

For the last few decades Wales has been an interesting place to be a mainstream forester. In the least populated area of Britain south of Hadrian's Wall we've been debating the place of planted forests for decades in this old industrial society desperate for a new industry. There may be new hope despite Welsh Government conducting its own heated internal debate about future forests. Ignoring arguments a few notable individuals have trodden their own paths, trying to understand the potential for forestry here in one of the few nations in the world that has enshrined legislation for 'sustainable development'. Edwina Hart, the outgoing WG minister for Economy, Science and Transport has been one of those individuals. In the late 1990s Ms Hart was the only politician to ask questions in the then National Assembly for Wales on behalf of a small group of foresters and timber processors seeking new value-added markets for homegrown softwoods. Always demonstrating no fear, Edwina Hart asked the chamber why homegrown timber wasn't being used in the construction of the assembly building in Tiger Bay. Welsh processors didn't win that battle; public procurement processes got the blame for the fact that this architectural statement of political intent didn't include timber grown in the nation which the building serves.

Nevertheless something good emerged from this early attempt to use Welsh softwoods more creatively. The Welsh Timber Forum was created as a membership organisation around 2000 to represent every type of timber business from forest to factory and design studio. The WTF at one time boasted 250 members, then more than any other timber organisation in Wales. Its members included academics, foresters, sawmillers (including BSW), joiners, architects and furniture designers. Around ten years ago Ex FC Wales forester Chris Edwards reformed the pioneering WTF to create the government-funded Wales Forest Business Partnership which for a decade has been acting on behalf of Welsh timber industries. Taking (often bullish) messages back to government, conducting research and publishing detailed technical reports, WFBP catalysed rethinking about use of our homegrown timber and questioned politics which drove negative perceptions of conifer forestry. WFBP brought a sea change in understanding of the potential for our own timber. Its most successful initiative, Woodknowledge Wales, directly informed the construction of several exemplar timber buildings including Coed y Brenin visitor centre extension near Dolgellau. For the first time in Britain this building used local timber for *Brettstapel* solid wall construction. WKW carried out all of the research and prototyping to demonstrate viability of this German technique which was later used in Wales' first homegrown timber-framed low energy *Passivhaus* school; Burry Port infants school. This unique project is the first to use curved *Brettstapel* walls in any construction in Europe. Find a full method report here;

www.woodknowledgewales.co.uk/files/Brettstapel%20Sept%202014.pdf

WKW also informed the 'Grand Designs' larch house project which demonstrated the viability of homegrown larch for house construction.



Burry Port infants school, the curved building uses innovative *Brettstapel* walls

As part of her farewell to politics and Welsh industry Edwina Hart commissioned WKW to organise the Woodbuild Wales 2016 conference held on March 17th. Speaking behind a microphone which dominated because of her small stature, Ms Hart's own speech was uncompromising and reflected her reputation for plain-speaking. Recognising the economic importance of forests for underpinning sustainable construction, she was scathing about the conservatism running through forest products industries. Ten years ago some of the tallest modern timber apartments in Europe were built in Wales using imported timber but Ms Hart asked what has been done since then apart from the few innovative exemplar buildings using homegrown timber. She blamed 'the big boys' for their lack of innovation; pointing out the unrealised social, economic and green growth potential for timber. Planners were peremptorily dismissed although Ms Hart recognised the steep learning curve facing players involved in creating a sustainable built environment. She is leaving office totally aware of the challenges which lie ahead and warned the audience that conferences are useless unless they lead to actions.



Minister Edwina Hart sternly reprimands the 'big boys'

Other speakers included Duncan Mayes, Vice President of R&D at Stora Enso Oyj who described the beneficial role of softwoods in construction; especially focusing on cross-laminated timber structural panels. Production of CLT has climbed significantly in the German speaking nations and mid-rise buildings up to 16 storeys high are at planning stage now. He saw massive timber construction as essential to substitute concrete and steel as 70% of the planet's population will soon live in cities. We need to implement building methods that lock carbon into durable timber structures rather than release carbon to the atmosphere in the manufacture of cement and steel. Peter Davies, the outgoing Chair of the Climate Change Commission for Wales described three legislative actions which will help accountability and drive timber construction:

- 1 Well being of future generations act
- 2 Environment Act Wales
- 3 Planning Bill Wales.

Peter promised that he would write to all political party leaders with key points to support the case for wood; much of the information having been generated by Woodknowledge Wales.

Architect Neil Sutherland of MAKAR, an integrated timber frame designer and manufacturer described the economic impact of his firm. Using local softwoods to make quality housing, his local workforce earned enviable salaries for their efforts. Alastair Parvin of the Wikihouse Foundation described how open source software development could enable creative design. Simon Inkson, Head of Housing at Powys County Council spoke about the organisation's new financial freedom which will

allow PCC to start building social homes again for the first time in forty years. He aspires to use homegrown softwoods in new local house construction.

Recent government restructuring and retirement of several WG civil servants who will not be replaced means that the Welsh timber industry will need to develop new strategies with less government aid. This was outlined in the closing talk given by Woodknowledge Wales chairman Gary Newman. He welcomed the challenge of recreating WKW as a mission-driven member organisation with clear objectives set out in a new manifesto. With the ambition *to champion development of wood-based industries for increased prosperity and well-being in Wales* Newman needs to pull together disparate organisations within the client base, supply chain and sector bodies in order to deliver the collaboration he believes necessary for sector growth. Armed with axioms like 'no moaning', 'collaboration' and 'take ownership' Newman has already gained support from several firms and players such as Confor, Coed Cymru, NPTC, and several educational establishments. WKW will build on the previous hard work put in by those individuals, firms and politicians who have recognised the potential for forest industries in one of the best places in the UK to grow conifers; Wales.



WKW Chairman Gary Newman launches the new manifesto at Woodbuild Wales 2016