

# Buckland takes the lead in glulam production

It is a quiet Friday afternoon, when I arrive at an impressive 1800m<sup>2</sup> site in Crediton, Devon, home of Buckland Timber. The wind down for the weekend is evident, with operations slowing in preparation for home-time.

When I get out of my car, I can already see Robin Nicholson, one of the company founders, walking towards me, with a welcoming smile on his face. I am looking forward to catching up with the directors of the company, who are longstanding Confor members, and we start our tour around the premises.

When the company began trading in 2012, Robin relates, some 100% of structural glulam was being imported from Europe. Buckland Timber now has a production capacity of 5000m<sup>3</sup> beams per year up to a maximum length of 30m. Whilst there are a number of British companies who can produce small quantities of bespoke glulam, Buckland Timber is the only company capable of manufacturing glulam on a scale that makes the product competitive with imports, he proudly points out.

I can see how the company is a prime example of vertical integration in the supply chain. Its founders are Bill Blight FICFor, a woodland owner and consultant and a well-respected figure in the south west forestry sector; Ralph Nicholson, a woodland owner and manager who grows high quality timber in his woodland in north Devon; and, his son Robin Nicholson, a chartered structural engineer with seven years' experience as a design consultant and building contractor. Recognising a gap in the increasing market for glulam the directors decided to take the risk to invest in a manufacturing plant that would add higher value to the timber grown in their own woodlands.



**Caroline Harrison**

visits Confor member Buckland Timber, Britain's largest manufacturer of bespoke glue laminated (glulam) beams.

Setting up the company required a substantial investment in production machinery, including a large-scale finger-jointing machine imported from Germany, sawing and woodworking equipment and press technology.

It hasn't been plain sailing for the company and the directors have learnt which locally grown timber is suitable for glulam manufacture. "Our production is predominantly spruce (70%) that we import from Scandinavia; Douglas fir (15%) that we mainly import although we also use or own, and larch (15%) that comes from our own woodlands. We also import any oak that we use. We would love to use more home-grown timber if it was cheaper but frankly, the quality and price of imported timber gives us better value", Robin comments.

The company uses a local business for the primary breakdown of their own logs. Moisture content is an issue and as they do not have any kilning capacity, they use the kilns at Duchy Timber in Cornwall.

I am told that the company is developing new

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**Glulam is made by gluing together a number of smaller pieces of timber to produce a single, strong, structural member. Glulam optimizes the structural values of wood providing strength and versatility. The beams can be used as vertical columns or horizontal beams, as well as curved and arched shapes. The high strength and stiffness of laminated timbers enable glulam beams and arches to span large distances without intermediate columns, allowing more design flexibility than with sawn timber**





products that use their own larch and Douglas fir in the form of bus shelters. "It is this type of simply constructed, volume market that suits home-grown timber."

Surprisingly, the main of their customers do not buy glulam for its green credentials. "Cost is king" Robin says, "whether the timber has been sourced sustainably is neither here nor there. Knowledge of the structural properties of timber is still somewhat limited amongst designers and architects but it is getting better. There is some knowledge of the durability of Douglas fir and larch but decisions are most often made because of the aesthetics of a timber structure."

Now five years old, the company is thriving with 12 employees that include two full-time structural

engineers, two full-time administrators/book-keepers, four full-time carpenters, one full-time tester/stock taker, four full-time glulam manufacturers, one part-time temp and one full-time production manager. Drawings are sent to Italy and the installation of many of their projects is sub-contracted.

"Residential contracts make up one third of our work along with schools and canopies. We are very lucky to have worked with a wide range of clients and some exciting projects ranging from single glulam beams to sizeable pre-fabricated structure installations. We are currently installing a structure at Terminal 5 at Heathrow. Interestingly, we have also had several contracts with the Diocese of Westminster for structures in churches."

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



Left to right: Grand Designs on site filming manufacturing process at Buckland Timber, for a Channel 4 series; curved joint for Timber Kit Solutions; 1.75m radius curves  
Above: Robin Nicholson  
Top: Glulam portal frame structure for a church hall building