

EXCLUSIVE!



DEMOLITION HUB INTERVIEWS

INCOMING NFDC PRESIDENT, WILLIAM CROOKS

On Friday 26th March, NFDC members attended the 80th Annual General Meeting of the NFDC online. A content-rich agenda included President, CEO and Strategic Projects reports, guest presenter in the form of Build UK CEO, Suzannah Nichol and the biennial ceremonial election results. Over 100 members tuned in as William Crooks, Managing Director of Derby-based Cawarden, took over the Presidential reins from Keltbray's Skills & Communities Director, Holly Price. Bromley Demolition's Gary Bishop officially moved up to the role of NFDC Vice President and John Lynch, former Chair for NFDC Midlands & Welsh region won the members vote for the position of NFDC 2nd Vice President.

Demolition Hub, media partner of the NFDC, caught up with the man himself, William Crooks, to find out more about NFDC's new President for 2021-2023 in this exclusive interview.



Demolition Hub: As you take on the reins, is there anything you'd like to say about your predecessor, Holly Price?

William Crooks: I've really enjoyed working with Holly. Holly has done a tremendous job in a very difficult time. She's had all the hard work but missed out on the Convention, the AGM and many other interesting national and technical events. We're not losing her, as she'll still continue to sit on the NFDC National Council and Finance Committee, so I'm still looking forward to working with her over my term as President.

Demolition Hub: What are your priorities for your presidency?

William Crooks: I'm excited about increasing the profile of health and safety and we've agreed a budget to take that forward. Secondly, in a tough time when our members don't know where we're going to be in a year, trying to keep the NFDC ship on a sound financial footing. I want the NFDC to continue to work closely with our Industry Service Providers (ISP) and encourage as many clients to use NFDC members as possible.

Demolition Hub: 2021 marks the 80th anniversary since NFDC's foundation, do you see it as a critical time for the NFDC?

William Crooks: The NFDC is going from strength to strength. I think we're significantly more professional and a lot more advanced technically now. I don't think the NFDC would have survived without a strong link between Scotland, Wales and the rest of the UK and that's one of the reasons the Scottish, the Northern Irish and Welsh come to the National Council meetings – it's vital that we get the full spectrum of experience and viewpoints.

I like meeting people. I like to understand different aspects of the business and areas of the country from Scotland right down to Bristol and London. We miss the social events because we don't get the exchange of ideas from meeting like-minded people. We've got regional meetings as well and they're well attended – using technology and adapting our way of working has enabled us to keep members engaged and connected despite Covid. It's like any democratic organisation, you start off locally and then work your way up to the centre.

We've got links with the National Demolition Association in the USA and the European Demolition Association as well. The Americans have adopted quite a few of the things that we put forward in our training because they recognise the high standards we've worked hard to set, the same in Europe. We've had a number of NFDC presidents who have become presidents of the EDA.

I come from a farming family and it's very similar. You get a group of farmers together and they want to talk about farming. If you get a group of demolition contractors together, they want to talk about demolition. When you talk about demolition, you learn what others do. You can give them your opinion and hopefully help each other. If you're on the NFDC National Council for 15 years, you can make a lot of friends.

The day Cawarden became members of the NFDC was a massive source of pride for me but also for all the people that have worked for us from the beginning. A lot of those individuals are still here, and they've been here for 30 years.

Demolition Hub: You're involved with quite a few different organisations. Was that a natural course?

William Crooks: My mother and father got involved with local community, regional and national organisations. They thought it was important to put back, not to take out. My father was deeply involved with county shows, ploughing matches and historical organisations. My mother was involved with local politics, the WI and charities. We've always put back. That's why we, my family and people who work for us support local charities and other organisations.

The NFDC nationally gives a huge sum of money to charities, far more than many Corporates, and each region independently donates substantial amounts to charity every year. A lot of people who manage and work for these companies have come from tough backgrounds, didn't do that well at school but have become proficient, intelligent site managers and operatives with the help of the NFDC, IDE and NDTG. Everything we do is improving the education of people who perhaps weren't so well served at a young age.

Demolition Hub: How do you see the development of demolition as an academic subject?

William Crooks: There are a good number of people who've done the Demolition Degree who started as site labourers. This industry is full of people who own their own businesses, who have become professional demolition engineers but started off as site labourers. It's a difficult industry to walk into and become a demolition contractor with just a great education, without doing time working on the tools or driving a machine. It's more of an art really.

We don't want the demolition industry to look like it's a business for uneducated people. It's not!

It's becoming more and more technical. We need to encourage people with degrees in construction or civil engineering to come into the industry. Some of the things we do are extremely technical. Therefore, we can't just have people who've worked on the tools. The two sides have to work together – the experienced operatives who've seen it all with the younger people who are more formally educated.

“Some of it is always going to be a hard slog, but modern technology is ever-increasing our ability to plan solutions. That's why I enjoy seeing 17, 18-year-old apprentices, green as grass straight from school, grow into cracking employees and cracking people. It gives you a feeling of satisfaction. The NFDC works just the same. I was a two-man-band 30 years ago and now I'm NFDC president.”

You need engineers who can calculate what will happen in a given circumstance and we also need the people who can speak from experience. We need to be wary that we don't lose those people, and it's very important to make use of them as teachers and mentors.



People don't want to go into demolition or construction because they perceive them as not very exciting career choices, or because they believe it's a dirty, tough environment. There's more to demolition than meets the eye. We need to encourage younger people in particular to join our industry.

