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ROCKLEIGH - EASY COMPANY

When husband and wife team Tom and Renee Watters formed Rockleigh almost 10 years ago, little did they know how it would develop. Although classed as a 'medium sized' commercial arb company with 35 staff, the Oundle, Northamptonshire, based business has punched well above its weight, with a Kings Award for Enterprise and the Princess Royal Training Award while making it to the finals of the 2025 Pro Landscaper Awards.



*Renee Watters
chatting with King
Charles at the
Kings Award for
Enterprise*

The King's Award for Enterprise for Promoting Opportunity through social mobility is the highest official UK accolade recognising businesses that actively help people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It celebrates organisations that help these individuals build the skills, confidence and experience required to secure employment and advance their careers.

For Rockleigh this has meant providing training and career development for young school leavers suffering from ADHD and Dyslexia amongst other issues. As well as this, the company continues to expand and has recently taken delivery of two 21 metre Easy Lift RA21 spider lifts, having been an active advocate of powered access in the tree care market.

The company was founded in 2016 by Tom Watters, who already had 20 years' experience in arboriculture. A few years after qualifying from arb college, he entered a partnership but after 15 years the two co-owners decided to separate, Watters wanting to concentrate on commercial work while his partner preferred domestic jobs.

As a result, he founded Rockleigh, initially operating from his garage/shed in Thrapston with two vans, a Timberwolf chipper and a team who joined him from the partnership. As he was the commercial 'face' of the partnership, he already had a good few commercial contracts. The



*Tom Watters
receiving the
Princess Royal
Training Award*

company grew slowly and steadily, and after a year moved into a small farm unit nearby.

Today the company covers an area that is very much dependent on his customers and includes a significant amount of work for national facility management companies which pass on good subcontractors to different regions. From Oundle, Rockleigh can be asked to carry out work from London up to Yorkshire.

"The work grows particularly if you do a good job as different parts of these companies recommend you to other areas," says Watters. "We have



worked from as far south as Brighton, and up the Pennines in the north. We have a permanent contract with local Councils for tree safety work, offer site safety surveys, and carry out a lot of housing association work in the Vale of Aylesbury and Bedfordshire as well as having long term contracts in Northamptonshire such as Boughton House, Rockingham Castle and Uppingham School."

The company also has staff qualified in Cobra tree bracing - a specialist non-invasive crown

stabilisation system using high strength polypropylene that supports weak limbs or overhanging tree branches without drilling, bolting, or damaging the tree's bark.

"We have grown steadily over the years," says Renee Watters, who runs the day to day operations from the office. "Our strategy for the first seven or so years was not to over promote ourselves in any way and we have only just sign written the vans because of the Royal award. We subcontract for several national companies which would rather not tell everyone they subcontract their work. Plain vans open the doors to so many more customers."

BUT WHY CONCENTRATE ON COMMERCIAL WORK?

"Domestic work is okay when you are involved as a business owner because you can directly control what goes on onsite. However, when you bring in other teams, the attention to detail is perhaps not quite as good as it should be," explains Tom. "We get less stress and phone calls from commercial jobs such as when the guys are taking down trees at a sewage works rather than knocking over a flowerpot when taking down a tree in Mrs Jones' garden and having to spend all night on eBay looking for a replacement."

CONTINUALLY EXPANDING

The company is moving more into environmental work such as seed drilling on new build estates, vegetation management and environmental contracts such as pond building and site safety surveys.

"We are always pushing ourselves to do more - the limiting factor is finding and training staff. The current premises - which we moved into in 2024 - are our third so far and were a good size but as we grow we may need more space for offices and equipment."

ARB EQUIPMENT

The main equipment for all arb companies are the vans and chippers and more recently aerial work platforms. Originally Rockleigh used Timberwolf woodchippers and Toyota HiLux trucks but more recently has a mix of Timberwolf and Forst chippers. Forst was established seven years ago and claims to be the largest producer of commercial woodchippers in Europe. The company is the product of Redwood which was founded in 2006 as an importer of woodchippers from Germany. As time moved on Redwood became known as the best supplier of woodchippers in the industry but wanting a better



One of the larger Bandit chippers



product Redwood moved into designing and building its own products which are designed and built in Andover, UK.

Rockleigh currently has 11, 150mm to 230mm Forst machines. For larger 300mm to 600mm work the company uses American made Bandit chippers. It also added an EcoTech Italia F27 Hornet mulcher to its fleet making light work of site clearances.

"Teams do not want to work with cheap equipment and if you have something decent that they like, they want to stay. So, over the years we have invested heavily into quality tools and equipment."

"I started hiring aerial work platforms around 2008 when I was with the previous company. They were mostly Genie articulated booms delivered on a massive truck," says Watters. "We would book them for a day's hire at 8am but they would turn up at 11am and the driver would say he was picking it up again at 3.30pm. They were huge and bulky but could be driven when elevated. We also used the old 4x4 Land Rover mounted lifts - ex Electricity Board - to clear trees around the old low voltage cables and street lights etc."

