

REVVING UP



Mark Barthelmie, the powerhouse behind Risboro' Turf, is quite unlike the accepted notion of a typical executive.

For a start, you would be hard pushed to find him dressed in the archetypal uniform of the rising yuppie – the Yves St Laurent suit and the nifty silk tie. I'll grant you he's got a smart suit – I've seen him wearing it – but he's much more at ease dressed casually, more in character as the boss who at the drop of a hat will scamper off to stage a convincing machinery demo in the middle of a fairway, ever at ease and easy to be with as 'one of the boys'.

For weeks I'd been chasing an interview, my plans thwarted by his being in America 'on business' and relieved to be at last meeting the man who had proved so hard to nail down. I arrived at the company headquarters, a nifty, button-bright, purpose-built location in rural Buckinghamshire complete



Top gear: Mark Barthelmie aboard his 1991 Harley-Davidson Sturgess

with its own green acres of testing ground, to be greeted by Mark's co-director Richard Taylor with the classic put-down, "Mark's out at the moment, hopes he won't be long – have a cup of tea!" Had Mark forgotten I was coming, I wondered, but within minutes he bustled into

his office, a grin beaming from ear to ear, fresh from staging a demo. The smile told it all, and though I was too polite to ask the outcome I could tell it had been a resounding success. Yes, Mark Barthelmie is the sort who gets high on the scent of 'a deal' and never happier than

when face to face with his prospect, convincing him that he's got the answer to a particular problem.

The walls of Mark's office tell a tale of their own, emblazoned with plaques and plinths in recognition of Risboro' Turf as trailblazers. There are 'Dealer of the Year' and 'Distributor of the Year' awards by the number, manufacturing and trade association accolades galore – all declaring the company as one that gets off its butt and performs! The casual observer could not fail but to be impressed.

Unconventional is the word that springs most readily to mind, for I learned that Mark had combined his 'business' jaunt to the GCSAA show at Anaheim with anything but a conventional pleasure trip – to Las Vegas with Lynn, his fiancée of some three years standing, followed by their taking a short hop in a stretch limousine to one of the dozens of 'wedding chapels' ➔ 18

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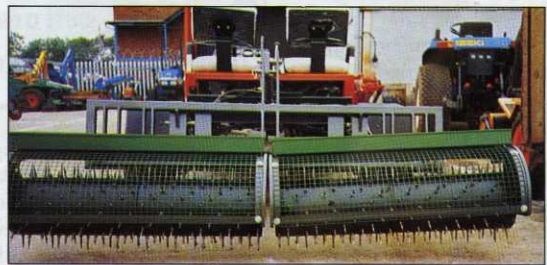
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17 ➔ found in the marriage capital, there to pay out a few dollars and take vows of matrimony American style – a mere seven minutes later our bachelor hero and his betrothed left as fully paid up members of the ‘just married’ club, returning swiftly to the hotel bar for a celebratory glass of soothing spirit!

I learned from Mark that Risboro’ Turf had been formed about six years ago by him as a direct result of his involvement in his father’s business, Risboro’ Agricultural, a company selling farming machinery and fine turf supplies and famous in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxon for innovation and service. Mark trained in agricultural engineering at Rycot Wood College before joining the family firm and covering the whole gamut of the business – fine turf, workshop, stores, on the road, machinery development and modification, sales and general administration and the setting up their first computer system – a perfect training ground that left little to chance.

Bolstered by his new found administrative skills and with the growing realisation that the agricultural business was running on borrowed time, with farming going through a transitional period, Mark saw the need, as he put it, to ‘look after his own interests’. At the time Risboro’ Agricultural had been modifying Ryan turfcutters for Marshall Concessionaires, and by applying the principles of service, back-up and having spares on the shelf, together with making the turfcutters work efficiently on hill and dale rather than on flat land, Mark used his contacts to gain the new firm’s first agency: Risboro’ Turf becoming synonymous with Ryan in Bucks, Berks and Oxon. The rest is history, for the company wrote its own success story and other agencies followed. Winning the Jacobsen agency was another milestone and it is with some pride that Mark looks back now to those days in the early 1980s when he became one of only two original Jacobsen dealers (now area distributors) to maintain an unbroken connection to the present day.

On the road covering BB&O single-handed, Mark soon became aware that there were bigger fish to catch, a customer demand waiting to be met for tractors, hollow-tiners, tee mowers and the like.

Soon Iseki and Beaver were added and gradually the company took other agencies on board, building up a sound business which today supplies – and services with great efficiency – a complete range of fine turfcare products.

