

# TALKING TIMBER



## TIME TO INCREASE VISIBILITY

*Wood has a great story to tell and affects every area of our lives but companies in the industry need to get out there and play a greater role in education, says wood consultant **Gervais Sawyer***



**Time to take off** your bandages – and get visible!

The Invisible Man analogy is somewhat incongruous as the bandages are used to give form to the invisible body! But then a bandage analogy need not just be a reference to the Invisible Man!

A few years ago, by coincidence, I had just read the Timber Trade Federation (TTF) timber trading statistics and found myself at Wembley Stadium looking at the pitch.

On a whim, I did a calculation and found that if I was to stack just one year of wood product consumption in the UK on the grass pitch (excluding fuel pellets and paper) it would make a pile over 2 km high! (For the scaled-down version, go to YouTube – The SawDoctor The Stack. May the force be with you!)

Now that is a truly mind-boggling amount of wood, so it follows that we must be very aware of its uses and how it gets there. Well, for 30 years now I have been visiting schools and careers fairs promoting the exciting possibilities of working in the wood-related industries.

*“In the USA, the wood industries are well engaged with schools and the public. Why can’t we do it here? No children go on works visits any more...”*

I started in wood in 1963 having been lured in by a TTF careers leaflet and I have to say that I have loved every minute of it. The material and the people are great and I can see that the industry deserves the best people.

But, and this is a very big but, I can tell you that after talking to many thousands of school children and their teachers, the wood industry is completely invisible. When you engage with them and ask them to imagine waking up to a world with no wood (no bed, floor, toilet door, toilet paper -eughhh! I know which buttons to press! No roof, no books, no barbecue etc.) they really start to get interested. They are all, universally, on my side. There are never any awkward questions about deforestation

**Gervais Sawyer (FIMMM)**  
is a wood consultant and editor of **International Wood Products Journal**

(wish there were) or other negative views. A few are lucky enough to have made something in wood and loved it.

In my talks we start by handling a huge variety of wood products. Then we investigate the amazing tensile strength of wood by hanging concrete blocks from a matchstick and bet with chocolate money when it will break.

My money is safe as it won't break with 80kg. So then, convinced of the amazing strength of wood, we build a suspension bridge that weighs 4kg that will support eight children or more. (See just how strong wood is in tension at YouTube – The SawDoctor Tensile Test)

In the USA, the wood industries are well engaged with schools and the public. Why can't we do it here? No children go on works visits any more (conveniently dropped on grounds of Health & Safety), little woodwork is done (computers are cheaper than tools and materials).

So, time to get visible and take off those bandages! If you want to exhibit at a careers or science fair, it will generally be free, so I have contacted many wood companies offering them free space to promote wood and themselves, but so far, in 30 years there has been no support.

Let nobody ever complain about staffing difficulties. Still, I love it. Just bracing myself for 2,500 16-18 year olds in Harrogate next month. ■

*Below: The timber industry needs to engage more with schools and the public*