"In 2008 the use of aerial work platforms was the

exception, rather than the rule, whereas today almost every contract uses a work platform. We have one client whose policy is 'Use a platform rather than climb'. Whether the money is there for the platform is debatable... When we first used spider lifts we would get £600 a day for the guys plus £400 for the platform and you might make £150 on the platform. Now it is a day rate for the guys, and the lift is assumed to be included."

"Around 2012, a few years before I started Rockleigh, a friend had a Hinowa spider lift which he towed behind a Land Rover. I couldn't believe he was towing his own machine, and he did it because he was fed up of waiting for the hire companies to deliver the lifts on time."

Rockleigh initially hired platforms as and when required but as their use became more regular it decided it would be more cost effective to buy its own.

"I met Malcolm Kitt and Richard Martin of Independent Access Sales - the Easy Lift dealer - at the APF show about six years ago. We got on well and I am one of those who buys from people I like. Richard is very personable and sorts out any problems."

Rockleigh purchased its first aerial work platform



Tom Watters (L) with Richard Martin of Independent Access Sales and the two new Easy Lift RA21s



- an 18 metre Easy Lift RA18 spider lift - around five years ago. "At the time it was more than big enough for the work but now having purchased two 21 metre RA21 Easy Lifts, it is amazing how much difference the additional three metres can make by allowing the machine to stand further away from the tree and avoiding being under the work area."

"We got on well with the 18 metre spider and we towed it behind a Toyota HiLux. It would be used on the most essential job of the day such as dealing with Ash Dieback because the trees are so unpredictable and brittle to climb."

"When we bought the spider lift we thought that if it was used a couple of days a week it would pay for itself. When it was out six or seven days a week we thought we need another one. And it is not only tree work - we were also asked to clean gutters on a factory, rescue drones from roofs and fix TV aerials!"

"With so much demand we added an Easy Lift 21 metre and now have just taken delivery of two new 21 metre RA21s which replace the older machines. If demand continues to grow we will purchase another, but only one that we can tow behind the HiLux trucks. There is a new 3.5 tonne Ford Ranger Super Duty truck from America that has a 4.5 tonnes capacity on a swan neck. This might be an option going forward as they have stopped manufacturing the HiLux. If so we will go for a larger spider lift for the next purchase. We do not want to go down the route of 7.5 tonners and additional licences etc."



The recently launched 14.2 metre pickup mounted CPL KA14 with 6.5m outreach and 250kg platform capacity



A Volvo 8x4 chassis with Fassi F820RA2.27 loader crane with jib giving almost 30 metres of reach

"At the recent APF show we liked the look of CPL's new 14 metre pickup mounted lift. It is mounted on an Isuzu chassis - we would rather have HiLux, but it would be perfect for the permanent contracts in the parks, clearing around street lights, crown lifting trees to five or six metres, lifting up over roads, car parks etc. It would also be more fuel efficient to drive a pickup mounted unit than tow one. When towing daily with the HiLux we have had to upgrade the shocks and springs."

HOW HAS THE INDUSTRY CHANGED?

"The habits of the gangs has changed totally. We have two Euro waste bins outside the offices and every week they are full of rubbish - cans, fast food wrappers etc. When I first started everyone had a flask and lunchbox and there was no waste - in the summer someone would bring a bottle of water. How have we gone from having no waste to filling two bins... it is ridiculous?. We would never stop at a shop for something, we worked hard and survived on a flask of tea."

"The industry is getting harder - and that is not just because we have grown. I don't think rates are anywhere near where they should be, it seems to be a race to the bottom in the domestic market. The whole industry is also constantly changing with new products and equipment such as the new Stihl FKA 160 battery-powered mechanical felling wedge unveiled at the APF."

