

# GILLIES FENCING



Refuelling the helicopter on site between batches of fencing. Inset: Paul Gillies, owner and director of Gillies Fencing.

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*Contractors who use high horsepower tractors and equipment are not unusual, but the 684hp helicopter hired by Gillies Fencing is probably unique. David Williams reports.*

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*The helicopter is costly but efficient in areas where access by conventional vehicles would be difficult or impossible.*

**T**he Gillies Fencing business covers a large area. The headquarters is near Ipswich, Suffolk, and does general fencing for farm livestock and horses throughout East Anglia and Kent. The other part of the business is more than 500 miles away near Fort William in north-west Scotland, specialising in deer and boundary fencing in one of the most inaccessible areas in the UK.

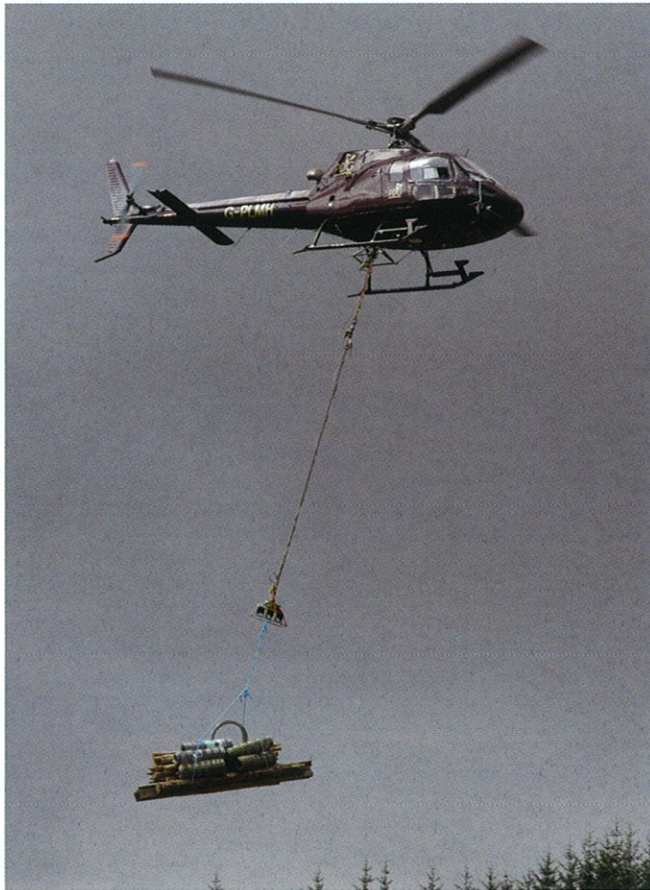
Paul Gillies owns the businesses in both locations. His father started the Scottish business in 1995 while Paul set up in Suffolk in 2002. Earlier this year he took over another fencing company that has allowed him to expand his operations into Kent.

Paul assesses and quotes for each job personally, which means he can be costing a new sheep fence in Kent and then, a few days later, on top of a Scottish mountain quoting for a deer fencing job where there is just an inch or two of soil over hard granite.

Most of the work in Scotland is for deer control on large estates, and a typical contract could cover 5000m. The Forestry Commission is also an important customer in Scotland, requiring fencing that will keep deer away from newly planted trees.

Access to the sites is usually poor by road or track and often virtually impossible for conventional vehicles. The team use 4x4 pickups to get close to the work areas, but these are seldom able to travel to the actual sites. The rest of the journey is completed on Honda ATVs, although sometimes the access is too severe even for them.





*The Squirrel helicopter can lift two bundles at a time totalling 950kgs.*

## Chopper to the rescue

Moving fencing materials to the work site is even more difficult. The job used to involve winches at the top of the slopes to drag the fencing materials up from the bottom, but the work was slow and difficult. This is where the helicopter comes to the rescue. Fence materials are delivered by lorry as close as possible to the installation site and left on level ground where the hired helicopter with lifting gear can operate. It is not a cheap option, but by dropping bundles of posts and wire at intervals along the fence line the helicopter can transport enough materials to the work site in one day to keep the fencing team busy for a month.

