

Valuable

Ransomes

DAVID WHITE pays homage to the 'Greenkeeper's Mecca' – BIGGA supporter and an Education and Development Fund Golden Key Circle member, Ransomes Sims and Jefferies

When I first entered what was, for me, the new and uncharted field of greenkeeping, a field about which I thought I could write dispassionately and about which I fancied I knew something, there came a time, soon after the honeymoon was over, when the penny finally dropped: this editor was dead without the help, support and understanding of 'the trade'!

Fortunately, help was not far away and came – almost by telepathy – by way of an invitation for me to spend a day at the Ransomes Sims and Jefferies plant at Ipswich, a place which I now think of as 'The Greenkeeper's Mecca'. My invitation, the very first I ever received in my new editorial capacity, was to witness at first hand the design, planning and construction of modern grass machinery – a slab of raw steel entering one end of the factory, a beautifully crafted machine rolling off the line some half mile distant.

Following my detailed tour I came away in awe, liking what I had seen so much that, like Victor Kiam of Remington fame, I would have loved to buy the company. Pipe dreams apart, I did buy into the company as a preferential shareholder – the first and only time I've ever dabbled in the stock market.

If all this seems just a little OTT, my opinion hasn't altered and I still think Ransomes are somewhat special – their staff training is second to none, their sales force the most technically expert I've ever come across (and the most cheerful), whilst the support I've received from the delightful Karen Smith, Ransomes PR specialist, has been unparalleled. Last but not least, Ransomes machinery is quality epitomised and they are and always have been innovators par excellence. From top to bottom the company reeks of class!

Greenkeepers will identify with Ransomes through their own favourite salesman (and, I'll be bound, with at least one piece of Ransomes, Cushman or Ryan machinery in just about every inventory), whilst for the purpose of this Gold Key tribute, I shall identify with two stalwarts of the company, John Wilson, the general sales and marketing manager for Ransomes grass machinery, and Richard Bishop, the company's sales manager.

Though Ransomes employ some 3000 people world-wide (including Kimber and Supreme Mowing in the UK, Ransomes SA in France, Ransomes GMBH in Germany and Steiner, Cushman, Ryan, Ransomes Inc. and Brouwer in the USA) the force at Ipswich has become somewhat stream-

lined compared with earlier times. This may be accounted for in part by massive infusions of high-tech equipment and certainly by high-tech management and high-tech thinking. Such modernistic planning serves to explain why Ransomes people are never stumped for an answer – they're all so well versed, so clued-up. That stated, the road to the top is almost always via the factory floor, a route followed with great success by John Wilson.

John joined Ransomes direct from school in 1949 and followed the time honoured route of apprentice training in every works department, whilst nurturing from the very beginning a desire to move into sales and marketing. "How did you get the break", I queried, "simple enough", he replied, "I asked for it"! By asking, John was given his first taste of sales, a spell of some three years in north London as a demonstrator and service engineer. "In those days, we used to undertake quite major repair jobs on site", he told me, "and business was slanted more on the farm machinery side, it was valuable experience and has stood me in good stead ever since".

Moving on, John became a 'salesman' proper in 1958, working in both home and export sales and concentrating on mainland Europe and Scandinavia – an example of the workload undertaken may be seen in a typical overseas tour: eight countries visited in three months, calling on prospects, visits prearranged through distributors, demonstrating the capabilities of Ransomes unique machinery. Again indicative of thorough training, it impresses me that any Ransomes man is capable of leaping on any Ransomes machine and making it perform miracles!

Pioneering is part of a salesman's make-up, and following his success in Europe John was away on the pioneering trail in Canada. Upon arrival he bought a truck, loaded it with Ransomes grasscutting machinery and began a countrywide tour, right across that great country. Those heady days in the fifties were certainly trail blazing, and John likes to think that his early invasions were in some way instrumental in forging the basis for what now is a flourishing N. American business for the company.

