

A Trip to England For BIGGA's BTME Show

An Experience of a Career

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This past January I was selected as one of ten North America superintendents to represent GCSAA and travel to Harrogate, England to attend the British Turfgrass Management Exposition. The trip was the brainchild of Stephen Bernhard and sponsored by his firm, Bernhard & Company. Bernhard has been bringing international greenkeepers to the Golf Industry Show for the past seven years and decided it was finally time to bring a group of US superintendents to the UK. Bernhard thought it would be a good idea to run the process through GCSAA and then select the superintendents through an essay contest. Through some major miracle of luck, my association involvement and probably some well-timed essay humor, I was selected as one of the ten delegates.

Joining me on the trip were Bob Becker of The Scioto Country Club in Ohio, Gregg Blew, CGCS of Wellshire Golf Club in Denver, Bob Farren, CGCS Manager of Golf and Grounds at the Pinehurst Resort in North Carolina, Michael Morris, CGCS of Crystal Downs CC in Michigan, Robert Murtaugh, CGCS of Overland Golf Course in Colorado, David Phipps of Stone Creek Golf Club in Oregon, C. Todd Pippin of The Club at Longview, North Carolina, Roger Stewart, CGCS of TPC Jasna Polana in New Jersey, and David Ward of Coyote Run Golf Course in Illinois. They were a great group of guys, all having numerous positive things to share.



It was a bit of a challenge logistically to get ten different superintendents from all over the country to arrive in England at the same time. But one of our hosts, Kim Furnell of Bernhard & Company, magically pulled it off. We flew into Manchester, and were picked up by Kim and her

associate, Gina Putnam, a former GCSAA employee who had worked in Lawrence. Gina actually emigrated to England three years ago to

work for Bernhard. These two ladies went out of their way to make us feel welcome the entire week and thankfully did all the driving. With the steering wheels on the right and the direction of travel on the left and the numerous mazes of roundabouts, I never felt completely sure where cars were coming from the entire week. And my numerous mistaken attempts to jump into the front right side (drivers seat) of our van were met by numerous snickers by the group of, "Oh, looks like you want to drive, huh?" In the name of human preservation and auto insurance agents across the land, I relinquished any attempts at getting behind the wheel!

We arrived on a Sunday and were based in the quaint town of Harrogate in the north of England. As with many of the older towns in Europe, everything was within walking distance. The exposition center was a mere two blocks away. We spent the first day getting situated and exploring the town. That exploration just so happened to include a couple of pubs where many of us were introduced to the tumultuous excitement of watching an English Premier League Football Match! A welcome dinner followed that evening where we met three European greenkeepers who ended up becoming our unofficial guides for the week. We found that they had been part of the BIGGA delegation that traveled to San Diego in 2004. Sid Arrowsmith, MG ran a 54-hole complex in England, Richard McGlynn was building a course in Russia, and Steven Tierney had the luck of running a course in Wengen Switzerland. These guys were a joy to be around, and got us into, and out of trouble all week! That first dinner provided a hint of what was yet to come, as everyone we met during the week went out of their way to chat with us and share their stories. It felt as everyone was thrilled to be in Harrogate, and anxious to talk amongst their peers.

The following day we traveled to the Sports Turf Research Institute (STRI) in Bingley where nearly all of the turfgrass research is done in the UK. We observed their research on golf turf as well as on other "amenity" applications such as football (soccer), rugby and cricket pitches. We learned in England, a field is somewhere you graze livestock, and a pitch is somewhere you play sport! We toured their test plots and talked with resident chemists and pathologists. With the damp wet climate, Fusarium patch (*Microdochium nivale*) is the #1 disease problem UK, and crane fly larvae are one of the biggest insect problems. Birds have been known to tear up entire fairways foraging for the numerous grubs.

Following STRI, we left for the Alwoodley Golf Club in Leeds. Alwoodley is the first golf course ever designed by Dr. Alister MacKenzie. Our host was Nick Leaf, Club Historian and former Chairman of the Green. Nick shared his deep knowledge of both the renowned architect and the course. We ended up walking all eighteen holes as our host explained the architectural principles inherent to the design. One of the more

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remarkable features of the course was the medieval farming furrows



Alwoodley Golf Club in Leeds, first golf course ever designed by Dr. Alister MacKenzie

left in place across the fairways. These numerous rounded ridges of approximately one foot in height ran across many of the fairways insuring that no two fairway lies would be the same. It was interesting to see what they considered adding interest to the game, was something we would view as being completely unfair!

