

fgspilcher

LAND DRAINAGE, EARTHWORKS, GROUNDWORKS AND CONSTRUCTION



STRONGER TOGETHER

Land drainage and groundworks experts FGS Pilcher is set to provide customers across Kent and Sussex with access to highly experienced staff, extensive specialist equipment and bespoke agricultural and construction services.

With a full range of specialist equipment and a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips, the Pilcher family has been providing farmers and landowners across Kent and Sussex with quality land drainage and earth moving services for almost five decades.

Started in 1972 by Ivan Pilcher, over the last 47 years the Woodchurch-based contracting firm I G Pilcher Ltd grew from a one-man-band into a busy outfit with a 10-strong team managed by Ivan's son Harvey, who joined the family-run business in the early 2000s after working for several years as an agricultural engineer.

Around 10 years ago, having acquired a number of specialist pieces of equipment from a retiring local drainage company, I G Pilcher was able to ramp up its offering, taking on more land drainage projects including agricultural, sports field, amenity, irrigation, ground source and services trenching; as well as picking up numerous large watercourse management contracts with the Romney Marshes Area Internal Drainage Board.

In the last few years, Harvey has also noticed that improved grain prices and scarcity of land for sale in the South East has spurred farmers on to look at ways in which they can upgrade the quality, and thus yield potential, of their existing acres and with this, a lot of investment has subsequently been funnelled into land drainage.

"Modern day agriculture is very much about focusing on the finer details and doing everything possible to

increase productivity and make more from the land you've already got," said Harvey Pilcher, second-generation land drainage and groundworks specialist. "Our land drainage services have certainly seen a resurgence in recent years because of this and are now always in high demand."

From land drainage and maintenance, to conservation work for farm stewardship schemes, the construction of reservoirs, lakes and ponds, and other essential groundworks, there are few water and earth related projects the skilled team haven't been involved with.

However, while business is booming, over the last 18 months, the increasing number of administrative changes and burdens being imposed on small businesses by the government has left Harvey struggling to keep up with office duties as well as the growing demand for work in the region.

Not wanting to let I G Pilcher's loyal and supportive customer base down, and to ensure they had access to even better levels of service, Harvey has now joined forces with good friend and owner of FGS Agri, Trevor Heathcote, to form a new joint venture FGS Pilcher, which officially launched on 1 June 2019.

"Essentially I G Pilcher has outgrown my individual administrative capabilities," said Harvey. "Trevor and I have known each other for many years, we have worked together in the past and the option of forming a new business offering has previously come up for

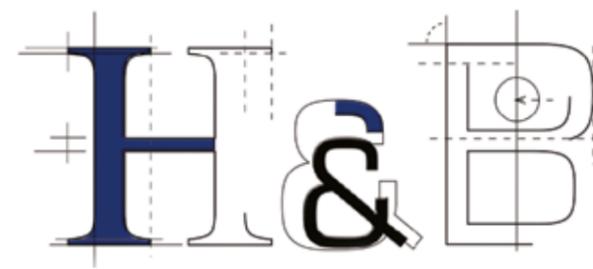
discussion. The government is constantly changing the legislation involved with running a business and while I have been doing it myself, it makes sense to take some support. FGS Agri already has the office support in place, we have similar customers in different geographical areas and, most importantly, both firms share the same values, ethos and our approach to working with customers is the same."

CONSTRUCTING A MULTI-FACETED BUSINESS

Having started out as a small independent agricultural contractor in the 1980s, Trevor Heathcote has successfully built a group of companies around his original Farm & General Services (FGS) brand.

Now based from Stanford Bridge Farm in Pluckley, Kent, the family manage a mixed farm comprising of both beef cattle and arable. In addition, the business has diversified to not only include extensive agricultural services from FGS Agri but also the supply of fertilisers from FGS Organics; operated and self-drive plant hire from FGS Plant; waste management solutions provided by Countrystyle Recycling; emergency water supply from Water Direct; and composting from enVar.

