Two men, Peter Roberts and Graham Dale, though from different sectors of the turf industry, have become inextricably linked and identified, certainly in BIGGA circles, by a company name that is world-renowned in the sphere of fine turf management. Both are dedicated to furthering greenkeeper education and both are known for their involvement with BIGGA under the umbrella that is Toro.

To be scrupulously accurate, Peter works for Toro Irrigation Ltd - he is their UK managing director - whilst Graham is identified as ‘Mr Toro’ in the machinery sector, though he is actually the managing director of Lely (UK) Ltd, the Toro machinery distributor for the UK. Both are high profile personalities known best as the joint sponsors (along with the PGA European Tour) of the TOOR/PGA European Tour Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award, a prestige event that has caught the imagination of thrilling young college greenkeeping students. This is seen as a wonderful, indeed mind-boggling, experience for the fortunate winner, who is whisked away for two months to the USA as a guest of the Toro Parent Company, visiting such widely differing places as the City and University of Massachusetts and the Toro machinery manufacturing plant in Minneapolis, through to the warmth of Southern California and Toro’s irrigation HQ at Riverside. Winning this event is a fairy-tale experience, with the planning, execution and financing down to the individual companies of Messrs Roberts and Dale.

All that ought to be enough, but these two unimmonly likable workaholics are not content to just sit on the sidelines and watch - no, they are in at the dead end, tossing ideas around like confetti and offering more than mere finance - the Student Greenkeeper Award is very much the better for their active involvement.

Let me now turn to their individual characters and personalities, so much alike in their collective thinking about BIGGA - twins almost yet as different in style as, say, Camembert and Parmesan. Peter is the archetypal sales man, a following that has been his forte for all his adult life and for over 21 years in the irrigation industry. He is instantly recognisable, a 'character' with a wicked grin, a winning personality and an ordinary wit, though at times appearing almost scholarly when his pipe is on fire alert and his bearded face is bearded in clouds of sweet smelling tobacco smoke - what is it he smokes, I wonder? I must ask him!

Peter began in irrigation quite by chance, thrust by family into country life from London roots and chancing upon a Hampshire company that needed a sales administrator. The story is told of his first day - of being cheered off and not wanting to return after a pub lunch but forced back as the only one with a car, of being somewhat taken by a gorgeous young lady that afternoon and of returning the next day to say, 'what progress could be made'. We can draw a veil over that episode, but the business outcome was to have repercussions that are evident to this day.

Quickly realising that colleagues would duck from dealing with 'difficult' orders or unusual requests, Peter offered to take the tough ones, recognised as an expert himself and set up in the UK as an independent subsidiary and had need of a salesman. The grapevine suggested Peter was their man, he was hired and the rest, as they say, is history.

Those were pioneering days, the British irrigation industry was in its infancy and much was myth and magic, with few understanding what they were buying. Someone in the golf world (not the irrigation world) had put a round sum of £5000 as the amount that would buy an automatic system - it didn’t, but it bought a few domestic sprinklers, a bit of piping and rudimentary controls - only when drought hit hard did weaknesses manifest themselves.

The irrigation industry learned quickly, and by the time the first recession of 1980/81 ended they were well organised and thinking and acting in a professional manner. The British Turf and Landscape Irrigation Association had been formed, a watch-dog group dedicated to establishing standards and a Code of Ethics and seen as a voice of reason when ‘cowboys’ were muddying the water during the so-called ‘golf boom’. The market on both sides now viewed irrigation as a professional science and one that must not be entered into lightly.

For approaching ten years Peter was all things to all people in the UK, an irrigation power-house, especially in the golf field. In 1986 his job changed, he took over Northern Europe and became embroiled with distributors and developers, acting as a management consultant, living out of a suitcase and enjoying every minute. Only in early '92 did he come home to roost, this time as managing director of what had become Europe’s fourth largest Toro business turnover, the British market. This, in his own words “is of such size that it needs total dedication, for it is more difficult to stay number one than to get there. My time will now be 100% in the UK marketplace and my plan is to take Toro forward to an altogether different level - we’ll stay number one by dynamic management in selling not just systems, but through a total concept of consultation through design facility and product application, together with immaculate installation and after sales. Above all, the product will not stand still - we’ll evolve - take up the challenge and get good odds!

Turning now to Graham, we see a man whose bearing and appearance...
would not go amiss in the corridors perhaps, or maybe someone big and of power: the bearing of a politician a private entrant Moto-Cross competitor talkative of the pair, but you can be nearly heard to his mind whirring, a deep thinker and a most astute observer. I'll admit to being surprised on learning that he had enjoyed four stormy years as a private entrant Moto-Cross competitor

This HND is for those aiming for management, advisory or consultancy posts in turfgrass and sportsground management. The Principal, Lancashire College of Agriculture and Horticulture, Myerscough Hall, Bislisham, Preston, PR3 0RY. Telephone: 0995 40611. Fax: 0995 40842.

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