A further step up came in the early sixties when Guy Catchpole, Ransomes then sales manager (now retired) invited John to become his second in command, a very important upward move. For some twenty or more years, John worked alongside Guy, promoting world-wide sales

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John Wilson, left and Richard Bishop

15 → and formulating marketing strategy in the grasscutting machinery sector, the high flyer in the company's range and successor to farm machinery as the anchorstone. When Guy was promoted to sales and marketing director, John was promoted to general sales and marketing manager. This was followed in due course by yet further promotion and the rest, as they say, is history.

Listening to John I soon realised that this man had wrapped his life around Ransomes, that it had become his life. To the stock question "what about your personal life, your hobbies?", he was quick to reply, "a little golf, an interest in photography, but if you *really* want to know what makes me tick, it's my work. Because our business is so fascinating, so absorbing, work doesn't seem arduous at all – Ransomes becomes your life" This sentiment was endorsed by Richard Bishop, and though I am jumping ahead in writing this, Richard's comments fit neatly into the story: "I know it sounds terribly corny", he said, "but corny or not, like John, I have Ransomes as my hobby..."

Richard Bishop, the man whose hobby is his work, is an Ipswich man born and bred. Unlike John, he didn't enter Ransomes via the apprentice route, rather as a twenty year old who had made a few false starts in other fields. Keen to grasp the opportunity that Ransomes offered, originally in production control, Richard likes to recall those heady days on the line, of first meeting up with Colin Gregory all those years ago in the late sixties, of all the good times that were enjoyed. Training by doing is Ransomes way, and when an opportunity to enter the buying department came about, Richard leapt at the chance. Following a highly successful year in buying, Richard moved into sales of electric trucks, sales being a sector he had been anxious to enter and this being the first rung. A further enlightening year came in PR, spent working alongside the great character that was Perry Crewdson, followed by the opportunity he'd really been waiting for – grass machinery sales.

Beginning as a demonstrator at a time when things were changing – grass machinery on the up, farm machinery demand in freefall – Richard soon gained promotion and was 'on the road', first as an area demonstrator in Sussex, then as area representative. In 1983, with business expanding, he was promoted yet again to field sales manager, travelling the country, looking after the business side of selling, nurturing salesmen, demonstrating, making things happen, if you like.

Now UK sales manager and controlling the grass machin-

ery team, Richard still spends time on territory, though increasingly his work brings him back to Ipswich and the deskbound life.

As a twosome, John and Richard tossed lovely quotable snippets at me – "we may be the oldest established company in grasscutting, but we are up to the minute with our ideas", said Richard. "Consider the following", said John, "we were the first company, in 1832, to introduce the lawnmower, the first with a motor lawnmower around 1900, the first with a mains/electric mower in the thirties, the first with a power driven gang mower – the Powerquint – in the sixties, the first hydraulically driven gang mower – the Hydraulic 57 – in 1967, the first all hydraulic ride-on in the late sixties, and the first with powered electronics – the GT – in the mid eighties".

A babble of cross talk now – "we are into evolution rather than revolution", ventures John, "we give the customer what he wants", chips in Richard, "and what the customer needs" adds John. I almost take these things for granted, seeing Ransomes as leaders in the business of making machinery that is both cost effective and commercially viable. I need no further convincing.

Of the BIGGA connection there is massive empathy, both with the cause and with the greenkeeper. Ransomes have been loyal supporters since the early days and indeed they like to think they were amongst the pioneers in our education revolution – "we were always close, our reps were giving lectures back in the fifties", John told me, "we welcome a strong Association and want to get even closer".

On the question of closeness, Richard urged me to tell readers of Greenkeeper International that his company positively encourages group visits – "we are one of the few companies with the ability to show everything we make in all stages of production – the slab of steel at one end, the finished product at the other". Having witnessed this show-piece of modern technology, I can endorse Richard's sentiments.

Let John Wilson have the final say: "We have long since brushed aside the 'grandfather image' and are a force to be recognised, we can with pride look to our slogan 'Ransomes for total turfcare', for with the acquisition of Cushmans and Ryan in 1989 we doubled our size and our design capabilities. Our design centres at Ipswich and in the USA are manned by a powerful group of development engineers, clever men who know that new products are our lifeblood". I'll endorse those sentiments too.