Today, FGS Agri is further still divided into multiple enterprises and in addition to the agricultural contracting work on which the original business was built, FGS Agri also provides farm and estate management, utility contracting, agricultural civil >>



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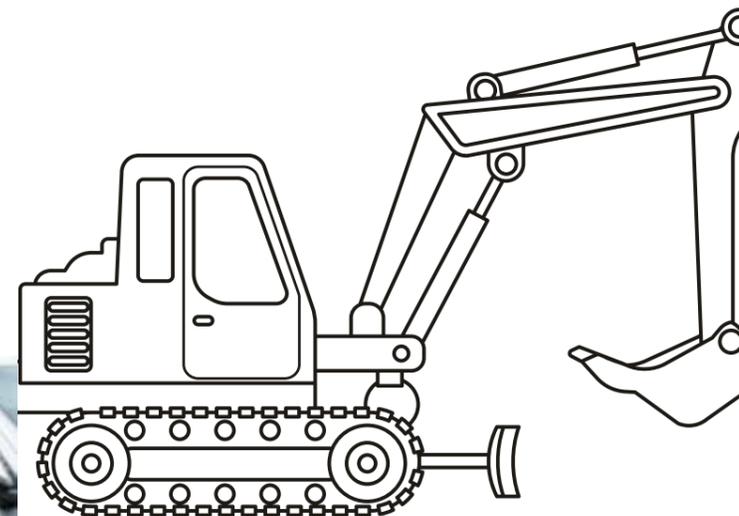
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David Holmes and Harvey Pilcher

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Heading up this civils and groundworks arm of the business is David Holmes, who was also one of the first people to join Trevor's team in the very early days. Although David grew up on his family's farm, he started his working life, and learnt his trade, at a local civil engineering firm.

Wanting to return to agriculture, David joined Trevor as an agricultural contractor in 1991 and it was only when the Heathcote family took on Stanford Bridge Farm, that David found himself back in the civils seat, playing an instrumental role in the redevelopment of the site, which needed extensive drainage works and concreting.

"Farming is in my blood, but the expansion of Stanford Bridge Farm took me back to my groundworks and civil engineering foundations," said David Holmes, head of civils and construction. "As we had already invested in the specialist equipment, once we had completed our own site, it just seemed to make sense

for FGS Agri to offer similar services to other local farmers."

Originally focused on digging ditches, installing farm tracks and completing other agricultural related groundworks, the work quickly took off as many farmers who didn't have the necessary equipment were calling in the team to work through several jobs which had been saved up over the years.

"The civils side of FGS Agri expanded from there, I started to take on members of staff and now manage around eight people depending on what projects we are working on," said David. "Today, we also find that as the industry has evolved, farms tend to be much larger but have fewer labour resources to call on, so we are helping them to undertake bigger projects."

POOLING RESOURCES

Despite offering a very similar range of services and working on a number of almost identical projects, in the last decade there has only been a handful of times

where I G Pilcher and FGS Agri's civil department have tendered head-to-head for the same jobs.

As such, neither of the businesses ever considered the other as a direct 'competitor' and by joining forces to launch FGS Pilcher both have effectively pooled their resources, with the right equipment, machinery and skilled personnel in place to offer more to both of their extensive customer bases.

"I have known David since school and our skillsets complement each other," said Harvey. "The joint venture is, overall, a better use of skills, resources and specialist equipment and coming together as FGS Pilcher will provide customers with access to a real one-stop-shop business. So far, we have had a good response from all our customers. The agricultural world is tight knit, and everyone knows Trevor, David and the team at FGS Agri. We both have large, »



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loyal customer bases and after 40 plus years doing similar type work in the same industry, it is a natural expansion for both companies. I know we will be stronger together."

Talking about the exciting launch of the joint venture with I G Pilcher, Trevor Heathcote said: "Having enjoyed a long-standing working relationship with Ivan and Harvey Pilcher, we felt that the launch of FGS Pilcher would combine the skills of the two companies into one combined operation, strengthening the services on offer and providing a more complete package for our clients. I am enjoying working with Harvey and look forward to developing FGS Pilcher together in years to come."

INCREASED CAPABILITIES

The newly formed FGS Pilcher team, which is an amalgamation of both Harvey's and David's long-standing, highly skilled workforces, will operate from each of the existing sites in Woodchurch and Pluckley until a new location is found to further strengthen the business.

"Transitioning over to work with the new company will be seamless," said Harvey. "From the customer's point of view nothing is set to change, day-to-day people will still be able to phone David or myself and the only noticeable difference should be an improvement in the number of services on offer. Everything else will happen behind the scenes."

