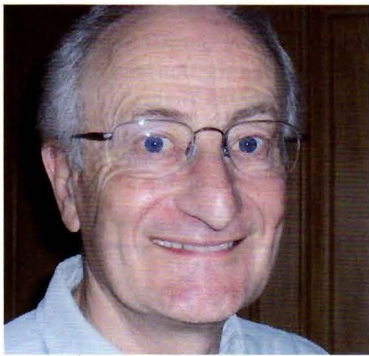




TALKING TIMBER

THIS WOOD STUFF – IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BUYING AND SELLING

Andrew True takes a brief, thought-provoking look at some of the issues facing the timber trade today



More than ever the market place is worldwide, with suppliers both willing and able to meet requirements. If all the major markets take off at the same time then supply is squeezed. One market affects another, resulting in a snowball effect. This impinges on the availability of timber onto our own market and, therefore, forward planning becomes more important.

Forward planning can help avoid the issue of short-termism.

Our trade has become used to "just-in-time" and holding minimal stocks – not always such a good idea with wood. Unfortunately the current supply-led market has increased the time from placing the order to delivery.

While I'm not advocating a return to the days when British Columbia dominated softwood supply to the UK and lead times of 8-12 weeks were the norm, the trade should plan a bit further forward. This will lead to increased stockholding at the "direct buyer/importer/landed stockist" level of the trade, thereby creating a buffer in the supply chain, and availing customers down the line of a continued good service. Also, all customers need to be educated to the fact that orders now need longer to source and supply, so that they themselves can adjust.

As well as the supply difficulties facing buyers of imported products, there are issues facing home-grown supplies. Log supply is getting tighter, not only because of a broader demand for the logs, such that sawmills are competing with other customers (pellets come to mind), but also because of a shortfall in replanting 30-40 years ago. There will be log supply issues within the next five to 10 years and this will be reflected throughout the market.

Our market needs to reduce reliance somewhat on imported product in order to safeguard our supplies. In the British Isles a key issue is establishing the best softwood species for the climate and soils, and this needs research both in the silviculture and subsequent usage. Research into timber has been woefully inadequate in the UK but is now being addressed by work at Edinburgh Napier University. Notwithstanding, there are very limited resources for scientific research, and no undergraduate timber-related courses. This is imposing further limits to the talent pool.

This leads to another issue – that of attracting younger people into timber. Young people are the future, and they can gain from the wisdom of the older members of the trade. There is also an imbalance of male to female, which has to be addressed. Perhaps the solution lies in better, more formalised, education in wood science and technology.

Andrew True (FIMMM) is immediate past chairman of the Wood Technology Society, and a current board member

That lack of timber education is an issue in need of addressing more urgently. The off-shore suppliers are generally well educated in timber and wood science through their local advanced education – even Switzerland has a school for the timber industry! This leaves our younger members at a distinct disadvantage. The Wood Technology Society is considering ways of solving this, but it cannot happen overnight.

With Brexit and other issues of a national interest, it is important that the trade also gets behind the Timber Trade Federation. It is the main lobby group for the timber trade and all within the trade should support it by being signed-up members. More members – a louder voice!

On a more general front, wood products are undervalued and with the increasing pressure from the environment, one should factor in a general rise in prices until equilibrium is reached.

Disposing of waste and time-expired product is another issue to be resolved. Timber is often wrapped, invariably banded, all of which requires responsible disposal.

UK interest rates are due to start climbing; the question is when? Coupled with the uncertainties of Brexit and normal day-to-day issues, the trade is in for very interesting times. ■

Below: The timber market place is worldwide



The Wood Technology Society

A Division of the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining