

PETER ROBERTS, Toro Irrigation Ltd and GRAHAM DALE, Lely (UK) Ltd

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 TORO/PGA European Tour Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award, a prestige event that has caught the imagination of thrusting 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.

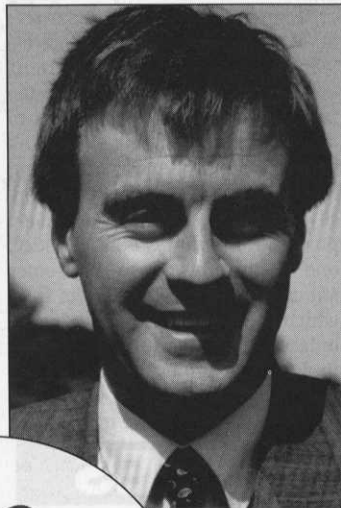
All that ought to be enough, but these two eminently likable workaholics are not content to just sit on the sidelines and watch – no, they are in at the deep end, tossing ideas around like confetti and offering more than mere finance – the Student Greenkeeper Award is very much the better for their active 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 salesman, 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 a ready wit, though at times appearing almost scholarly when his pipe is on fire alert and his bearded face is wreathed 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 coun-



Peter Roberts



Graham Dale



# Heart and soul

try 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 cheesed 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 see ‘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, learned far more about irrigation by *having* to investigate problems on the factory floor – quizzing the technical experts – and was soon recognised as an expert himself and thrust into the mainstream of selling – his real love.

Chance took another hand in 1976 when Toro Irrigation Ltd, previously working with a sole distributor, 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 – and 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 and we will become even more technically advanced – that is what makes an irrigation system”.

Outside of work Peter is a tournament caster – a fisherman who doesn’t catch fish! He’s good, scratch by golfing standards, and challenges most amateur golfers that he can cast further than they can drive a golf ball – to the first bounce – take up the challenge and get good odds!

Turning now to Graham, we see a man whose bearing and appearance

## 'We both felt that we needed to get more involved in education'

would not go amiss in the corridors of power: the bearing of a politician perhaps, or maybe someone big and mysterious in the City. He's the less talkative of the pair, but you can almost hear his mind whirring, a deep thinker and a most astute observer. I'll admit to being surprised on learning that he had enjoyed four storming years as a private entrant Moto-Cross competitor – and in truth rather saw him as a pukka yachtsman, which indeed he told me he was and still is – funny how first impressions can throw you! I digress.

Graham is from Ipswich, as are so many others who make it in the

world of turf machinery marketing or technology, and began his career at Ransomes. His early interest leaned toward a career in farming but it became evident to him by the late 1960s that unless one was of direct farming stock that wasn't likely – indeed there was no guarantee even for those with the farming silver spoon, as later events have proven. He began as an apprentice, one of twenty or so Ransomes annual intake of raw recruits from which the future of their industry, indeed almost *the* industry, would find its new production managers, designers, engineers and sales technicians. Exposed in the mainstream

of Ransomes technology, Graham quickly felt that agricultural machinery sales should be his chosen path. He was fortunate in being trained at a time when Ransomes were selling combine harvesters and even more fortunate in manoeuvring himself from the more mundane apprentice tasks of engineering inspection by being assigned to finished goods, an interesting exercise. Equally fortunate, Ransomes encouraged further education and Graham took several courses in mechanical engineering at Ipswich College.

The role of a Ransomes apprentice is very thorough and opportunities presented themselves for Graham's exposure within the agricultural sales division. With his apprentice not yet complete, decisions nevertheless had to be made on his career path and he was guided by Roger Smith, who suggested that the future lay not in agriculture but in grass machinery – and that a vacancy in sales was there for the taking! At the tender age of 20 Graham was a demonstrator, at 21 seconded to Australia on an exchange scheme and working in the distributorship network for three years. It was in Australia that he saw another side – the smaller and altogether more personal side of the distributor.

Although there were to be no instant changes – still too much to do and learn in Ransomes – this 'other side' had sown a seed in Graham's mind – which was to come to the fore later. For the time it was work as a territory rep back in 'Blighty' till 1977, then a brief and satisfying flirtation in being one's own boss – selling kit boats (the sailing connecting) which only ended when recession cut into every yachtsman's pocket and made smaller business enterprises very precarious indeed.

Luck follows the lucky, they say, and a Toro area management job was whispered on the grapevine as being for the taking with the Toro distributor for the South West. Graham had covered this area for Ransomes, knew the people and certainly knew the machinery business – the job was his! Various promotions followed, culminating in a move from the south west to County Durham as sales manager until 1983, when things began to change. Changes take place, business tycoons make decisions and company profiles alter. In this brief article it is not possible to precis all that happened behind boardroom doors at that time – suffice to say that the Toro distributorship changed hands – without bloodshed – and Lely UK, a Dutch owned company in the agricultural machinery business, took over this sole distributorship prize.

Graham was hired as sales manager at Lely for Toro products – not

surprising in view of his skill and expertise – thence promoted to the general manager's role and finally to the lofty role of managing director – lifting a turnover of £2m to one of over £5m and rising. It all seems so simple written here, but this is really a lengthy tale of dedication in a highly competitive market, of grasping every opportunity and winning more than one's share in a tough business. Looking at the Toro machinery marketplace, one thing stands out – the meteoric rise in technological features and innovations: nothing stands still, and in scanning a complete product line of, say, 1983 and comparing it with today, one will see that not a single machine has escaped the high-tech advancements for which Toro are noted. It isn't that obsolescence is planned – it comes by demand from the end user, who literally presurise for more and more innovations. It's called 'the what's new' syndrome. A prediction from Graham for the future? "Watch out for a huge leap forward in the use of micro-chip electronics and controls – see what the motor industry has done in that field, we'll surely follow".

Like any good Captain of Industry, Graham has a release-valve in being an active yachtsman, with what leisure time he has all down to getting thoroughly soaked; heaving-to, luffing to leeward and all that stuff. A sport and language I cannot comprehend, but eminently enjoyable and a wonderful re-charger of human batteries.

In closing, I quizzed these good friends on the BIGGA Student Greenkeeper Award connection. They had both worked through the EIGGA, SIGGA and BGGGA syndrome – both enjoying and revelling in the politics of it all: "We had to know which political cap to wear" they both chuckled in unison. Graham now – "We both felt that we needed to get more involved in education and we listened with glee when Paddy McCarron suggested that greenkeeper education needed something upon which to hang its hat – a publicity vehicle if you like and the scholarship came out of that chance comment.

"Any advice for candidates?", I asked, and their reply, again in unison, centred around a candidates achievements both in college and on the golf course, together with enthusiasm for their chosen career and how they might cope out of a normal environment – in short the candidate who is chosen will be the one who might most benefit career-wise from the experience – that's how it has been, but one never knows: nothing stands still and changes can and do take place, so being on one's mettle is the wisest guide-line.

DAVID WHITE

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