That is the secret of success for Risboro’ Turf, the efficiency with which they sell and service, for Mark believes that service is the key to their acceptance in the market place. The business is split between golf courses (they call on every greenkeeper in the three counties and count on something like 98% as customers) and local authorities, together with an increasing growth in the domestic market, having won the Honda agency from fierce competition.

The company has recently moved into manufacturing, rising to the bait of numerous requests to supply something similar to the old Pattisson/Sarel roller for greens aeration, but a machine-mounted version that could be hauled behind a Cushman or compact trac-

tor rewarding. I’ve seen to it that those things I and my fellow dealers don’t like about the way some business is conducted are conspicuous by their absence in our ethical involvement as a manufacturer. For example, I know all my agents personally and we are not out to carve each other to pieces, rather we’re out there to conduct sensible business and sell the right product. Equally, our warranty claims are handled without so much as a squeak, no matter what. To be honest, I think the dealer very often gets a rough deal and I aim to see that my dealers don’t – it’s that simple!”

Being conscious of one’s responsibilities, proud of one’s achievements and craving to get things right is something that Mark is vehement about. Having discussed the approach to responsibility and seen how they are ‘getting things right’, pride is paramount in their most recent achievement, being only the second in the country in their specialised business to gain

and riding not just any old machine, but his beloved 1991 Harley-Davidson Sturgess, a giant of a machine which is his way of blowing away the cobwebs of everyday life. Not content to be a ‘biker’ alone, he’s influenced others in the company to follow suit – or did they convince him? – and the workplace is awash with gleaming and delicious two-wheeled monsters. I drooled over three stunning Harley’s in Mark’s garage, his own, Lynn’s (finished in a strident shocking pink), and co-director Richard’s, all 1340 powered. Together they like nothing better than to ride to mainland Europe for the annual Harley ‘thrash’, their destination this year being Milan.

Mark’s greenkeeping connection goes back to the old days of EIGGA – with an involvement in section affairs through local secretary Seve Schmitz. Enamoured by the sight of a huge Jacobsen trophy on Seve’s mantle, Mark learned that it was competed for by greenkeepers regionally and nationally, the overall winner going to the USA. As a Jacobsen dealer Mark sought involvement; and in splitting the event away from being a routine section meeting they’ve sponsored a BB&O tournament ever since, even though the national event is no more. “To sum it up”, Mark told me, “I’ve always thought it right to put something back into the heart of our business – the greenkeeper – which readily explains why I’m a Gold Key supporter. It is an indication of our absolute commitment to them. Finally, as a further commitment to improving professionalism, we have plans to open a training room in the winter, for greenkeepers to spend four or five hours with us and perhaps join us for lunch, give them a chance to gain hands-on experience with state-of-the-art machinery – maybe on how to set up the latest cylinder mower or groomer – and meet local reps and machinery specialists for an informal exchange of views”.

Roy Kates had primed me to expect an individualist and a free-thinker and I was not disappointed – I came away conscious of the commitment this man and his young team put into everything they touch. The greenkeeping profession in Bucks, Berks and Oxon can rest easy, Mark Barthelmie has his finger firmly on their pulse. It is beating vigorously.



‘To be honest, I think the dealer very often gets a rough deal and I aim to see that my dealers don’t – it’s that simple’

tor to cover greens at some speed. Using skills learned at Rycot Wood College, Mark slipped into mechanical engineering mode to develop prototypes which, constantly developed and improved, have proved most successful in production, selling in rewarding numbers. Indeed, so successful has this venture been that they have appointed some 15 dealers countrywide to handle the demand.

I’ve never met a businessman that at some time didn’t have a tub to thump or an irritation that needed airing. Mark is no exception. Choosing his words carefully, he described his particular ‘tub’ as that of being “constructively critical of the way some manufacturers handle themselves and how they conduct their business”. He continued, “I’m outspoken and always have been, which is not surprising because we are at the receiving end – in a direct firing line from manufacturer and end user alike – and this is one of the reasons why getting into manufacturing has been

the coveted BS5750. “We wanted to be at the front of the queue because we are critical of ourselves and the way we do things. I’m always inviting input from staff and clients alike and we make a point of asking our customers what they like (or don’t like) about our business. The BS5750 has proved a great sharpener, getting effect systems into place for us to cope with constructive criticism – in truth, we get very few complaints and I’m planning to keep it that way!”

In these ‘Gold Key’ interviews the stock question that often throws a subject is ‘what makes you tick?’ It’s surprising how many business tycoons ramble on at length about their industry, never at a loss for words, yet at the thought of talking about themselves they become tongue-tied. Not so our Mr B, who’s eyes positively lit up as without hesitation he replied, “I love my motorbikes, they keep me sane!” I said he was unconventional, and to prove the point he went into a reverie about the joys of owning