

Major builders merchant fined £2.2 million after worker killed in conveyor crush

- Paul Coulson was crushed by a three-tonne pallet after another worker operated a conveyor not knowing he was inside
- Dangerous working practices had previously been captured on CCTV, but
- Company only made changes after Mr Coulson's death.

One of the country's largest building merchants has been fined more than £2 million after one of its workers was crushed to death by a pallet of timber that weighed around three tonnes.

Paul Coulson, 56, died after a colleague started a conveyor not realising Mr Coulson had climbed inside it – resulting in the fatal crush.



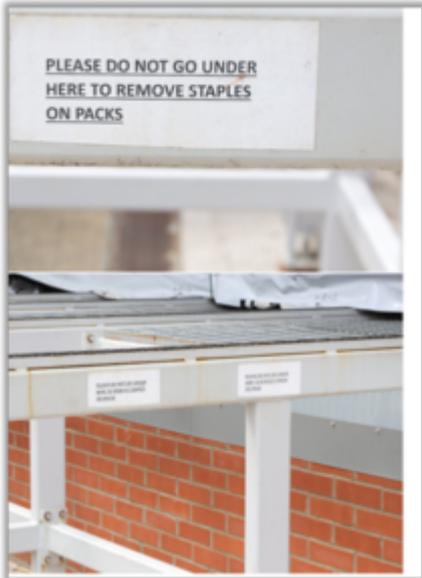
Mr Coulson was crushed by a pallet of timber that weighed around three tonnes

The incident happened on 22 May 2024 at Herringswell Sawmills, a site in Bury St Edmonds in Suffolk operated by Huws Gray Limited. Mr. Coulson, a labourer, had been tasked with removing plastic packaging from pallets of timber before they could be processed at the mill.

The 56-year had climbed within the framework of the conveyor to access some of the packaging. However, another operative, who could not see Mr Coulson from his location, started the conveyor. This resulted in the pack of timber moving forwards and colliding with him. The operative, who could see that the pack of timber was not moving along the conveyor as it should, reversed it before changing its direction. This resulted in the pack of timber moving forwards again – colliding with Mr Coulson for a second time. The crush injuries sustained were so significant that he died at the scene.

An investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that the company – which provides supplies to the building trade from hundreds of sites across Great Britain – had previously identified that employees were accessing the danger zone within the conveyor and placed signage asking employees not to do so. However, CCTV analysis revealed that between 14 April and 23 May 2024, operatives entered within the framework of the conveyor on

19 different occasions.



The company did place stickers on the conveyor before the incident happened

Although the company had placed stickers on the conveyor in a bid to tackle the working practice, no further action was taken to prevent access until after the tragedy.

The measures subsequently introduced to reduce the risk included guarding the conveyor to prevent access, changing the system of work so that the pallets were unwrapped before being placed on the conveyor, as well as more CCTV being installed to allow all angles to be seen by those operating it.

Although standards of health and safety are much improved over recent years, sawmilling remains a high-risk industry. HSE guidance clearly identifies the risks. [Health and safety in sawmilling – HSE](#).

Accidents can happen when people enter dangerous parts of the machinery to carry out adjustments, clear blockages, or replenish consumables. Companies need to prevent access to the reciprocating carriage and associated machinery during normal operation. This can be achieved by having in place:

- fixed-distance guarding on the sides of the machinery;
- close guarding designed to meet the necessary reach distances;
- a combination of these or other suitable measures.

Huws Gray Limited based in Llangefni, Anglesey, Wales, pleaded guilty to breaching the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 Section 2(1). The company was fined £2.2 million and ordered to pay full costs at Chelmsford Magistrates Court on the 26 March 2026.

HSE inspector Joanne Williams said:

“This was a staggering failure that has cost a man his life and robbed a family of their loved one, and the scale of the fine handed down reflects the gravity of this case.

“All companies, regardless of their size, must follow the hierarchy of control for guarding dangerous parts within work equipment.

“Our investigation revealed that in this case, Huws Gray Ltd chose to control a serious risk through instruction alone – instead of putting proper safeguarding measures in place

“This meant employees were able to access a danger area, with tragic consequences.

“Had Huws Gray Ltd taken robust action when they became aware of the problem, Paul Coulson would be alive today.

“Our thoughts will always remain with his family and friends for the loss they have suffered.”

The case was taken by HSE Lawyer Edward Parton supported by paralegal, Mariea Slater.

Further information:

1. [The Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE) is Britain’s national regulator for workplace health and safety. We are dedicated to protecting people and places, and helping everyone lead safer and healthier lives.
1. More information about the [legislation](#) referred to in this case is available.
2. Further details on the latest [HSE news releases](#) is available.
3. Relevant HSE guidance can be found here:
4. HSE does not pass sentences, set guidelines or collect any fines imposed. Relevant sentencing guidelines must be followed unless the court is satisfied that it would be contrary to the interests of justice to do so. The sentencing guidelines for health and safety offences can be found [here](#).