It's amazing what you end up thinking about in the bath. Last week, as I was having my regular soak, I found myself wondering why the strongest competitors in sporting events are called seeds. It was probably because of Wimbledon.

For the life of me I couldn't come up with an answer from the type of seeds we all know about. Sowing seeds of success... It didn't quite follow.

As my mind wandered and the water became cooler and the bubbles less bubbly, mentally I put the two types of seeds together and wondered what would happen if you ranked seed companies. Would you have the Top Seed seed?

If that were the case there is a fair chance that the Seeding Committee would consider Barenbrug for that honour based on the criteria that Barenbrug is a global company with a group of companies spread throughout the world and also that Barenbrug varieties are a constant feature at, or near, the top of many of the STRI Rankings. The company has also just joined BIGGA's Golden Key sponsorship programme.

The man whose name adorns the familiar yellow bags is Joseph Barenbrug, a Dutch seed merchant who established the company in 1904, and since then, while always operating with a Barenbrug at the helm, the company has set a pattern that many of its varieties have followed — showing great strength and an ability to reproduce across the full gamut of climates.

"We export to 80 countries worldwide and have companies all over Europe as well as Australia, New Zealand, North America and China," explained Michel Mulder, the Dutch Managing Director of Barenbrug UK, and a man whose enthusiasm for the industry is infectious.

The British arm of the Barenbrug empire was established in 1990 but the name had been known in Britain for many years as a wholesale product before that, principally in the agricultural field, but Michel is quick to point out that Barenbrug products were supplied to St Andrews as far back as 25 years ago.

In 1990 Michel and John Bradley, who is now Amenity Sales Manager, were appointed by sharing the information, we get the best of both worlds," explained Michel.

"We really are a global company and say that we can supply from the North Pole down to the South Pole!" he added.
It is perhaps surprising that a company which is found all over the world has a worldwide workforce which numbers a mere 380.

"This is a business where you need warehouses, research stations and a sales force. We have about 60 people on the research side. To produce the seed we contract farmers to use their fields and have fieldmen who monitor quality and advise the farmers on chemical usage. The farmer is happy because the better quality the crop the higher his price," said Michel.

As more of the top rated varieties are produced the more the price to the end user will come down.

"In five to ten years time our varieties will be affordable to clubs in each budget category and everyone should benefit from the quality up-grade," explained Michel, who added that Barenbrug produces a combined 60,000 tonnes of seed a year worldwide in both agriculture and amenity sectors - that's three and a half million golf greens!

Grass breeding is an industry where the ability to see into the future is extremely important and there are a number of areas where Barenbrug is conducting research.

"Our biggest challenge is to producing varieties which are going to cope if, under legislation designed to protect the environment, the use of fertilisers is restricted. We are also spending a great deal of time looking at disease and how it will affect grasses in drought conditions.

"When I visited our breeding stations recently I didn't only see all the new varieties being tested but them all being tested against all the known diseases," revealed Michel.

While there is much being done worldwide the UK arm of Barenbrug is also making major strides.

"In '92 we had a turn over of £1 million and a staff of ten people. We finished last year with a turnover of around £5 million and a staff of 24 and our aim for the year 2000 is to have a turnover of £7.5 million and a staff of around 30," said Michel.

One of the key members of staff doesn't appear in those statistics however. Mungo the cat is a permanent resident in the warehouse and does sterling work in ensuring it remains vermin free.

"Mungo is extremely popular and colleagues even come in at Christmas and New Year to feed him," said Michel.

As is inevitable such growth means that accommodation which, at the beginning, was more than spacious enough soon becomes cramped and Barenbrug UK is in the process of addressing that particular problem.

"July 1 sees the start of work on our new offices on our Bury St Edmunds site. Greenkeepers and groundsmen visit us when we talk about breeding programmes and producing cultivars but at the moment we cannot accommodate the groups of up to 30 that we would like."

"It's been needed for a while but the last thing a seedsman does is put money in an office," joked Michel, of the half a million pound investment, which will see a two phased development including additional warehouse space, office accommodation and a custom build presentation room.

Barenbrug's Golden Key sponsorship has come about through the company's desire to be closer to the end user and will compliment the existing programme which has involved taking groups of greenkeepers to the research station in Holland and working closely with individual greenkeepers in the UK.

"There are not many weeks when Michel and I do not visit a golf course and they are occasions when we are always learning from them. It is important to speak with greenkeepers and listen to their views," said John.

One of those with whom Michel has a close relationship is John Philp at Carnoustie.

"With Carnoustie hosting The Open in 1999 we feel that we are preparing for The Open together," said Michel.

Michel and John both stressed, however, that Barenbrug has the philosophy, that the golf course just around the corner is just as important as the big name venue and that is always key to the thinking.