Weather can be a limiting factor as strong winds, fog and snow can make lifting unsafe, and suitable days during the winter months can be few. The helicopter can lift up to 950kgs and this allows two bundles covering 100 metres each to be lifted at a time. The bundles are prepared and assembled in advance and typically include 30 posts, 1 strainer, 2 rolls of C8/80/15 bottom net, 2 rolls of C6/90/30 upper net, 1 roll of line wire and 20 rails.

The bundles with rope harnesses attached are laid out on the ground so they can be lifted in the order that they will be required along the fence line, with additional corner posts or gates being

dropped in the correct locations. Placing the materials precisely is important because if they are spaced incorrectly or dropped at the wrong places the team will have to reposition them by hand.

"We always use the same company to supply the helicopter," said Paul, "as they understand our business, and we have a good working relationship with the pilots."

Their usual helicopter is a Squirrel AS350 B2 with 684 shaft horsepower that can fly in winds up to 40mph carrying under-slung loads weighing up to 950kgs. The hire cost is about £1100 per hour of flying time.

"The helicopter is fast, efficient and comes with a fixed cost," said Paul, "and it does mean we can lay out the materials for up to 20kms of fencing in

a day when conditions are good."

Apart from the helicopter, the equipment used in Scotland includes a Honda TRX500 4wd ATV to move tools to the site. These include a generator to run a heavy duty Hilti drill plus hand tools. The drill is needed because soil depth is either limited or non-existent and holes have to be drilled in the granite where a large spike is inserted, with fence posts mounted on the spikes.

The price for deer fencing varies depending on access, soil depth and terrain, from about £6 to £10 per metre and a 5000m contract takes about a month to complete. The Scottish business employs four full-time and two self-employed staff and although fencing is the main activity, tree felling and planting, spraying and weed control work are also undertaken. Once the materials are on site, weather isn't too much of a problem, but deep snow will bring the work to a halt.

The Scottish fencing teams

have a typical work rate of 130m a day for a two-man team, but this varies depending on the degree of slope and depth of soil.

The southern business employs the same number of staff but the easier working conditions allow more mechanisation. A new JCB 2170 Fastrac and a Fendt Vario 716 tractor are used, both fitted with Bryce Suma Max post drivers.

Paul favours these tractors for their fast travel speed between jobs, and the build quality and weight for operating the post drivers. Another advantage of using modern, powerful tractors is that during the summer Paul can hire them to local farmers complete with drivers for harvest work, which helps pay the finance charges for each machine. Smaller tractors are also used for lighter work while Mitsubishi pick-ups provide transport for staff.

## Business Growth

During its first six years the Suffolk business has grown through recommendation. Most of the work is stock and equestrian fencing and contracts tend to be large. Keen to continue developing the business Paul has diversified into constructing horse riding maneges, a venture which has been immediately successful.

"Manege building goes well alongside the fencing as many large equestrian



*Fence bundles placed every 100m next to the old fence being replaced.*



# Fencing in Scotland

customers need both and it is easier for them to deal with one supplier. Several of the maneges we have installed have been full Olympic size and we are keen to expand this side of the business."

Easier access and installation means that work rates in England are higher than those north of the border. Typically a two-man team in the south-east will install 150m of stock fencing per day. In addition to non-fencing work, the company erects 80 to 90km of stock fencing per year in the south-east compared with 70 to 80km under the more difficult Scottish conditions. As he is not geared up to handle small scale garden projects he prefers to leave them to specialist contractors.

Despite the large distance between business locations the company reduces costs and maximises profitability by sharing overhead costs and using its combined buying power.

"We buy all our wire from one supplier, Tornado Wire Ltd, which we know can supply to our sites quickly and efficiently with consistent quality, which is important when we are going to spend thousands of pounds airlifting it into place on a mountain top where faults would be expensive to rectify," said Paul.



Paul Gillies (left) discussing a fence contract with his Suffolk team.

"Our timber sources depend on price fluctuations as we find that the quality of the timber available is affected by the strength of the pound. We are always looking for good quality timber and buy from Eastern Europe when the pound is strong and when the pound is weak we buy home-grown."

For the future Paul expects his

personal management will remain crucial. Visiting sites in person to prepare quotations means he can assess all aspects of the job, helping to avoid unforeseen problems. He also plans to attend more county and equestrian shows, as well as the Royal Highland Show to attract new customers. ●

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