

ANGULAR MOMENTUM

An unfortunate accident led to the design of a product that promises to end a dodgy workaround and improve jobsite safety. We travelled to Scarborough to see it for ourselves...

Sometimes a product comes along that is so self-evidently sensible that you wonder why it wasn't invented in the dark ages. And yet, to all intents and purposes, certain practices within construction still are.

I refer to the perplexing bodge of using timber planks to support a brick or block wall while the cement is still drying. Unsteady walls continue to blow over, often in the lightest breezes, which is exactly what happened to former brickie, Carl Harris – the accident pretty much ended his former career, he still bears the scars and has continuing health issues. The enforced layoff gave him the time to think about a better way of improving safety in this aspect of construction, however.

The result is the 'Brick Bud' and the start of a new venture called Harris Brick Safety Systems. Brick Bud is a lightweight and resilient triangular GRP bracket, which is fixed into the cement of a drying wall and braces it until it is fully cured – one would be needed every three metres on longer spans, but better than the unsafe and frankly uneconomical alternative.

We start at the very beginning, though. A wall fell on your leg, but when did it happen and what damage did it do?

"This was around six years ago, and my ankle basically snapped. I've had four operations and I still have really bad arthritis in it – I was off work for a year. I'm in constant agony and they were talking about fusion at one point, so it was quite a serious accident," says Carl, pulling out his phone to show me a photo of his x-ray. "It's still like that, to be honest," he adds.

In spite of attempting to restart his near 30-year bricklaying career, Carl took an SMSTS course and retrained as a construction site manager. "I've worked for a few housebuilders, including Bellway and Storey Homes," he says. "I couldn't lift heavy weights anymore, so I teamed up with my mate Cliff, who I'd met on a site, and we started working on this."



“One client said how they'd had two walls blow down, which nearly killed two people”

Brick Bud inventor Carl Harris is rightly proud of his product.

SAFETY FIRST

Find out more about Carl and what Brick Bud can mean for your construction customers at <https://harrisbricksafetysystems.com>

Well fair play to you! Are you still working as a site manager, or has Brick Bud taken over more recently?

"No, I can't do that anymore, simply because I'm up and down the UK with Brick Bud delivering demos."

Even if you do have a great idea for a product, bringing it to market is still an expensive and time-consuming business. How did you achieve this?

I received a grant from the government's net-zero scheme, which helped me develop the first prototype. I've self-funded it since, and I've had to take a couple of small loans out to cover my expenses."

Okay, you've got your first prototype, how did the product develop from there?

"Because I'd previously worked with the government's net-zero scheme, the second prototype had to have a reduced carbon footprint, so it was made from polypropylene, which is 80% recyclable."

"The testing revealed that on a two-metre wall you'd have needed the polypropylene model every 300mm – on both sides of the wall. It would have taken hours to set them all up! We tried an aluminium version next, but I met a guy who works with Network Rail and oil rig customers, and he asked me if I'd considered GRP instead. The latest GRP version is broadly equivalent to aluminium in strength, it is able to withstand stronger winds."

Brick Bud has since been tested by a number of construction companies. Who has been looking at it?

"It's been with Crest Nicholson, I'm in talks with two guys from Lovell, and I've had interest from HS2, Skanska, St Modwen and. One client said how they'd had two walls blow down, which nearly killed two people, and he was interested. Another told me he'd just ordered 2000 metres of timber, which, considering he'd also need a joiner, would cost him a heck of a lot of money – and all that wood always ends up in the skip afterwards. Brick Bud is reusable and should last years if it's used correctly, of course."

Prototyping and testing complete, where are you at the moment in terms of production and pricing?

"I've got a manufacturer who has just started producing 150 units, we've also got somebody working on the risk assessments, the relevant paperwork and everything that our potential customers and temporary works coordinators on site would need. It's going to cost a lot of money, but it will be worth it because this will be sent to all our clients. The price has been set at £270 plus VAT each."

You're all set for launch, then – and will 150 units be enough if Brick Bud takes off?

"Yes, as soon as we have all the paperwork in place, we're ready to go. Lionweld Kennedy, which is a national award winner for sustainability, can scale up production as volumes increase. To support any stepped volume increases, I will have an office at the production facility too."

I notice you're wearing a couple of wrist bands, and I wondered what you do in your spare time – assuming that you have any at the moment?

"The first one is for Andy's Man Club, which is a suicide prevention charity. I'm quite passionate about this, as I lost a few friends this way. The other is for a DJ called Mark Plumb – I used to be a bit of a raver, and he played at an event recently. I also enjoy MMA and used to train in that, but I can't do that anymore, for obvious reasons."

Quite so! Last question, then – what are the next steps for you?

"I've added a couple of minor details, following a meeting with a potential client. The product can now be screwed into the ground, which enables it to stand up to 11 on the Beaufort Scale – it's a heck of a lot. Otherwise, a couple more training colleges have shown interest, and I've been invited to talk at the 'Super Trowel' event in August. They asked me how I'd feel about speaking in front of 3000 bricklayers, but I'm absolutely going to do it!"

And that slightly terrifying prospect is where we leave it, but here we have a new product that hirers might file in the same category as Prop Pal, and likewise which performs its task with rigorous dependability. Carl is promoting Brick Bud to end users and construction clients, but drop him a line to get ahead of what will likely be a strong demand. ■



Brick Bud folds up very neatly.



Setting up is quick and easy.



Brick Bud is adjustable and can be fixed to the ground too.