

# PRECUT CONSTRUCTION – FRAMING & TRUSSES SPECIALIST



## SAWDUST IN HIS VEINS

TIME AND MOTION are always on Chris Miller's mind. In his thriving 320sq m factory in Belfast, near Christchurch, his staff of ten cuts and prefabricates timber frames and trusses for building projects all over the Canterbury region. The products are built to exact specifications received from builders and architects and then trucked direct to the sites.

"For the builder, there are huge advantages in using our products," says Chris. "Our frames are guaranteed to be 100% accurate. Also the precut, prenailed product is much faster to erect, so that there is less time on the building site and this means a higher turnover and a lower wage bill."



The product, of course, is topnotch. Precut Construction uses New Zealand Oregon, which is grown all over the South Island and is sourced from a number of timber merchants, arriving in pack lots ready to be cut and shaped to the right size. "This is good timber," Miller says, "as it does not have to be treated, although a treatment [H1.2] can be used. It is also very strong and very stable."

Chris's association with the timber industry stretches back to his youth. After a stint with the Territorials, he travelled overseas working on various building sites in Australia and Britain. He returned home to Southland and then in 1986 moved to Christchurch where he commissioned plants for Baigent's and Sutherland Timber before going out on his own.

Miller started Precut Construction in 1991 with two staff and during the 1990s the staff grew to 20. He found though that he was not making good money because of what he calls "a lack of focus." He therefore sat down and rethought and rebuilt the business.



The forward-thinking, quality and efficiency-oriented new enterprise has since hit its stride, with one of its latest innovations being the installation of an automated CSS Spider saw system for cutting and nailing frames and trusses.

Plans are fed into its computer instead of being manually crafted and the trusses are cut to the right length and angle. "It is a process," says Miller, "that takes the errors out of what we do. The tasks are completed much more quickly and it is easier for the staff because so much of the heavy work has been removed."

Miller's restructuring of his business also produced some very clear guidelines. One of his main criteria is to employ good staff and look after them and an especially important aspect of this is having a skilled team. "We want them to see themselves as part of a partnership and also that it is they who are an asset to the firm," he says. In pursuit of this, the staff have weekly meetings where they have an input into the business.

Staff study is also important. Since its inception Miller has championed the BCITO Frame and Truss apprenticeship course. This was introduced in 2004 and he is currently working through the same scheme as his staff. He believes that it is important for his staff to complete the apprenticeship because it allows them to make a career out of their work. "It also gives customers a guideline as it shows we can provide quality workmanship."

The two-year apprenticeship course covers a wide range of topics, from safety, nail machines and design specifications to knowledge of timber, assembling frames, knowledge of roofs and computer truss design.

Miller's staff is also encouraged to think about one another. Each month one is nominated for an award by the other members of staff. "There has to be a reason given for the nomination, usually they have done something good for their fellow workers. This means that we encourage all of them to think of those they are working alongside."



Miller adds that a lot of staff have passed through his firm in the last 15 years and that one of the disadvantages of working for a smaller company is that there is eventually only so far that an employee can go. "The advantages are, of course, a greater variety of jobs. So many of those who have passed through here are doing really well and feel very proud of what they are achieving in their chosen field." Staff members who show promise also have a chance to learn how to set the computers, which now contain all the data for cutting frames and trusses.