



The team: Dominik Urban, Jaime Jenkinson, Kiko Godinos, Crawford McLaren, Rafa Lopez Zapata and Luke Forbes Adam.



- ◀ Neat pile of brush pre-chipping.
- ▶ Chipping the brush through the Timberwolf chipper.



(chainsaws, rakes and brooms). Each team is responsible for its own kit. If a blunt chainsaw is put back on the shelf, it ruins the following day's schedule." Depot manager Kiko makes sure that all kit is kept in working order and in its place. At weekly inventory inspections, each team signs off on equipment that has been checked for damage, or has passed its inspection. Noting eight CCTV feeds streaming live to a monitor in the office, Fletcher says that in their last yard they suffered a burglary where all plant was taken. They are taking no chances here.

Fletcher (34), born in Hammersmith, grew up in Malaga Province, Spain. "I left school thinking tree surgery was removing DNA from trees. It sounded cool." His introduction to tree surgery started in 2000, while working as a groundsman for a British tree surgeon under palm trees and on golf courses throughout the Costa del Sol. "The

Steady growth at Red Squirrel Tree Surgery

EXECUTING WORK TO THIS LEVEL TAKES SKILL AND EXPERIENCE. RED SQUIRREL TREE SURGERY HAS ALL THE EXPERIENCE, QUALIFICATIONS AND UNDERSTANDING REQUIRED WHATEVER LEVEL OF TREE WORK IS REQUIRED. CAROLYNE LOCHER RECENTLY SPENT THE DAY WITH THEM TO FIND OUT MORE.

streetside pre-chipping brush piles and the genuine camaraderie amongst the team. Days later in South Harrow, Red Squirrel Tree Surgery's (RSTS) office team, Katie and Steph, are busy fielding enquiries from potential clients and directing one works team to their next work site. Co-directors Fletcher Jenkinson and Pip Forbes Adam offer a brief tour of the company's well-screened 5,000 sq foot yard, which they took on in March 2016. Established in 2011, RSTS's work is split fairly evenly between private and

commercial work. They employ 20 staff, a mix of directly employed and sub-contracted team members, who work on sites across London in five highly organised teams on an average day. Fletcher says, "The teams are colour-coded: red, blue, green, black and yellow. Each has a corresponding truck (single and double cab tipper trucks), a woodchipper (Timberwolf, Först and Schleising), sometimes a stump grinder (Predator, Carlton and Rayco) and tools

first time I saw my boss up a pine tree, I said that I wanted to learn how to do that. He left a rope with a prussic at the bottom, told me to put on the harness and climb the tree. An hour later, I looked down from the top and saw him tying a chainsaw to the rope. I pulled it up and started cutting." In 2001, Fletcher came back to the UK. While living with Pip (his godfather) he gained a City and Guilds qualification in tree work from Merrist Wood (his

THE rope-tied London plane log is lowered smoothly, first onto a garden room roof where it is turned on its side, then to the ground where it is brought to rest beside the tree's two-metres-circumference base. Two days ago, this mature twin-stemmed London plane tree, growing in a suburban North London garden, stood 40 metres high. This afternoon, post-pollarding, it is now a frame of its former self and 15 metres shorter. Red Squirrel Tree Surgery's team leader and today's lead climber Crawford McLaren says, "This is a big job. We don't come across anthracnose of plane very often. The disease weakens a tree from the leaf tips inwards, moving rapidly into the branches, which then become brittle and die. The main trunk still has life in it. Hopefully it will come back and we will have been able to save the tree." Owners of surrounding properties had



Office team: Stephanie Crawford (secretary) and Katie McDonald, (logistics manager).

been concerned about this tree's health for almost a year. The new owner contacted the Forestry Commission who identified why leaves on one side of this tree were not growing. When choosing which arboricultural practice to use, what swung this private client in favour of Red Squirrel (beyond their well-presented appearance,

friendly manner, reasonable prices and insurance cover) was their Check-a-Trade references and customer rating. What impresses essentialARB while watching the team working is the constant stream of bilingual communications (English and Spanish) between climber and groundsmen, the neatness of the



▶ RSTS's works vehicle.

Co-directors Pip Forbes Adam and Fletcher Jenkinson.



attendance organised by his Spanish tree surgeon boss) and went to work sub-contracting as a climber for many of the arboricultural companies in London. Learning much about business, he also learned about people; and the importance of giving teammates positive feedback every once in a while and paying people what they deserve.

Pip (56), having worked in landscaping for 20 years, was looking for a career change, something less physical, when Fletcher presented a business plan requiring an initial investment of £7,000. Fletcher says, "Having worked for other people, I knew what I wanted and what I did not want. I wanted to work with all-round normal guys with a good work ethic: reliable, respectful and level-headed. I wanted a good office team, offering a smooth and friendly service, so that a customer feels confident from first contact until the invoice comes in."

Pip's investment of £7,000 bought a truck, some hand tools, public liability insurance, a website and advertising. With everything in place, Fletcher stopped sub-contracting. "It was a lovely feeling. Our first client in Fulham came from a word-of-mouth recommendation." Pip says, "From the beginning we shared the quoting. I managed the administration while Fletcher carried out the tree work." Fletcher paid back Pip's investment within a year.

Pip's biggest learning curve was understanding how, as an arborist, Fletcher worked: how long each job would take and how to take brash from a back garden through a house in a clean and tidy manner. "I may have quoted for a day's work when it was actually a day and a half. I am still not very good at quoting on Cypress trees." For Fletcher (who does not suffer ignorance easily) dealing with awkward clients could have proved tricky, but he learned to overcome it.

