



TALKING TIMBER

DON'T BLAME THE WOOD

*The performance of wood and wood products is entirely dependent on appropriate design, specification, manufacture, supply, installation and maintenance, says **John Park***



"At ..., we are passionate about wood, but we're not blind to its shortcomings".

The day before writing this column, that arrived in the post contained in a promotional brochure insert. Now, I have no problem with wood-plastic composites; what I find disappointing, especially from a company "passionate about wood", is the use of what I have termed 'besmircheting' (besmire with marketing), because of, in

the minds of specifiers and users, the potential negative knock-on effect of such statements on all wood and wood products.

All involved commercially with wood should understand, embrace and perpetuate this: wood does not have shortcomings. Wood is an infinitely renewable, almost infinitely variable, natural material, which has properties and characteristics. It can also contain defects which are characteristics that can adversely affect its performance (again, they are not shortcomings, it's a natural material). That is what wood science is all about – understanding those properties, characteristics and defects in order to optimise the utilisation and performance of wood in all end-use situations.

Hence, following on from the successful inaugural 'Timber 2018', 'Timber 2019' – a conference for the UK timber industry, presenting the latest trends and emerging research in timber, wood science and related fields, organised by IOM3 Communications on behalf of The Wood Technology Society. With delegates from as far afield as South Africa, Spain and the US it was described by one of those delegates as "diverse and interesting, with something for everyone".

Attendance was modest, but most importantly the conference served to showcase just what is currently being undertaken for the furtherance of wood utilisation and it was heartening to note that included in the list of delegates was one of the UK's foremost architecture practices. I was to learn over coffee that this architect is the materials specialist for the practice and is always actively on the lookout for all such specialist events – so that's at least one architect more knowledgeable about wood than many who sell it.

Conference proceedings – seven sessions following the keynote presentation on 'Recent advances in wood science and timber engineering', encompassing: 'Grading, wood imaging and prediction of properties'; 'Durability and remedial treatments'; 'Physics and wood science – fluid flow, drying and acoustics'; 'Wood composites'; 'Wood modification'; 'Timber and carbon storage'; and 'Structural' – can all be found in the

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192-page Timber 2019 'booklet'.

Interestingly, as fascinating as the presentations were, circular economy and environmental issues seemingly now omnipresent no matter what conference you may be attending, it was the Q&A sessions following each presentation that led to some protracted and stimulating discussions of the most pressing issues of the day. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that it was education and training, or rather the lack of it, that had everyone buzzing.

Which brings me back to those shortcomings, all of which can be ascribed to a lack of understanding of the material or disregard of performance characteristics and fitness for purpose. It is somewhat unfortunate that, for some, wood is simply a commodity rather than a specialist material. Wood as a commodity tends to be price-sensitive and similarly when cost is a factor at 'point-of-sale' there seems to be an unerring tendency to forego the correct specification. And who, amongst specialist timber merchants or any supplier of timber for that matter, when fulfilling an order, asks what the intended use is?

Don't blame the wood. The satisfactory performance of wood and wood products is entirely dependent on appropriate design, specification, manufacture, supply, installation and maintenance. Overcome *human* shortcomings related to all of those and no wood product will fail prematurely. ■

Below: Delegates at Timber 2019



The Wood Technology Society

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