



Arbor-Call's Först chipper with the Transit crew cab.
Lead climber Sam rigging a diseased beech.



The firm is equipment rich with a whole range of machinery kept up-to-date: It includes a Unimog with a winch on the front and a PTO chipper, timber trailer and flail. There are two stump grinders, two tracked chippers and a tow behind chipper, a JCB skidster with a larger mulcher head. In addition there's a Bandit 19XP Intimidator whole tree chipper on tracks with a grab arm, an Avant handler, five 4x4 pickup trucks, four Transits and a Cabstar. The whole team is kitted out with the company uniform.

Raising the standards

GRAHAM MOLE RECENTLY VISITED HAMPSHIRE-BASED ARBOR-CALL TREE SURGEONS TO GET AN INSIGHT INTO THEIR BUSINESS.

BEING a lady in the arb business is still unusual. But for Alison Lovejoy it's simply a pleasure. She explains, "I like dealing with clients and I'm told they like dealing with me. They just say they find it easier to talk to a woman. One example came up recently where there was an elderly client with a problem and I thought it was just best to go out there and see her and put her mind at rest. When I was there she told me our firm had been recommended because it was run by a woman and she felt a bit more at ease."

Alison is co-owner of Arbor-Call, based in Hampshire, a firm which now boasts a staff of 21 - 16 out working and 5 in the office running the day-to-day business.

Her colleague Ben Wainhouse, the firm's arb estimator, surveyor and technical manager, agrees. He said, "I do think some of our lady clients find it easier to deal with Alison rather than a scruffy tree surgeon. Alison brings a certain air of professionalism and approachability."

Said Alison, "Why do we do this? It's because we love what we do. We're passionate about it and it's just like looking after a family, helping them earn a living and I'm proud of that. And we couldn't do it without them - we'd be nothing without our hard-working staff. We are a family and the staff are fantastic and I'm just proud to be part of it, even driving a truck with our name on it makes me proud to have been part of making it. And that pride doesn't go away."



Alison at her desk.

Generally, Alison's partner Jess takes care of the work out on the ground while Alison looks after the administration, sales and any further opportunities that are on the horizon.

Nowadays the firm operates within a 25-mile radius, having grown substantially since Alison joined 8 years ago.

Part of that growth involved a whole range of staff training which is largely the concern of Ben.

He explained, "We always ask the customers to do the Checktrade reviews and then we also ask them for their thoughts on our work and whoever gets the most positive Checktrade reviews wins employee of the month and a prize."

There's also other appreciation from customers... Said Ben, "One of them sent us a picture of the lads at

work. They even captioned it 'Dream Team'. That was great and it just showed how pleased the client was with the quality of work and the attitude of our staff."

In the meantime there's a whole programme of training planned for the staff in 2019, including seminars, tree and pest ID sessions and best practice talks. As a co-opted member of the Arboricultural Association's learning and education committee, Ben is a firm advocate of proactive training and that is now a policy throughout the firm.

But he's also campaigning to see the introduction of licences for tree surgeons, with more regulations and higher standards throughout the tree surgery business.

He explained, "One reason for that is simple. To be an arborist you have to be - or should have to

Above: MEWP takedown of a beech colonised with *Kretzschmaria*.

Above right: Taking down a row of conifers.

be - more than just a chap with a chainsaw and a truck just working weekends. It's very difficult in those circumstances for professional firms like ours and others to compete. Due to lower overheads and potentially no public liability insurance professional companies are easily undercut by cowboy firms. I believe something should be done about that. There's a need for regulation to make the industry fair from a baseline level. For example, having a licence to operate and certain qualifications."

It even affects trees. Said Ben, "I'll go to a house and the client will tell me the tree has got ash dieback - on the advice from a rogue trader - and that it needs removing. After inspection, the tree is perfectly healthy and there's no need to remove it. I advise that it would not be necessary to remove the tree. However, they want it gone and want it gone cheaply. Unfortunately, this happens regularly in various situations and we see the loss of perfectly healthy trees."

Where Ben would also like to see change is the situation where anybody, without any training or even safety kit, can simply buy a chainsaw from anywhere and set to work with it. He added, "It's crazy and



▶ The Unimog and timber trailer.

▼ A very appropriate registration plate!



again, it's an issue that may need further regulation."

And for the future? For Alison that means further expansion, though limited by the need to preserve the quality of the firm's work. She explained, "We can be a bit larger but we'd like to keep in that quality niche and the amount of control that we've got at the moment. I'd hate to lose that. Maintaining a high quality is really important. We don't want to become too large and lose that 'family' feeling. Rather than get bigger and more complacent, we want to maintain our personal approach to dealing with clients."

Ben emphasised, "I don't want us to be just a tree surgery firm. I want us to develop so we can give something back to the industry and help make it a more skilled profession to be in - not that it isn't already - but it needs to be seen that way - and I want us to be part of making the industry's standards higher."

Inevitably, the conversation turned to Brexit... For Ben the threat is not only that house prices will drop, thus lowering the public's spend on the industry but

▲ Above: Ben Wainhouse.

▶ Callum chogging down a large beech.



even more damaging is the risk of losing some of the EU's regulations which could see an increase in the arrival of pests and diseases which, he reckons, could have 'a harmful impact'. For him there could also be the loss of health and safety regulations creating an unsafe workplace for arborists.

The last word went, of course, to the lady of the house. Said Alison, "We hear that there is a lower proportion of female arborists out there in the industry and we'd love to see more. We have previously had a female climber and in fact had a call today from a woman who would like to come in for a trial day. Equality in the workplace is a must."