As a company, RSTS has grown quickly yet steadily, adding a new team almost every eighteen months. In 2015, with three teams, they achieved Arboricultural Association Approved Contractor accreditation for the business. "People said 'don't do it'," says Fletcher (of seeking AA-approval). "I looked at the people saying this and went for it. It is the arboricultural equivalent of a Michelin star for chefs and I wanted to bid for council contracts."

Pip says, "We enrolled on an 'ArbAC Preparation Workshop'. They gave us modules to complete, information on the policies we had to implement and helpful

▼ Mature twin-stemmed London plane tree, suffering from anthracnose growing in a suburban North London garden. Pre-pollard, it stands 40 metres high.



The heavy rigging facilitating the lowering of each plane log.



templates for risk assessments and more. It did seem like a waste of time at first, but, implementing LOLER and PUWER checks and now going back through maintenance records to see

when machinery blades were changed, it makes sense. Everything we had to do is really beneficial to the company." After their last annual assessment, Fletcher attended a 'Managing Safety' refresher course.

In 2016, RSTS bought out an Acton-based arb company (plant and client list), expanding to four teams. Moving yards, they were joined by Katie and then expanded to five teams with the addition of the Mercedes Axel 18-tonne grabber lorry. There is no room in the yard for co-product woodchip or log piles. The Mercedes tipping trailer is currently full of

logs, some of the 10 tonnes of co-products created a week. Co-products go to Crows Nest Farm Green Waste Recycling Centre or to an allotment around the corner. "We would love to find a bigger depot, but there isn't one unless you go out of London."

In 2016, RSTS was incorporated, Pip assuming the role of Private Contracts Manager, Fletcher as Commercial Contracts Manager. Katie says, "In the space of fifteen months, we have grown a lot. There is a lot going on."

Word-of-mouth recommendations remain RSTS's best advertisement. A page on Google Profiles and 'Squirrel Cam' videos on YouTube' also help. In summer, Pip quotes for up to 11 jobs a day, of which around a third become firm bookings, keeping the teams busy for up to two weeks in advance. Fletcher tenders for developer and council contracts, ensuring blocks of future work.

His first successful commercial tender was to the London Borough of Ealing. "We

▼ Day two, Crawford McLaren is lead climber. The complicated part was the location. It was growing above a garden room and every part of the tree had to be lowered on a rope and cut up small enough to be taken out through a nicely painted house. Heavy rigging was used and a lot of men were put to work on it.



▼ The rope-tied London plane log is lowered smoothly, first onto a garden room roof where it is turned on its side, then to the ground where it is brought to rest beside the tree's 2-metres-circumference base.



have done multiple small works for them. The first was maintaining and cyclically pruning 180 plane trees within 12 weeks in Ealing's Broadway ward. More small contracts followed." The London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham came next. RSTS is their 'on call' arb company for all housing complaint works. Today, for a resident, this includes a 'fell and poison' of a sycamore and laburnum, with ivy cleared from the side of a house.

Ivy removal (via abseiling) from houses across London remains a steady area of business - 50 or more houses a year. RSTS also plants homegrown trees (sourced from Deepdale Trees in Hertfordshire) and installs garden swings with ropes secured throughout the canopy. They have also just installed tree lights (half a tonne of lights wrapping each branch of a sycamore) for a hotel in Hammersmith.

Recently, the teams have been sent out on emergency post-storm clearance works. Pip quoted for reduction work on several

contract we have yet to tell you about," says Pip. "We have done reductions, lifts, multiple 'fell and grinds' for (10) housing estates in Southwark. The challenge is that teams need to leave the yard by 6:30 am to beat the traffic and return during rush hour. It is up to 3 hours there and back. The lads are on an incentive scheme for this contract, whatever they make plus 30%. They can make good money."

Fletcher has just tendered for their first 'long-term' contract, all the street trees and park trees across one borough. If successful, they will have won their first five-year contract.

Building a successful business always takes time. It has taken years for Fletcher to learn not to take 'work' home with him. As RSTS's all-rounder, he spends 40% of his time climbing. He was lead climber on the anthracnose of plane pollard until 'flu got the better of him. "It was a good job, not work we do every day, like pruning fruit trees or hedges. It was more like one of those jobs that is the reason why tree surgeons get into the business."

He spends 60% of his time on everything else. While he prefers the peace of being up in the canopy, his advice to anyone thinking of starting out on their own is, "Spend less time up the tree and concentrate on the business. There is so much to be done and you cannot concentrate on the tree if you are constantly thinking about the business. We cannot grow any more here. I am happy with the size of our company and I like that personal touch. The bigger a company gets, the more problems there are and standards of work get diluted."

Fletcher admits that if the company is not developing, he does get restless. The solution? A sister company in Spain, overseen by both co-directors on a rotating basis.

Pip says, "I think of Fletcher as the diesel engine that powers a ship forward. He has the drive and ambition to seize the opportunities out there. I am the solid steel hull that holds the ship together. With the collapse of the Spanish construction industry, there is no shortage of people wanting work."

In April, Fletcher will travel to Spain, buy a truck and take over his first tree surgeon boss's business. A Spanish team member, currently based in London, will join him and begin recruiting and training future team members. Within a year, Fletcher hopes that Red Squirrel Tree Surgery (Spain) will have two teams working on the palm trees growing throughout the Costa del Sol.

He concludes, "We are going to be catering mainly to the ex-pat trade. If we can brand the sister company with our AA Approved Contractor status (and Trustmark) and the Check-a-Trade logo, this will assure people that we carry out all works to UK standards. We want to set the benchmark for the future of tree surgeons out there."

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