



Dedicated forester/arbiculturist Andrew Gentle (Suffolk Tree Services\*) is a man who knows his own mind and isn't afraid to speak it, particularly where shoddy work practices and health and safety matters are concerned.

# IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

Andrew's full-time team and some of their kit. (l-r): Kev Scott, Barnaby Beeton, Tom Rooke, Chris Sykes (foreman), Andrew, John Porter and Tim Copeman.



Andrew comes from a line of men determined to succeed; his grandfather owned a successful precision engineering company in St. Albans (C. Gentle & Son) and his father was a geologist until his retirement a few years ago. Both men showed determination in following their chosen path and Andrew is no different.

He was actually introduced to arboriculture by his father who had considered forestry as a career in his earlier years. Although Andrew's father decided that geology was his overriding passion, his son had inadvertently discovered where his future lay. In 1988 he started up with

a partner and set about acquiring the necessary experience that would eventually lead to the establishment of Suffolk Tree Services, the thriving business he now owns independently.

Based in Long Melford, Suffolk with an additional site in Lavenham, his is a small, busy and efficiently run business that employs six skilled foresters/arboriculturalists full-time and two additional part-time staff when required. Andrew is very much a hands-on boss and is determined to remain involved on a day-to-day basis with the practical end of the business. He maintains personal control and is very much in the front line when negotiating contracts or assessing quotes.

It is obvious talking to Andrew that he is essentially a family man. His wife, Julie not only looks after their two daughters, aged three and four months, but also runs the office administration and accounting.

Julie is an amazing woman, said Andrew. We are both committed to our family and the business and have built up a reputation for quality and efficient service over a ten year period. But like all successful businesses, the administration grows proportionately. It was important to me that I retained a role which had direct contact with existing and potential customers, so I am very fortunate that Julie has taken over the management of the office and now runs that side of our business full-time.

Even the dog plays an active if not particularly productive role in the business. Ragamuffin accompanies me wherever I go, laughed Andrew.

On some jobs, he has no choice but to stay in the lorry where he's less than happy. But believe it or not he is trained to remain still when the machines are operating and is probably as safety-conscious as the rest of us.

Suffolk Tree Services operates throughout East Anglia offering a full range of services, from tree surgery, to forestry and site clearance, stump grinding, woodchipping and fencing.

Our work is essentially divided into three areas, explains Andrew, local authority, domestic and site clearance. We are proud to say that over 50% of our work comes from recommendations which is a fine testament to the high standards we achieve.

And there is no doubt that Andrew's standards are very high. He is a regular technical assistant to the renowned trainer and assessor for FASTCO, Walter Smith\*\* (affectionally known as Wally). He first encountered Wally at an official HSE meeting when he asked for help and advice in training his new

operators. In the last three to four years, Wally has grown to admire Andrew and often asks him to assist on his training courses.

Wally expressed enormous confidence in Andrew. He is a very calm and competent man. We conduct many of our training courses in Ickworth Park, near Bury St Edmunds where there are a number of very large trees, which are particularly useful for aerial rescue training. Andrew has a level of competence that inspires trust and confidence. An

We have invested significant sums of money into retrofitting safety features on our Entec\*\*\* chippers. As a forward-looking company themselves, Entec used the need for retrofitted safety features as an opportunity to actually improve the operating efficiency of their machine.

We now have fewer false trips from branches thrashing about in the hopper and the continuity has improved the work rate accordingly. Also using electronic control buttons for forward and reverse instead of the



essential quality when training in potentially hazardous situations.

Andrew understandably has strong views on other tree service companies who are less keen to adhere to the rules, particularly those implemented by the HSE. Whether I agree with the ruling or not, isn't the issue, he says. All I want is to compete on a level playing field.

bar is undoubtedly easier and more efficient. So we have no problem with the changes. However, it is galling to see other operators continuing to use unmodified equipment and reflecting this in the prices they quote. My argument is with the HSE themselves who appear to lack the will to enforce their directives.

Andrew's tenacity for meeting all

the required training and safety procedures has paid off in other ways.

We are regularly asked to tender for work from three borough councils - Bury St. Edmunds, Colchester and Babergh. They know that we adhere to all the relevant requirements covering not only the equipment, but also safety clothing, risk assessment and operating methods. We have established a hard-won reputation for excellence and we intend to keep it.

Eighty percent of Suffolk Tree Services workload is tree surgery,

two 5t and 10t bulk tipping trailers and the timber-forwarding trailer for heavy forestry or site clearance work, which makes up the other 20% of their business. The tractor pto is a useful on-site power source for their Entec Chippit 2000.

Chipping is an important part of the site clearance programme and an additional source of income to the company. All brush has to be disposed of and like many tree management companies, Suffolk Tree Services recycle the waste products by

101-150hp, producing 20mm chips. The two diesel models are Entec Chippit 35DH s and are mainly used for contract work. The small petrol driven Truck Loader chipper is ideal for gardens and sites where access is restricted.

Over time Andrew has developed a particularly close relationship with Entec. Our first chipper, back in 1990 was an Entec and although we had no problems with it, we were fairly new to the industry and did subsequently try two other makes. These unfortunately proved less efficient. In the meantime, Entec itself was expanding and offering a larger range of products that would do what we wanted. So we went back to them and have been extremely pleased with the results.

He has a lot of respect for the company primarily because their back-up service has been superb. We have never had any significant downtime. On the rare occasions that something has got into the machine which shouldn't have been there and caused serious problems, they have come out to the site with a replacement chipper until the repairs have been made.

To reciprocate in some way, Andrew agreed to a suggestion that Suffolk Tree Services test run any new design modifications or prototypes that Entec are working on.

Richard Marshall Entec's managing director explained, Andrew runs a very tight, thorough operation. His chipping procedures cover the whole range of materials that you are likely to encounter. So we are confident that his methods will quickly illustrate any benefits or failings in our design proposals. We have found the arrangement to be extremely useful in giving us actual operating experience of our new machines before we progress to full production stage.

As for the future, Andrew's priority is to consolidate and build on the existing structure of his business. I know I am fortunate to have a hard-working team of dedicated people. I would like to see the business keep expanding, but not at the expense of my own personal involvement or a reduction in the quality of the work. We will continue to upgrade our equipment and improve our techniques and I may even get a chance to spend more time with the children!

**\* Andrew Gentle**  
**Tel/Fax: 01787 319200**  
**Mobile: 07976 850375**  
**\*\* Wally Smith**  
**Tel: 01284 810650.**  
**\*\*\* Richard Marshall at Entec**  
**Tel: 01449 767838**  
**Fax: 01449 766062**

1: Andrew (right) with two of the team and their Entec Chippit 2000 pto model.

2: The Chippit in action.

3: Never far away is Ragamuffin who accompanies Andrew on all jobs.



evenly split between amenity and private contracts. The six full-time professional operators are divided into three teams depending on the task and have a range of equipment at their disposal including the four Entecs and four stumpgrinders. In addition to the vans and lorry there is also a John Deere 4250 four-wheel-drive tractor which is used to pull the

producing woodchips. These are then sold for equestrian and play areas or other horticulture purposes. Chip mulch is sold for flower beds, improving the soil and weed control.

The Chippit 2000 pto model is the largest of the four chippers, it has a maximum throughput of 8 tonnes (if you can keep up) and will handle material up to 300mm diameter at