

(from previous page)

Summarising, Nick Park impressed upon us three key factors which would bring about change for the better: First, the new structure would ensure total continuity and thus override or outweigh any individual whims or personalities. Second, that greenkeepers (BIGGA) will play a much bigger part in deciding how (much larger) sums of money might be spent. Finally, that this was a genuine partnership between Unions, Clubs and the Association.

Asked if professional golfers might have a part to play, Secretary of the EGU, Keith Wright, suggested that there was no place for them in this endeavour, "indeed", he continued, "the sooner we convince Clubs that greenkeeping is an art and a profession the better it will be for all concerned". A murmur of approval rumbled through the halls.

One might imagine this session a hard act to follow, but with an up-to-the-minute topic like Greenkeeping in the year 2010 – Who are we training and for what? Dr Hugh Nunn took the day to a splendid close, all present being given plenty upon which to cogitate.

Saturday night was given to merriment, with a fine banquet set before us in the historic Merchant Adventurers Hall, followed by the riotously funny act of Barry Williams, which proved to be an inspired choice in sealing the high mood of the evening.

With a somewhat subdued audience, following Saturday's excesses, Larry Gilhuly judged the mood perfectly with It's a matter of Quality, for although specifically informative it had just the right seasoning of humour to bring sparkle back into weary souls. Two young masters of their craft followed, Ken Siems first; demonstrating both visually and vocally that bent grasses (and other innovative features) at East Sussex National were no myth, with Peter Jones following in fine style to tell us (again with splendid pictures) how at Collingtree Park he had mastered the pure sand greens and Penncross conundrum. Both left us on a 'high', which remained to the end, Dr Roy Goss winding-up by discussing alternatives to our old 'friend' *Poa annua*.

Leaving York, we are heartened by the good news from Nick Park, inspired by the good vibes that such conferences instil within us and gladdened that old friendships have been renewed and new ones created. We shall be back for more!

# A learning experience

David Norton, the TORO Greenkeeper of the Year, recently spent two months in America as part of his winners award. These are his observations...

Airports can be chaotic enough in themselves and I had seen quite enough organised chaos on both sides of the Atlantic, with my journey taking over 20 hours from Beverly to the University of Massachusetts. Just when I felt the worst was over along came a sting in the tail. That sting was the 15 minute ride on Boston's underground, though without taking you on a similar ride I cannot begin to explain its nastiness. Suffice to say that in the whole eight weeks away it was the lowspot of my tour, and I count myself lucky to have arrived with luggage intact. When I finally reached the campus it was dark; below freezing; snowing; and the dormitory was locked!

I was soon inducted into American ways and began the seven-week, eleven subject, course in fine spirits. These included turfgrass management; golf course architecture; turfgrass diseases; entomology; irrigation; physiology; personnel management; calculations; soils and fertilisers; trees and shrubs; and the equipment shop, with students being tested by exam or practical project, sometimes both.

There was never a dull moment, for the excellent course material was both informative and practically based and though classroom days were long – 8am to 5.30 pm – the time flew past. Some of the material was familiar from my days at Askham Bryan, with the presentation made doubly fascinating by its 'Americanisation'. For example, our meadow grass is known as Kentucky Blue Grass (which sounds much nicer) and came to light when latin names were used in the classroom. My fascination grew when talk turned to American warm season grasses – so different from those few varieties we have here in Britain – and the management practices necessary for their survival.

The essential ingredient in any learning experience is, in my opinion, the dialogue that comes after school. My unfounded though long-held views on America and the Americans were soon changed through such conversations and I now feel that no big gap exists in the capability of 'them' as opposed to 'us'. What is clear, however, is that education is a high priority, high profile subject, and this we must emulate at every opportunity if we are to gain the same professional recognition enjoyed by our American cousins.

Did I tell you about the war? It broke out whilst I was there, giving me an exposure to American news coverage that was truly mind-blasting. Twenty-four hour TV coverage on four channels, newspapers crammed to capacity and in Amhurst itself the sight of demos and peace protesters marching on the streets. This climaxed on George Washington's Birthday when a peace protester incinerated himself on the village green. Thankfully a cease-fire was called before I flew home.

This was no "all work and no play" trip and I lived it up in Las Vegas at the GCSAA show. I had been psyched by fellow US students into believing the show would be enormous and indeed it was quite big, though not as big as they would have it. It was good though, with many excellent short, sharp and snappy 20 minutes lectures and a chance to see the Hydrojet, both on show and later in action in California. Suddenly familiar faces appear at the BIGGA stand, Neil Thomas, Debbie Savage and Ivor



The Tamarisk Course, southern California

Scoones, and a chance to meet ICI Premier Greenkeeper Award winner, Anthony Davies, who had also won a trip to the show. Likewise familiarity at the TORO exhibit where Graham and Dave presided and where I was invited to participate in still more merriment – this time at TORO's reception party.

On campus I had met folks from Sun City; Pebble Beach; Butler National; Pinehurst and Pole Creek, to name but a few of the famous courses represented, whilst at the show I was privileged to meet and talk with many other important and influential people in the golf industry. Truly a learning experience.

Las Vegas itself will long live in my memory, with its gambling tables and over-the-top extravaganza style. Could you really believe it, I even saw white snow tigers guarding the entrance to the Mirage Hotel!

Returning to school, a final grand dinner (coinciding with celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the turf school) was shared with lecturers and students, before we all received our certificates at a passing-out parade. I had learned so much, mixed with so many fine people and was reluctant to move on, but California – in the shape of TORO's Irrigation Plant at Riverside – beckoned.

So to the final week, with a conducted tour of the plant proving most interesting and hugely informative. A real 'home cookin' meal of delicious taste and proportion with Bill and Carol Theole was followed by a trip with Bill to the desert. Palm Springs is where TORO have a desert outlet and from this base we visited several eye-popping courses and talked with green maintenance staff. The courses at PGA West, La Quinta and Tamarisk especially impressed me and it was at Tamarisk that I saw my first ever *Poa trivialis* greens, which in both Britain and America we were taught were 'no go'. Seeing was definitely believing! Funny thing, they were suffering the effects of a 5 year drought, though on the day I visited it rained more than it had in two whole years – typical!

One day to go, with the morning spent at Riverside in mind-blowing discussion with Jon Williams on irrigation systems past, present and future. I do hope he achieves all that he is aiming for. Indeed, on reflection, I'm sure he will. Now the end is looming, though I could happily stay on for several more weeks in California, and I am sorry to leave. The airport newsstand offers an English newspaper for £5.50 and I begin to feel drawn homeward bound. Calculations now reveal that I've covered 20,000 miles, being transported through Boston's subway nightmare to the tables of Vegas and the beaches of California. A great and rewarding experience which I shall never forget. There are too many people to thank individually, but to everyone concerned – the organisers, TORO as sponsors and all Americans who made me feel so welcome – thank you all. May all future winners enjoy equal pleasure and delight and, perhaps most important of all, gain true and lasting benefit from the learning which such a trip affords.