

## OUR UNSUNG HEROES

*The timber trade has been blessed with many personalities, but there are many unsung heroes who have had an important influence on our trade. This piece by **Andrew True** is about one of them*



**Even today, timbers being used in south-west London and north-east Surrey should be treated against the house longhorn beetle, a nasty but rather large beetle that devours wood with ease. But, have you ever wondered why the house longhorn beetle has not colonised the entire country, and only remains within that highly localised area?**

This problem was one addressed by Mike White,

formally of the Princes Risborough Forest Products Research Laboratory (a government-financed research unit commonly known as FPRL, that has now morphed into BRE), who discovered the reason why and, as such, avoided a full-scale national panic.

Now a sprightly nonagenarian, Mike had developed a specialism in entomology, researching insects, beetles and bugs that affected timber. His work created a greater understanding of how to combat and treat timber against infestation, and paved the way for much of today's preservation and conservation treatments.

Apart from the house longhorn beetle, he researched the death-watch beetle, common furniture beetle, termites, marine borers, and pinhole borers, to name but a few. He classes himself as very lucky in that he could pursue his hobby (beetles) as a full-time job.

He is still, today, consulted for his expert opinion when unusual insects are found in wood.

Mike also did considerable research into interstitial condensation in buildings, paving the way for today's modern practices.

Mike was passionate about timber education and on retirement from FPRL regularly gave lectures. He conducted extensive surveys on the extent of death-watch beetle attack in the roof timbers of Westminster Hall (Houses of Parliament), and subsequently selected the replacement timbers. Thanks to his work, this roof will now outlive all of us.

Among other projects requiring Mike's expertise were the restoration of HMS Victory, and the restoration of Stoke Poges church that formed the basis for Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard".

Mike was a member of a group of post-second world war wood scientists, all based at FPRL, who all became world experts in their respective fields. They were the Real Madrid of their day. All had a huge influence on how we trade and use wood today. They were also very strong supporters of the Institute of Wood

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Science, and the subsequent dissemination of wood science to the wider community.

Unfortunately, all this experience is fast diminishing owing to government spending restrictions, and today there is only a small group of UK wood scientists flying the flag for our industry. Unlike Canada, the US, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the UK does not have any graduate level university study courses that include wood science and technology. This is something that the Wood Technology Society would like to address.

And, hopefully, you are still wondering why the spread of house longhorn beetle has been limited. Mike, after extensive study and research into understanding the beetle, came to the simple conclusion that it was all due to the local climate, a micro-climate, which was generally warmer than in the rest of the UK. Hence the beetle could not spread beyond its habitat. Further, he helped in the development of the treatment for timber that was to be used in this area, against attack by the beetle.

This shows just one example of the importance to our country and timber trade of financing research that is purely pertinent to the UK, in order to protect our future, especially in light of global warming. ■

*Below: Mike White with a sample showing attack by death-watch beetle and common furniture beetle. He would extract the larvae for research purposes*



**The Wood Technology Society**

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