

Conservation Contractors Ltd

If there's ever a job advert for someone to look after a war zone then William Warden has to be the man for the job. Who else has a CV that takes in looking after the battle grounds of Salisbury Plain, surrounded by tanks, troops and helicopters to say nothing of fast jets plying their trade? And if the mulcher stops dead in its tracks then the culprit is probably an old shell or maybe a piece of tank track. Graham Mole tells us more.

It's an area just a bit larger than the entire Isle of Wight, an EU designated Site of Special Scientific Interest and, at 90,000 acres, the biggest area of chalk grassland in all of Europe. It's also home to a ghost village that's helped train troops operating in Northern Ireland and Iraq.

Even back in his office, in the Wiltshire village of Marston, William's windows still rattle when the gunfire goes off. It's hardly the quintessential tranquillity of the English countryside.

Looking after the Plain is just one aspect of the work done by William's firm, Conservation Contractors Ltd. There's an Arb Approved Contractor tree surgery section and, unusually, a massive contract to spray weeds on roadside edges over the county.

Crop spraying is how William started his business – as an agricultural contractor – and now the three strands to the business ensure that he's never short of work.

The scrub clearance is the contract that takes him on to the Plain, where the emphasis is on managing the chalk grassland. He explained, "Unlike farms it's never had fertiliser or chemicals anywhere near it and that gives it its special character." The work was first funded by an EU project called 'LIFE', which has contributed a total of €207 million in 224 projects since 1992. But, just operating on the Plain isn't straightforward. Contractors have to be vetted, briefed, trained and supervised before they're allowed access on their own. They have to notify Range Control on both entry and exit and alert authorities to any problems. Some areas are totally out of bounds – for example near firing ranges. Access to these is only allowed during the summer and Christmas shutdowns.

As we drove on to the Plain the first reminder is a series of roadside notices warning: "Danger. Unexploded military debris. Do not leave the carriageway." As if...

As a helicopter fluttered towards us then wheeled away, we came across a series of tanks, now wrecked and charred, the objects of target practice, the gun barrels stark against the skyline. Here and there herds of jet black cattle grazed peacefully but nowhere could we get a glimpse of the area's roe deer.

In a nearby valley we approached the ghost village of Imber. There, in 1943, villagers were given just 47 days' notice to leave so that it could be used as an exercise area for US troops preparing for the D-Day landings. They were never allowed to return... leaving the manor house and the church. Bizarrely though, any former resident born there retains one unique privilege – the right to be buried there.

Later, breeze-block houses emerged, not for people but for police and military to train for the street warfare of both Northern Ireland and Iraq. Just lately there's been a new development, the appearance of shipping containers on the Plain which, somehow, has become part of the training regime.

There are wooded thickets on the Plain, but not for the purposes of forestry. There are blocks of both beech and conifer but their real use is as cover during army exercises. As William explained, "Seeing 50-odd tanks all lined up together with their support vehicles is quite something and when you add in helicopters, fast jets and gunfire it's quite a sight."

Almost unbelievably, some members of the public still manage to get on to the Plain, despite the obvious dangers. Said William, "It's surprising how they get there but they do." Once there were rangers employed to keep things under control but budget cuts saw them replaced with fencing.

But the work on the Plain doesn't account for all the firm's work. Away from the area, and as a marked contrast, four of fourteen of William's staff concentrate on tree surgery, often using a cherry picker and working on jobs all over Hants, Wilts and Dorset, which is now managed by Daniel Butler who has just passed his Professional Tree Inspection Course, helped by Scott, Steve and Matt Laine.

Apart from the yard full of timber and stock netting there were no clues to the large fencing operation, managed by Dave Thompson and helped by Garry and Ian, who last year erected over 100km of agricultural and equestrian fencing.

To William's regret, nowadays it's all done by tender with an average of four competitors for each job. It reflects the government-imposed cuts on local council budgets. It's here though that William's policy of not having all his eggs in one

Garry Thompson making light work of the small timber!



Dave, Garry and Ian, having just finished a huge fencing job.



Large section felling of poplars.



Daniel by the side of a poplar removed from Waitrose in Salisbury for Wiltshire County Council. All the wood was chipped and recycled for biomass.



The boss – William Warden.



basket pays dividends, providing regular work and a lot of it, spraying the weeds on kerbs and pavements. It's a reminder of the days when William bought an agricultural firm which specialised in crop spraying. Nowadays the three Bateman Sprayers are rarely in the yard, while the street work's done using 3 quad bikes.

William explained, "It's all very varied but it works out as a steady pattern if you take it over the year. It irons out the peaks and troughs and that really helps."

So, I wonder, what would be his favourite job? He grinned, "Five years ago it would have been a big tree job. I'd have been like a cock pheasant on a cold and frosty morning. All head up and strutting around."

And now? He almost sighed, "Clinching a deal."

And his worst job? He laughed, "The paperwork. I always seem to get stuck with that. But there is rather a lot of it..."

For the future William sees the possibility that forestry could follow farming. Already, for both industries, there's been an increasing emphasis on machinery and he picks out the way that farming has coped. He explained, "In a way, it's used machinery to leapfrog over the lack of labour. You really do begin to wonder if there isn't an opening here for robots who can just drive tractors in straight lines up and down a field."

At least though, he concedes, "We'll still need fencers and climbers." Well, at the moment anyway...

And the future for his firm? He pondered, "You think about being bigger and better but it seems about right at the moment." He added, "What we've been doing's worked for the last 20 years and we intend to stay big enough to get the work done professionally but stay

The Dymax tree shear, useful for felling small trees and scrub.



small enough to care."

I would describe Conservation Contractors as small but perfectly formed, with Arb Approved Contractor status, CHAS Accreditation and ISO management systems in place.

And while he's busy working round the army – "It has to be that way round!" – there are still the tree surgery jobs keeping four of his staff busy, one example being the felling of giant poplars for the council in nearby Salisbury. In such cases the wood is increasingly being used for biomass or biofuel, though that leads William to worry about where all the necessary UK timber will come from. Are we, for example, planting enough? – a common enough industry concern...

But the growing popularity of wood burners is also having its effect on William's domestic jobs. He explained, "We can take away the wood but increasingly now people will keep the decent timber for themselves. That's becoming quite common."

With such a variety of jobs there's a wide range of machinery available.

There's a 26-metre cherry picker, a Simon lift on a Volvo lorry with another 14m on a Land Rover. In the same machinery team there are 2 Unimogs with 12" PTO Timberwolves and a Jensen 540 trailed chipper linked up to a DAF lorry. A reverse drive Valtra fitted with a Seppi Mulcher, a JCB telehandler which can be fitted with a Dymax tree shear and there's also a 20-year-old MBTrac. As William puts it, "I'm not addicted to shiny paintwork. We're judged by the quality of the work we leave behind rather than what we arrive in."

Having a list of modern, and not so modern, kit is all very impressive to the people who like machinery but William considers the company's biggest and best assets are the people who work with him, who are still people and not numbers in a large corporate. There is a considerable training budget in place, in relation to the company size, and robust health and safety standards.

He said, "We're always willing to hear from people looking for a chance to prove themselves in our industry – from apprentices to team leaders."