

# Playing a straight bat

Ian Robinson describes being an agent as hard graft, but he's loved every minute of a life-long career in the business. Mike Jeffree reports

**Y**ou could easily put Ian Robinson 10 years off retirement. That's partly no doubt because he devotes equal energy to leisure as work. The managing director of Newcastle softwood agent Gill & Robinson (G&R) cycles, swims and hikes. Three years ago he endured -10°C and altitude sickness to scale Mt Kilimanjaro and raise money for the Timber Trades' Benevolent Society and Sir Bobby Robson Foundation cancer charity.

Belying his appearance, however, Ian is 66 and stepping down after over four decades trading timber from around the world. Moreover, he's sold the family business to German agency Kullik & Rullmann.

Neither decision has been easy, as his commitment to the company is clearly undiminished. Hence the process involved to find a "truly like-minded" buyer, and the agreement to stay three years to oversee the transition.

"Finally leaving will be a huge wrench, and my wife says she won't know what to do with me cluttering the house," said Ian. "But I've had a great career and ultimately you know when the time is right!"

After graduating with honours in Swedish and economics, he recounts, he joined G&R in 1971, when it was run by his father Jim, and Stanley Gill, the nephew of Stanley Gill snr, brother and partner of Harry H who started the business in 1889. But he was bitten by the timber bug earlier.

"Growing up, we frequently had Swedish and Finnish suppliers staying," he said. "I was fascinated and asked them to point out where they came from on the map!"

His career choice was confirmed by stints at sawmills in Sweden.

"I also spent my third Uni year there, working at an agency and learning Swedish."

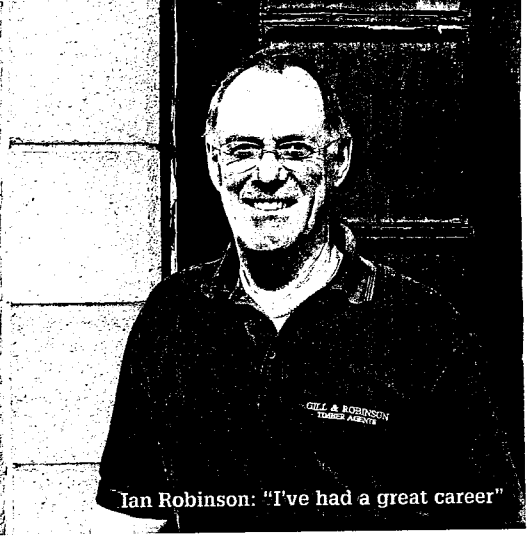
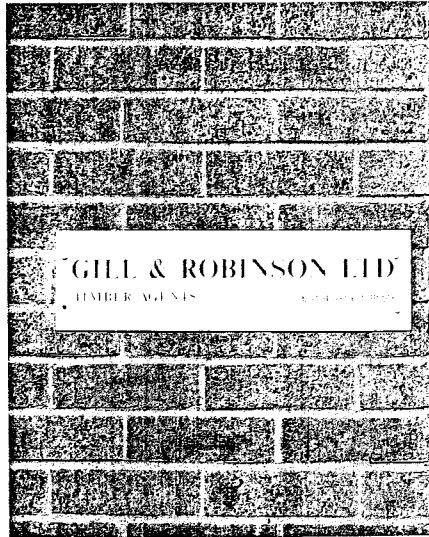
Footloose world travels followed, but even that included visiting mills in New Zealand. And he was back on the road again after starting work, spending a year with Finnish suppliers.

Over the next decade he immersed in all aspects of the agency. Then, in 1986, two years after his father died and Stanley Gill retired, he became MD. Subsequently G&R has seen some of the most far-reaching changes in its history, with Ian and his team "building on the firm foundations laid down over the years by exploring new areas to buy and sell".

Some developments have also been market-induced, but even here it's been a case of being "alert to opportunities and ensuring, if one door closes, there's another one to open". A case in point came in the 90s when, after G&R added eastern Canadian mills to its traditional Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian supply base, they were struck by pine nematode.

"It was a blow, but the Baltics were just opening up, so we jumped on a plane and found mills we could work with," said Ian.

Today the company still sources 50% of its



Ian Robinson: "I've had a great career"

material from Sweden and 10% from Finland, but also deals with major shippers in Estonia and Latvia. Its supplier net additionally extends to Germany, Russia, Holland, Chile, Portugal, Ireland and now UK mills too. The product spread consequently ranges from joinery redwood and whitewood and large section softwoods, through KD and graded carcassing, to CLS, decking and furniture components.

Another strategic move was the launch five years ago of a quick-response terminal operation at Hull with Swedish mill Höglands.

"Some customers were wary, but we were careful not to compromise our agency status so, while we handle sales, Höglands retains ownership," said Ian. "It's proved a success, currently selling 25-30,000m<sup>3</sup> a year."

G&R's sales development has also been significant.

"With our first offices in the north-west and Newcastle, we principally sold in the north and Scotland. But I'd long seen opportunities in the south, so in 1986 we opened in London, followed by Yorkshire in the late 90s. Today we truly have national coverage and a sales team of seven, compared to three when I started."

Ian's career has also seen the blurring of demarcation lines between agency and importer. But he's still convinced the "genuine del credere agent" has a future.

"There will always be a place for agencies that act with integrity and play with a straight bat," he said. "We provide a service few others in the supply chain can replicate. We put the right customer with the right supplier and encourage them to meet. That way suppliers better understand the market and customers learn more about the product. Service is also key. Take the EU Timber Regulation. We're not 'first placing' timber in the EU, so it doesn't directly apply to us, but we're advising both suppliers and customers. We don't get paid for it, it's just what a true agent does."

Ian is also confident of G&R's own future,

safe in the knowledge that its new owner is cut from the same cloth.

"Neither of my daughters was interested in joining the business and I could have just sold to the highest bidder and walked away," he said. "But I couldn't do that to the team, shippers or customers. When you've been in business this long, they're not just colleagues, they're friends. So I needed to find the right buyer."

K&R, he added, is just that. Tracing its roots back to 1880, it now has offices in China, Japan, India, and the UK. Annual worldwide sales are in excess of 300,000m<sup>3</sup>, compared to G&R's 120,000m<sup>3</sup>, and products range from German sawn lumber, CLS and decking blanks to glulam and American hardwoods.

"There are few overlaps, so great opportunities for synergies; our principals being offered new products, like laminates and hardwood, and our shippers' products being introduced to new markets worldwide," said Ian. "Equally importantly, K&R and managing director Carsten Kullik share our ethos. When we signed the contract, he wrote me a great personal letter saying how excited he was about our companies coming together and he's already building those vital personal connections with our customers and shippers."

Over the next year, he added, he will work with K&R UK sales director Lawrence Webster to ensure a "seamless transition". "Then one day someone will say 'I haven't seen Ian for a while' and that will be it!"

He will seriously miss the business, but step down confident that G&R is in safe hands. And as someone who "loves being active", there's little chance of time lying idle on his.

"My next aim is Mont Blanc, then Mount Everest base camp," he said. "In the meantime I'm doing the 200-mile Coast and Castles bike ride from Edinburgh to Newcastle with friends, including ex-Timber Trade Federation president Geoff Rhodes, and the one-mile Great North swim in Lake Windermere." ■