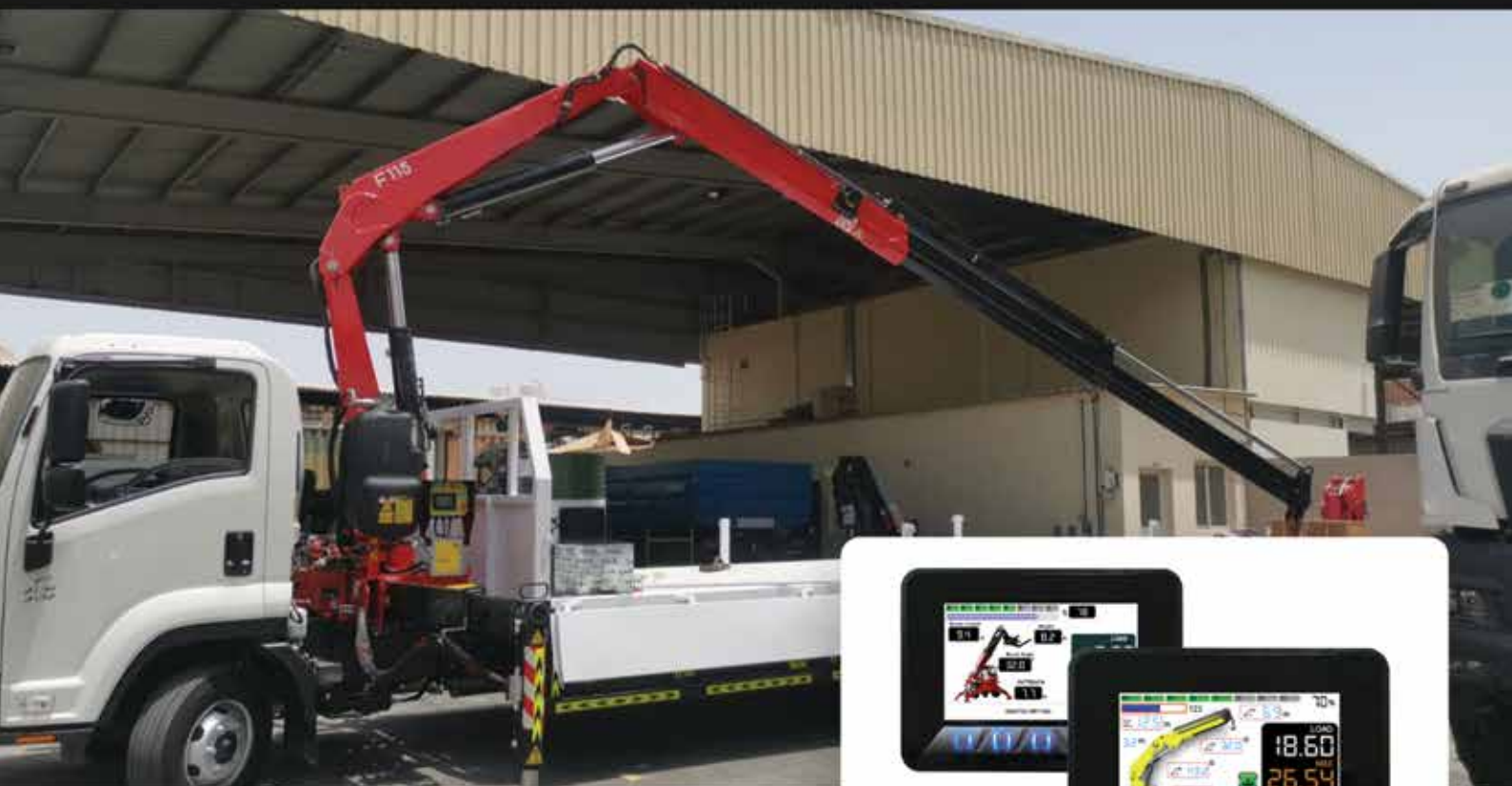
It has a 18 tonnes of lifting force with a 55mm lift allowing arb workers to fell trees from a safe distance using a remote control. Or a Volvo 8x4 chassis with Fassi F820RA2.27 loader crane with jib giving almost 30 metres of reach. With the winch fitted it can lift trees over houses and coupled with a grapple saw we hired in for removing a tree that had fallen onto a roof on a block of apartments. It is all amazing equipment and is changing the industry so much."

WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

"Ideally we will be in larger premises and able to offer more services," said Renee. "Perhaps not offer full nationwide coverage but wider than we can at the moment. We will continue to offer training places to all staff and developing our awareness of neurodivergence, keep customer confidence and have an enjoyable workplace. By making small positive changes every day it will continue to build the company." ■



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The new Fellertrack tracked carrier with Palfinger PK23002.SH and CS750 smart grapple saw



APF 2026 – CELEBRATING 50 GOLDEN YEARS

The APF Exhibition tree care show was once again held at Ragley Estate in Warwickshire, UK, and marked 50 years since the first APF Demo event was held at Longleat Estate in Wiltshire. This year's show enjoyed three days of good weather and attracted record crowds with a reported 20,000 visitors attending. The only downside of this success was the morning traffic congestion as visitors attempted to access the showground.

The event has seen a growing number of spider lifts, small truck mounts and telehandlers on display, and this year was no different, with most of the big brands represented. Forestry and arborist attachments for telehandlers and excavators were also a major feature of the show this year.

In addition to forestry and tree care equipment there were plenty of associated events including the European Chainsaw Carving Competition, the British Speed Fencing Championships, the World 25 metre Pole Climbing Championships, Axe throwing and, for the first time, a winch racing competition providing entertainment for those not interested in the equipment.

The APF Exhibition is not a show for lifting equipment product launches, with manufacturers tending to use the international or specialist events for that. However, dealers able to supply and maintain the equipment were busy as visitors took a closer look at machines already identified on their purchasing short lists.

Exhibition Secretary, Ian Millward said: "The show was a fitting celebration of our 50th anniversary. It has been a fantastic showcase for the Forest & Arb industries and the 700 school children who came along on guided tours now know a lot more about woodlands and trees than they did before." ■



Magni telehandler with Woodcracker CS750 smart grapple saw



AlmaCrawler B2190-A



Promax three tonne capacity CR30-HD tracked carrier with trailer to cope with longer items



The new 20m Versalift VA-200 F with 10.4 metre outreach and 250kg platform capacity



Alpha Access sold the last Teupen Leo23GT - it is being superseded by the Leo24GT



Various Woodcracker attachments