SOCIETY SUPPORT

“Whatever Happened to the Institute of Wood Science?” asks
Wood Technology Society chairman John Park

Jim Coulson, Wood Technology Society board member and past president of the Institute of Wood Science (IWS), recently gave a talk to the London Hardwood Club on the topic of “Whatever Happened to the Institute of Wood Science?” He raised more than a few eyebrows.

Jim started by saying that most people in the UK timber trade seem to have assumed that the IWS somehow “disappeared” about 5 or 6 years ago and that it no longer exists as the timber trade’s professional qualification, source of technical training and education. But, he added, that’s simply not the case: the IWS does exist, but it has changed its name and also how and where it operates.

Over a number of years – especially worrying with the slow-down in ‘proper’ training that has bedevilled the timber trade for at least the past two decades – the IWS had been losing members (through retirement and people leaving the industry), but was picking up few new ones. With neither individuals nor companies showing any interest in the benefit accruing from qualifying as a ‘wood scientist’ or ‘timber technologist’ via the IWS courses, the Institute was being starved of both income and new blood.

Somewhat ironically, for the benefit...
accruing from the kudos which still comes with the letters, senior figures in the trade who had passed the IWSc exams many years previously were still using the designatory letter 'CMIWSc' or 'AIWSc' on their business cards. Unfortunately - and here is another irony - they had ceased to be paid-up members, inadvertently contributing to the demise of the Institute.

It became clear that the very survival of the IWSc - another rich irony given that this was all taking place at the same time as the renaissance of wood as a construction material - was under serious threat and that something had to change, and change quickly, in order that this much-needed technical body on wood could continue to exist. The eventual resolution lay in affiliation with the 'Institute of Materials, Mineral and Mining', for simplicity usually referred to as the 'IOM3'.

Over the past 15-20 years a number of other institutes - dealing with many different materials and processes - including clay technology, packaging, rubber & plastics, steel and glass had been absorbed into the IOM3 and so it seemed both timely and appropriate, for a number of reasons, that it should now be the turn of wood to enter the embrace of a great organisation that had the resources to ensure the survival of the IWSc for the future. But, there can't be an 'Institute' within another Institute and so the name had to change. Thus 'The Institute of Wood Science' became the 'The Wood Technology Society' (or 'WTS' for short), created as a stand-alone division within IOM3.

The IWSc technical examinons cease to exist, but the IOM3 Training Academy has stepped in and developed the Timber and Panel Products (TPP) course, aimed at NVQ Level 2. Up until 2014, it was still possible to take the 'old' IWSc Certificate Course but this was then suspended by IOM3, pending a decision on updating it. There are now plans to offer an equivalent NVQ Level 3 qualification later this year using the TPP as its core but with added modules on matters such as sustainable procurement, health & safety and so on.

Upon the creation of the WTS, former members of the IWSc were given the chance to re-enrol in the IOM3 and to adopt a new set of 'post-nominals' (the letters that go after one's name), based on a membership grade that uses the full title of the Institute of Materials, Mineral and Mining. Hence a former Fellow of the Institute of Wood Science (FIWSc) is now a Fellow of the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining (FIMMM) and a former Certificated Member of the IWSc (CIWSc) is now a Technician Member (TIMMM).

Jim, in concluding and answering the question that was posed in the title of his talk, said the Institute of Wood Science has not 'gone away' at all, it has simply re-emerged as a new body for the timber industries in the 21st century; The Wood Technology Society, part of the larger IOM3. And the 'new' Wood Technology Society very much needs the support of the timber industries and the people therein just as much as - if not more than - the 'old' IWSc did. But just as importantly, the timber trade also needs the WTS and its qualifications. To quote the old adage: "If you think training is expensive, try the cost of ignorance!" Today, the WTS can provide a forum for like-minded people and organisations. A forward thinking strategy has been prepared and is being acted upon, with a view to expanding and promoting the wood message across many strata of the timber sector and academia. Furthermore is the continued support and promotion of wood science which varies from original research at universities through to providing the educational opportunities as Jim explained.

The WTS has a managing board of 12 people, all volunteers, comprising a mix of experience from all aspects of the trade, from university academics, timber consultants, through to current and retired timber traders. And, to further broaden the scope and expertise of the WTS, there are additional 'observer members' (in modern day parlance - non execs) to add guidance and specialist expertise. Links are also being created with other trade organisations.

Wood science, and an understanding thereof, is of continuing paramount importance. If only, for example, to know the Latin names (now customarily used in European Standards and required by the EUTR) for wood species; that softwood is not soft; how to distinguish not from discoloration and what gives various species of wood strength and durability to name but a few! And also to keep up with our overseas suppliers, many of whom generally will have some formal education in wood science! The necessity is evidenced even more by the simple fact that all of us in the chain of wood and timber products, from supply to end usage, should have a sound understanding of the product in order to pass on such information to the less knowledgeable to enable correct specification and proper utilization - there is nothing like premature failure to drive specifiers into specifying alternative materials - of what is in effect one of the world's only truly renewable resources.

The Wood Technology Society is a division of the Institute of Materials, Minerals, and Mining which is incorporated by Royal Charter and a registered UK Charity No 269275. The web site www.iom3.org provides the detail, how to join, benefits and, naturally, the WTS link!