The BTME show opened the next day. It was a joy to attend, and could be described as a throwback to what the GCSAA Show was in its earlier days. Approximately 250 people attended the Opening Session and most of the educational seminars ran concurrently with the trade show. It was interesting seeing the different types of equipment used abroad and the differing applications. (We would never need a flail strong enough to handle gorse!) The educational seminars provided insight into differing management strategies but the information related universally. One highlight was how very focused the Europeans were on sustainable practices and low input methods. This was initially for economic reasons but has also proven sound for both environmental protection and the fight against annual meadow grass (*Poa annua*.) Most of the courses seek greens made up of the "finer grasses," the fescues and bents. In that pursuit, one British greenkeeper insisted he only applied 6 grams of actual nitrogen per square meter to his greens last year!

Harrogate week is similar to our conference and show, with evenings filled with wonderful opportunities to meet new colleagues, network and just talk turf. As a GCSAA delegate, it gave us the opportunity to meet the next ten BIGGA delegates who will be traveling to the GIS in Anaheim. They are a great group of guys and we all made plans to reconnect there. The last thing that anyone who attends this conference feels is lonely. Everyone is genuinely inclusive and is quick to introduce themselves. At one dinner I was fortunate enough to sit across from Sir Michael Bonallack, former Secretary of the R&A, who when persuaded, talked at length about his duties with the R&A, his British Amateur titles (5) and Walker Cups (9.) I was in awe, to say the least!

The BIGGA Banquet was the climax of the show. Held at the posh and historic Majestic Hotel, the banquet allowed everyone to let loose after a great week. A lavish meal was served followed by Irish comedian

Adrian Walsh. This guy was tremendous, providing big laughs with his never-ending string of one-liners. Afterwards it was disco dancing or adjournment to the famous Majestic Hotel bar. I introduced myself to an older greenkeeper I had sat next to in one of the seminars earlier in the day, and low and behold, I find out it is Walter Woods, who had just retired from St. Andrews after 40 years. Talk about a legend of the profession! That guy has probably forgotten more than I will ever know! And his sense of humor would make even Joe Vargas blush! Meeting and talking with him were one of the highlights of my trip!

On our last day Friday, we visited a great old links course, The Ganton



The Ganton Golf Club

Golf Club. Both Harry Vardon (6 British Opens) and Ted Ray were former professionals at Ganton and the club recently hosted the Walker Cup Matches in 2003. Their greenkeeper, Phillip Baldock took us around for a no-nonsense look at the links. He had previously overseen 36 holes at Royal Portrush in N. Ireland. It was great having his insight as our group asked numerous questions about managing the links. The course there was prepared for golf alone – no signs, no yardage markers, no flowers, no fancy monuments, no beverage carts, etc. Practice green markers were made of a simple short hook of steel. Bunkers contained the native sandy soil that included many sea shells, and weeds were not a problem as long as they didn't effect play. It was a refreshing way to see a course prepared. Mr. Baldock said he would probably be disciplined if he ever burned in the stripes on the fairways like we do in the US! They had a crew of six and only one utility vehicle. When asked how steep they construct the walls of the riveted bunker faces, he said, "We use a very technological method, on greenside bunkers we place each piece of sod one finger back of the last piece, on fairway bunkers we use two fingers!" Greens topdressing was done frequently and consisted of a mix of 70% sand and 30% soil. Iron sulfate was used regularly to control moss. When asked about his rate, Mr. Baldock noted, "Black does not bother me, it only lasts a few days and does a world of good." It was empowering seeing such a practical approach to golf course maintenance.

The trip was a series of great experiences, one followed by another. It was a week in my career that I will never forget. We had a dignified group of professional superintendents and our hosts from Bernhard were tremendous. Words simply cannot describe the quality of individuals met and the experiences gained. Attending BIGGA's BTME is something every superintendent must do at least once in his career. And I encourage each of you to somehow find a way to experience it yourself.