



SMR Agrifor Ltd



**ASKHAM BRYAN
COLLEGE**

From Classroom to Woodland: How the Partnership Between Askham Bryan College and SMR Agrifor is Shaping Tomorrow's Environmental Leaders

[Askham Bryan College](#) has been at the forefront of land-based education and training for over 75 years, earning its place as one of the top land-based colleges in the UK. The college is passionately committed to sustainability, embedding it at the heart of its curriculum and preparing students to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Located within a stunning natural environment, the college provides a unique learning experience among 50 acres of formal gardens, 200 acres of land, and an arboretum boasting rare and unique tree species. Askham Bryan combines a legacy of academic excellence with forward-thinking practices, equipping students with cutting-edge knowledge and hands-on skills while fostering a deep understanding of environmental responsibility and global career opportunities.

At the forefront of [Askham Bryan College's Horticulture Department](#) is Steve Bassford, an experienced educator who has been shaping the next generation of environmental professionals since 2012. Now overseeing over 250 students across the college's five sites, Steve leads courses spanning forestry, floristry, arboriculture, horticulture, Royal Horticultural Society and environmental conservation. As Head of Horticulture, he ensures that the curriculum aligns with industry standards while addressing the needs of the local community.

Steve likens his role to managing a small business, balancing financial oversight, marketing, and community outreach while fostering meaningful, real-world experiences for his students. The college has long maintained valuable partnerships with organisations such as the [Forestry Commission](#), [BALI \(British Association of Landscape Industries\)](#), and the [Yorkshire Gardens Trust](#). A new and exciting collaboration with [SMR Agrifor](#), a family-run forestry business committed to sustainability and proud holders of a [Grown in Britain](#) forest certificate, is further enhancing the learning experience by providing students with direct access to sustainable forestry practices and industry expertise.

Founded by Mike and Susan Rickards, SMR Agrifor is a prime example of sustainability in action, demonstrating the positive impact a responsible forestry business can have. The company goes beyond supplying high-quality, locally sourced timber to actively support conservation initiatives and collaborate with local charities. Their approach is driven by a deep commitment to both community and ecological well-being, ensuring that every decision made aligns with their values of sustainability, environmental stewardship, and social responsibility. Their ethos made them an ideal partner for Askham Bryan College.

"Sustainability is high on the agenda, especially with our new T-level courses. Mike and Sue's approach with SMR Agrifor aligns perfectly, it's about helping communities, thinking of the future and doing things in a way that's sustainable and meaningful." said Steve Bassford, Head of Horticulture, Askham Bryan College.

The collaboration began when Mike Rickards, co-founder of SMR Agrifor, reached out to the college with a proposal to work together. Steve recalls being immediately drawn to the opportunity, appreciating the

alignment between SMR Agrifor's values and the college's goals. What began as a straightforward inquiry has grown into a thriving partnership that benefits both the students and the wider local community.

Complexities of Educating in Nature

Askham Bryan College has faced its fair share of challenges in delivering forestry and conservation education. One of the most significant obstacles is the limited availability of accessible woodland sites near York. Teaching practical forestry skills often requires staff and students to travel long distances, sometimes up to an hour, which reduces the time available for instruction. Seasonality also poses difficulties, particularly during the nesting season, which restricts certain forestry activities to avoid disturbing wildlife.

The introduction of T-level qualifications has brought both opportunities and complexities. These government-designed programs are intended to prepare students for industry by combining academic learning with practical training, with a strong focus on sustainability, ethics, and business skills. While these areas are essential for developing future professionals, there is a clear need for hands-on experiences that allow students to apply and bring these principles to life in real-world settings.

Collaborative Efforts, Sustainable Results

The partnership with SMR Agrifor has been transformative in addressing these challenges. By providing access to a managed woodland site, complete with the necessary forestry licenses and management plans, SMR Agrifor has created an invaluable resource for the college. Students have the chance to engage in real-world forestry activities, including tree felling, thinning, and planting. These experiences allow them to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical setting while also learning about sustainable practices directly from experts like Mike Rickards.



"Collaborating with businesses like Mike's is so important. It keeps us in touch with what's happening locally and ensures our education is heading in the right direction. It's about preparing students for real-world challenges and opportunities" **Steve Bassford, Head of Horticulture, Askham Bryan College**

The collaboration has enhanced the learning experience for students. Practical tasks such as dismantling trees in an environmentally conscious manner, conducting aerial tree rescues, and planning replanting efforts have given students a comprehensive understanding of forestry's complexities. These activities align perfectly with SMR Agrifor's values, which prioritise community impact and environmental stewardship over pure profit. As Nia Ward, 1st Year Arboriculture Student shares, *"It has made me have more knowledge on biosecurity and what needs to be done in order to keep forests and woodlands safe."* Harry Thompson, 1st Year Arboriculture Student, adds, *"I think it is great we get set assignments where we must make decisions as business owners on sustainability,"* while Luke Summerson, T level Arboriculture

and Woodland Management student reflects, *“The practical days at SMR Agrifor doing the tree felling have been invaluable. We learn many ways of sustainability within our lessons at college and combined with practices at SMR, it teaches us a lot.”*



Mike Rickards, Co-Founder of SMR Agrifor, sums up the partnership’s impact: *“What sets this partnership apart is the depth of its impact. It’s not just about preparing students for the workforce; it’s about fostering a holistic understanding of sustainability and its importance in every aspect of forestry.”*

Students have learned how to minimise environmental disruption during tree felling by dismantling trees in smaller sections, ensuring that more materials can be utilised efficiently. This approach not only aligns with SMR Agrifor’s sustainable practices but also maximises the educational value of each activity.

The benefits of this collaboration are wide-reaching. For Askham Bryan College, the partnership has provided a vital resource for delivering a cutting-edge curriculum that prepares students for global opportunities. With companies from Canada and Australia expressing interest in hiring the college’s graduates, the hands-on experience gained through working with SMR Agrifor has proven invaluable.

For SMR Agrifor, the relationship has offered support in managing their forestry operations while promoting their commitment to sustainability. By partnering with the college, they have been able to educate the next generation of forestry professionals and raise awareness of sustainable practices within the community.

Strengthening community towards a sustainable future

Looking ahead, both parties are eager to expand their collaboration. Steve envisions involving environmental conservation students in biodiversity surveys, monitoring the ecological impacts of forestry activities over time. This would not only provide students with critical skills but also create a long-term case study on sustainable forestry management.

As Steve Bassford reflects, *“This collaboration exemplifies the perfect relationship. It’s collaborative, supportive, and aligned with our shared values of sustainability and community impact.”*

In a world where sustainability is becoming increasingly critical, the partnership between Askham Bryan College and SMR Agrifor serves as a powerful example of what can be achieved when education and industry come together.

“Our business thrives on strong community ties and collaborative partnerships and by working with educational institutions such as Askham Bryan College we create a positive impact that extends beyond our smallholding. We are providing students with real-life training scenarios on our land, this hands-on experience teaches the next generation about sustainable practices and responsible land management, giving back to our community and fostering environmental stewardship” Mike Rickards, Co- Founder, SMR Agrifor

Sustainability is at the heart of Askham Bryan College’s curriculum, where students gain hands-on experience in real-world settings like SMR Agrifor’s woodlands. By applying classroom lessons on habitat management, biodiversity, and sustainable forestry, students not only witness the practical impact of their actions but also embrace their responsibility in shaping a healthier planet, locally and globally. Together, Askham Bryan College and SMR Agrifor are shaping future leaders who will drive meaningful change for a more sustainable world.

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