

Disability is not bar for brave Paul

A CONSTRUCTION consultant who lost his leg under nightmare circumstances has become one of the first disabled people to gain full status as an access auditor.

Paul Houghton, of Hart Road, Thundersley, studied for, and passed, "gruelling" exams to become a member of the National Register of Access Auditors, the organisation that authorises this growing speciality.

NRAC consultants investigate buildings for aspects such as health and safety and ease of use for the disabled.

Paul said his disability gave him no special privileges when it came to gaining NRAC entry.

He explained: "Although my own disability gives me a special insight, I wasn't a qualified architect or surveyor with letters after my name, unlike most of the members. I probably had to work extra hard."

Despite the ordeal that resulted in his disability, Paul still called the path to NRAC membership "one of the toughest experiences I've had."

He said: "The NRAC pushes its candidates to the limit. There's a presentation and then a 45-minute grilling."

Paul previously ran a roofing company and constructed the roofs on more than 2000 houses.

In December 2000, a mystery pain in his leg took him to hospital. Within hours, Paul was fighting for his life.

He had contracted necrotising fasciitis, the lethal infection highlighted in the tabloid press as "the flesh eating bug." To save his life, surgeons amputated the

■ By **TOM KING**
Business reporter

infected leg. Paul's career as a roofer and businessman was over, but he was determined to turn his experience to good account.

He recalled: "I had 25 years in the building trade which I didn't want to throw away. I know about construction, I know the practicalities.

"But I've also got something else I can offer now. When I enter a building, I see it through a disabled person's eyes. I think immediately in terms of things like, where can you sit down to rest?"

"When I worked as a roofer, I was a 16-stone bloke's bloke and nobody got in my way. I didn't know anything about oppression in any shape or form. I didn't think about disabled people very much. You just don't tend to encounter them on building sites.

"But take a man's leg away, then you see oppression, then you see barriers."

Believing that he now had "a useful combination of insights to offer", Paul immersed himself in subjects such as surveying and IT. Since the loss of his leg, he has acquired 11 City and Guilds qualifications and two diplomas.

He has worked as an access auditor for Essex County Council for 18 months. His track record to date includes audits on Colchester Castle and Hylands House, the majestic stately home outside Chelmsford.

Membership of the NRAC entitles him to undertake freelance commissions, Paul said: "What I do now really makes a difference. I'm achieving a lot more than when I was building roofs."



■ Determined – Paul Houghton Picture: ROB BROWN