delivery lorry (with walking floor) bearing the Vicary logo.

Left centre: The new 14-tonne Doosan digger DX140 LCR with TMX tree shears, operated by foreman Terry Stead.

Left: Terry putting the tree shears through their paces, showing off the Engcon 360 tilt-rotation head.

mixed woodland (predominantly ash and sycamore) on one of the local estates. They are cutting biomass material for the estate's boilers, in turn bringing this section of woodland back into management and good health.

Access within the estate narrows the further in we go. A quintessential landscape, field trees dotting arable and grass landscapes gently undulating down towards the River Humber, changes by degrees, literally - growing on chalky free-draining Wold soil, the dense woodland being worked grows on a 30-degree slope.

We park in a turning area at the bottom of previously thinned, well-spaced woodlands. These stands form the blueprint for what JSV will achieve this week. "This is a complex job," says Chris. "We worked out what we could extract per day and agreed a tonnage rate upfront. The estate has several biomass boilers heating all the properties on the estate, and all the product timber and brash extracted will go to the estate for chip - one to two years' worth of supply. On our second day here, the owner was so pleased with our work, he offered us additional work."

Narrow site access prevents the use of the 27-tonne digger, so two smaller tracked diggers were moved here on the company low loader. The 14-tonne Doosan DX 140 LCR with 14-inch TMK 400 tree shears and accumulator arm (both purchased in December 2017) cuts the racks and removes one in three trees either side, taking everything down the bank to the landing area at the bottom. All timber, hardwood and softwood, is cut with a chainsaw into 3-metre lengths. The logs are then stacked by the 6-tonne Kubota KX0574 digger's grab attachment at roadside, ready for removing back to the yard. Everything else, including small, bushy trees and all lop-and-top, is piled at the bottom of the bank and chipped.

The reverse-drive Fendt 939 400 hp tractor drives the PTO-driven Jenz HEM



593Z chipper. With a 1.4 metre infeed, the machine utilises helix drum technology to chip, "giving a better sample when chipping brash (or a bushy tree)", at a rate of up to 40 tonnes per hour. Both are replacement machines bought last July. Vicary replaces most machinery every three years, before they get too worn.

Buying replacement kit from a variety of dealers, Chris is happy with the performance of all. There is room for improvement in the service offered to contractors. "If I have a breakdown on a Thursday night and the earliest someone can get to me is Monday, that is no good to me. 'Out of hours' service - I would pay extra for that, but no-one wants to know."

Attending shows such as Agritechnica, Elmia and the APF to scout for new machinery, Chris has high praise for the new Doosan digger DX140 LCR and TMK 400 tree shear combination. Narrower by a foot and half the weight of the 27-tonne digger, this 14-tonne is now JSV's busiest machine. The 14-inch tree shears came with an Engcon 360-degree tilt-rotation head. The head has been slightly modified by Terry, who added a support to stop trees wobbling when tilted. Chris marvels at the fact that

despite six months of use, the blades have yet to need sharpening.

"These diggers have revolutionised our work. It takes the same amount of time to manually fell a tree as it does to cut them with tree shears. Felling manually, the stems are left on the floor. A machine moves the stem into the correct position straight away, doubling our efficiency. Doing more work in less time means that we can take on more." Mechanisation did initially remove four men from operations.

Where the diggers come into their own is the safety they provide. "Dangerous trees, leaning or hung up, can be processed safely by a machine operator sat in a cab, removing the need for men to be on the ground near the danger zone. The men have to be safe."

Maintaining team spirit is equally important. "I have a team of motivated staff and we are very good at what we do. Going out after work on a Friday is good for morale. The men can talk freely about the week just gone and we can discuss what is coming up next," (a 40% thin of woodlands growing on flat land in managed rows, paying special attention to the larch). "We did a 20-acre site clearance for the

Environment Agency in West Bromwich (for flood-defence earth banks). We could have done the job in four weeks, but their restrictions dragged the work out to eight. It is a long time to stay away. Tonight, I am taking them out for steak and chips as a thank you."

Scaling up the service side of JSV's

business has doubled their efficiency, creating larger volumes of raw material for products. Firewood sales are still growing and woodchip sales are racing ahead.

One last investment in infrastructure, a new weighbridge (which will pay for itself in 2.5 years) and tarmac entrance for the yard are (since FJ's visit) in position.

Is Chris happy with where the business is now? He thinks about the question for a long moment before replying. "I am looking to add another saw man to complete the service team. A local. Good men are hard to find." He thinks that then, they are probably there. For the moment...

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