The main areas FGS Pilcher will focus on will be the construction, installation and maintenance of land drainage systems, ditches, ponds, lakes and reservoirs, the ongoing management of watercourses, boundary maintenance, as well as agricultural groundworks, including landscaping, concreting and general farm building related construction.

"We are offering over 20 different services to farmers and landowners on a regular basis, most of which are interlinked and somehow related to water," said Harvey. "With investment into new, specialist equipment, we have also launched a new land drain jetting service. If an old drainage scheme is failing, previously they would have had to be replaced, but now we are able to clean the existing system and get it back up and running. In-house GPS surveying and mapping ensures an accurate record of works is maintained."

While FGS Agri's historic customers will now benefit from the extensive water



and drainage-based services brought to FGS Pilcher by Harvey's team, I G Pilcher's existing customers will in turn benefit from increased capabilities in the agricultural construction sector brought to the new joint venture by David's team.

"When it comes to the groundworks and laying concrete, we like to offer turnkey solutions to customers," said David. "Typically, if a farmer is putting in a building, we can do everything except put the frame up. We can modify the yard, fix the drainage, link up services such as water and arrange all necessary health and safety and CDM paperwork, often working with the building installer directly. Completing full projects makes life easier for our customers who often have limited resources, or don't have access to the right equipment and, for those who have taken grant funding, are often under pressure to construct the project under specific timescales."

HIGHLY SKILLED TEAM

As well as offering similar services over the years, both Harvey, who spent his early days working as mobile agricultural mechanic for farmers in the local Kent area, and David, who's family still farm near Tenterden, have developed strong links with the farming community and, with a real, hands-on understanding of the demands placed on agricultural businesses, take the same personal, bespoke approach to jobs.

"One of the main things that makes FGS Pilcher different is that both Harvey and I are farmers at heart, and we understand that the farm needs to operate as normal while we are doing our work," said David. "For instance, before the joint venture, both FGS Agri and I G Pilcher were working on large, complex dairy units. Cows do not just stop milking because we are there installing systems and laying concrete, so our primary focus is to work with the farmer to allow them to carry on with uninterrupted milking. FGS Pilcher is a very personal business and the backbone of every project, is actually about building a close relationship with the customer and sitting down with them to make sure that everything runs smoothly around their operations."

Together with this personal approach, and extensive access to the right machinery, at the core of FGS Pilcher is a highly skilled team, who each have over 20 years' experience in the land drainage and civil engineering sectors.

"The long-standing staff have moved across from both companies, they have an awful lot of knowledge and experience and are the backbone of the new company," said Harvey. "When booking in jobs, my customers will often ask for specific operators



and that relationship and approach will continue under FGS Pilcher."

With the team's many years of experience, not only is there always the opportunity to bring in different ideas from other farms, which can help to enhance the job in hand, but customers also know that there is a capable team delivering the project.

"Both Harvey and I have customers who have been working with us for many years, have a lot of trust in us and know that the whole project will be smooth sailing from start to finish," said David. "Some of these projects are a once in a lifetime expenditure so it is about far more than just delivering the job; people have to have trust in the team doing the work. A lot of our current work is based on word of mouth recommendations or doing work for the same farmer or landowner across different sites. I think that says it all, because repeat business proves that the team has left behind a positive result."

NEXT GENERATION

By bringing FGS Agri and I G Pilcher together both teams are hoping to further strengthen the ability to offer bespoke services, with a team of very experienced staff on hand to deliver projects, all on a very personal basis which understands how the agricultural world works.

Looking to the future too, the team at FGS Pilcher is already looking to expand its offering to customers with the joint venture providing already knowledgeable staff with access to more specialist equipment.

The new business also has its sights set on developing areas of British agriculture, such as the UK's viticulture sector. Over the last few years, FGS Agri has been involved in soil preparations, plantings, and providing groundworks services to vineyards, from re-concreting yards with tourism offerings to converting old agricultural buildings into wineries and visitor centres, while I G Pilcher has been helping to improve the drainage on sites.

"Moving forwards, we know the viticulture sector is going to grow and we also foresee huge demand for the drainage and water retention services," said David. "As we take on more work, we are hoping to grow the staff which will be an opportunity to bring the younger people into the industry. By merging the experienced staff, if we do take on apprentices, we will be able to pass a wealth of knowledge on to the next generation."

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