A lot of people like to watch demolition. You've only got to say you're cutting the floodlights down on a football stadium and most of the town turns up to watch, even though you tried to keep it quiet for health and safety reasons. It's exciting, but not everybody wants to work in it.

I love being a demolition contractor – it's been a way of life for 30 years. If you've planned the demolition of a 17-storey building, had to adapt the plan six times and managed to get it down safely, there's massive fulfilment in that. The operatives working on site are really proud of what they do. They often demonstrate that by what they post on Facebook and the other social media forums.





Demolition Hub: What do you see as the big game changers in demolition?

William Crooks: Machine drivers now can't just be a driver; they have got to be a technician to drive the machine. There is so much computer equipment in there.

“Imagine what things are going to be like in another 20 years. You could be in an exoskeleton suit to reduce the wear on the joints and limbs. You look at robotics and think, how far are we from where it's unacceptable to put any operative on a demolition site?”

Using telematics, we could all be sat in an office 40 miles away with just one person on site, or at least have the operative driving the machine from the site cabin. You're already seeing machines being retrofitted with remote operation systems, so they can work in chemical factories and other places where there's extreme hazard. We want to protect the operative from everything, dust, repetitive strain, muscle and joint injury, all things that come from long term wear and tear. They're going to be taken away by technology, hopefully, that either carries out the job, or protects the worker. If you're going to use equipment like that, you're going to have to be better trained and better educated.”

I think organisations like the IDE and NFDC are going to have to embrace that. We talk about the future and what we're trying to do, but our industry encompasses everyone from the large multifaceted contractor, right down to the man with a wheelbarrow, a dog and a pickup. They have to be both inclusive and forward-thinking.

Demolition Hub: How did you start out in demolition?

William Crooks: *“I left school at 16 and went to work on the family farm. Part of the business was agricultural contracting, so we were using tractors and trailers, working for other people. At that time, you could drive a tractor at 16 with no training whatsoever. I walked out of school on the Friday, and on Monday morning I was driving a tractor as a full time job, for £8 a week. It was great.”*

I went to agricultural college, learned a lot and met people from all over the country. Then I spent a year doing accounting and other things linked with the business before I went to Australia for a year. I worked in construction and agriculture there and then came back to work on the family farm.

Then agricultural contracting turned to looking at farm buildings. I set up Cawarden in 1986. We were taking down farm buildings and selling the materials because barn conversions

had suddenly become massively popular and they wanted the materials to match extensions and rebuilds. We knew a lot of farmers, so we started taking their buildings down, reclaiming the materials and selling them.

We were always keen on recycling, before it was on the radar for environmental and social responsibility. We wanted to save things, we wanted them to be reused and we could make money out of it. Then people kept asking us to do other demolition jobs, so we started to do straightforward demolition and grew into what we are today, doing all sorts of demolition, remediation, civil engineering, recycling and crushing. The business employs a lot of people and sells an awful lot of bricks and tiles.

It's been really enjoyable. Some of it's been tough, but it's been good for me. I've met some great people and made some really good friends.

Demolition Hub: Have there been any standout projects for you in that time?

William Crooks: Yes, demolishing Derby County FC's Baseball Ground. Ninety per cent of the Cawarden workforce are massive Derby County fans and our Cawarden company colours are black and white.



We didn't want anybody else knocking our ground down, wearing rival football colours. We were and are sponsors of Derby County, so to do that job was satisfying.

It was sad to see the old ground go, but it was great that we were the ones to do it. I think the fans in the city appreciated the fact that it was a local contractor.

We completed Derby Royal Infirmary, the 17-storey tower block and then the 15-storey main block, plus all the Victorian buildings as well. We were on there for two years. We did a lot of work at the Derby City Hospital years ago. Lots of sport grounds, Chesterfield, the main stand at Northampton Rugby Club and the American Adventure Theme Park.

Demolition Hub: Your profile says you have a positive outlook on life...

William Crooks: I'm the most pessimistic positive person you'll meet! That means I look at a project as, what is the worst that is going to happen? Anything other than the worst is a positive.

I love history, but I'm always looking to the future. I've got a number of different plans in my head. I've got the plan for this year, I've got the plan for the next five years, then I've got a retirement plan. I think you've got to keep positive and think you're going to be here for a long time, so you need to plan ahead. I try to bring that positivity and enthusiasm to the people who work with us and I try to do the same at the NFDC meetings too.

Mike Kehoe at C&D Demolition did a presentation called Prepare to Fail. I learned a lot from that. You need to have a disaster plan in place for any project and for life. You could say it's a bit pessimistic, looking at the worst case scenario, but I think to maintain a positive attitude you need to be prepared for the worst so if it does happen, it's not soul destroying.



Demolition Hub:
And finally:

What's your favourite tippie?
Mount Gay Rum

Favourite cuisine?
Spaghetti bolognese or fish and chips

Personal bucket list?
I always have a list of 10 things to do before I die, of which I've done about forty per cent. One of the things that's always on my list and I've never managed to achieve is to see a puffin in the wild. It's a very simple, easily achieved target, but if you never do it, it always leaves you with one thing left to do. And that's why I've never actually done it yet.

“You just need to keep one simple thing that you know you can achieve and get the positivity out of that when you eventually do it. Ideally, if I'm eating fish and chips, drinking Mount Gay Rum and looking at a puffin at the same time, I'll be pretty much there.”