



# Q&A



Confor's Wales manager **Anthony Geddes** interviews well-known agent and manager Andrew Bronwin.

Andrew is the owner of Andrew Bronwin & Co Ltd, a well-respected mid-Wales based forestry agent and management firm. The company employs a team of qualified forest managers based in Powys, covering all of Wales and the border counties. Furthermore, he performs a valuable role as vice-chairman of the Confor Wales committee. I have had the pleasure of working with Andrew in a previous life with John Clegg & Co. and now as a member of the Confor team.

**AG: Andrew, for our members who don't know you, can we have a little background of where you've come from?**

AB: I did a degree in rural land management at Reading then, combined with a move to Scotland, I completed a postgraduate in agriculture and an MSc in Natural Resource Management.

**Was forestry a chosen career path for you?**

My career started in the highlands of Papua New Guinea in the early 80s as

# ‘Subsidised farming can’t continue and forestry can be part of the longer-term solution’

a VSO volunteer working in agriculture. Prior to that I worked with single homeless people in London for a few years. They were both quite character forming experiences! The point then came when I couldn’t delay choosing a career any longer so here I am. I worked for ADAS, then Tilhill and set up Andrew Bronwin & Co. in 1996

## **What was it about the other organisations that made you strike out on your own and what is it that you feel makes Bronwin & Co stand out from other firms?**

Tilhill had merged with EFG and was then nearly taken over again. I didn’t want to go through the merger process for a second time. When I left, Tilhill shut down the branch where I was district manager, quite a few clients came with me and that set me up.

I like to think we can do the whole thing from planting through to harvesting. We work on a lot of traditional estates which are complicated and have very specific requirements so if you don’t have that eye for detail you can come badly unstuck. These estates are often multi-purpose, have numerous stakeholders with very complex forest structures. Our success is reflected by the long-term nature of our involvement in many estates. On these properties, we prepare budgets, implement agreed work programs, employ and supervise contractors and negotiate with the relevant government organisations.

Where I believe we excel is in doing our best to make forestry pay for the owner. We have invested quite a bit in technology – drones, computerised measuring equipment, digital mapping so that we

can offer up to date and well-presented information.

## **I notice that Bronwin & Co are registered drone pilots – (have you been to Gatwick recently?) Do you feel that the future of the industry will be driven by digitisation/technology?**

No airport jobs thankfully!

Of course, technology will play a big part of the future. It’s a challenge for small companies to keep up with all that, especially when technology moves so quickly. Fortunately, we have technically able and, dare I say it, younger people who are very capable. We listen to them and get the cheque book out when it’s needed.

It’s important to acknowledge that the technology and investment in forestry extends beyond the drone or the desktop. When I reviewed one of our client’s sites back in 2018 following a thinning operation, I thought the figures must be wrong. The forest had yielded double the volume that we would historically have expected. When they proved to be correct, I contacted Forest Research to tell them I had some exceptional, fast-growing trees.

There are many plant breeding programs and the effects of years of research are now being seen. We ensure that we work closely with the growers and monitor what is going on in the wood so we can help owners take advantage of these developments.

## **If there would be one thing that you could change about forestry in Wales at the moment what would it be?**

Where to start with that one! No one thing will make a big enough change,

what is needed is a step change in policy, financing and regulation.

Welsh Government must recognise the need to create rural wealth post Brexit. Agriculture in terms of sheep and cattle is going to be challenging when the money stops coming from the EU. The chances are there will be much less coming from London. Subsidised farming can’t continue and forestry can be part of the longer-term solution alongside other diversification opportunities.

We will have to see what happens once the Brexit mists clear. If there is still public funding for agriculture forestry needs to get more than the historic 2% of rural funding! Currently forestry gets nothing and that’s a pretty bleak picture that Welsh Government aren’t seeing.

Over regulation continues to be a serious challenge. Huge areas of Wales are under non-statutory designations and NRW’s restrictive rules are resulting in decent planting schemes failing. Planting isn’t happening because of NRW and the Welsh Government aren’t making funding available to pay for the public good which is preventing the landowner from making the best of their land.

Finally, Rural Payments Wales is another organisation that isn’t working and needs to be made more flexible, less bureaucratic and faster to respond.

Apart from all that it couldn’t be better!

## **What do you feel is the biggest opportunity for foresters or forestry today?**

Move to Scotland or Ireland! In Wales there are possibilities but at present our hands are feeling tied. As a country we are in a period of political change and its all there to play for, after all we are part of the second biggest timber importer in the world. There is a huge domestic market and in a world of Brexit and climate change, national timber supply has no export tariffs and is carbon-friendly!

We really need the policy to change so that scale of public money invested in creating non-productive liabilities is acknowledged; combating the public belief that broadleaved planting, PAWS restoration and the restriction on planting conifers are always ‘good’ things.

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