



Ransomes' chief executive Peter Wilson (pictured above) explains how the company has gone from red to black since he and new chairman John Clement took over a year ago

FROM RED TO BLACK TO GOLD

M E M B E R



**BIGGA
GOLDEN KEY
CIRCLE 1995**

Ransomes has been cutting more than grass during the past 12 months. Its workforce has been cut by 12%, several senior management positions have been eliminated, and the American head office and warehouses in America, France and Germany have been closed.

Ransomes, Europe's leading manufacturer of grass cutting machinery, has been ill for several years, culminating in a loss of £8.9m last year. But chairman John Clement, who took over in October '93, says the company is now "out of intensive care".

With the cuts and a rationalisation programme, a new leaner, fitter company has emerged, bringing with it a host of new, competitively priced products. So the future looks healthy for the company that made the world's first lawn mower way back when the French Revolution was making the headlines (1832).

The problems started in '89 when Ransomes paid around £95m for Cushman Ryan. As Europe's no1, the \$140m per

annum US market was an obvious area for expansion. Also by getting in there, it would open the door to other markets such as South East Asia where American architects rule, specifying machines they're familiar with at home. Buying the Cushman and Ryan brands, leaders in their sectors of the market, instantly made Ransomes a major player in the US market.

"So they did the right thing, in my opinion," says group chief executive Peter Wilson, who joined Ransomes a year ago, "But they paid a high price."

The high price wouldn't have been a problem if they'd done something with the brands. But they didn't.

Then the recession hit and Ransomes lost £12.6m in three years.

A boardroom shake-up saw former Unigate and Littlewoods director John Clement take over as chairman and ex-BTR and Northumbrian Water executive Peter Wilson replace Bob Dodsworth as chief executive.

They quickly and dramatically turned things around. In the first six months of this year turnover rose 14% to £102.1 million and profit was up to £11 million.

"We took out the very expensive top layer of management (including the managing director, finance director, US president and vice presidents) and promoted people from within," says 49-year-old Mr Wilson. "The

amazing thing is the success we've had so far this year has all been achieved without recruiting any new people. So it's really like taking the lid off the pot and allowing people to express themselves."

Another amazing thing is that this success has been achieved before many of Ransomes' latest products have made a contribution. Although many of these products - such as the lightweight Fairway 250 and all-electric E-Plex triple greens mower - were in the pipeline, the new team have speeded up product development and new product introductions. "So there are a lot of good new things still to give us a good contribution," Mr Wil-



son points out, adding: "And we've got a lot more products in the pipeline. This coming year is going to be a very, very good year for us in terms of new products."

One of the new products, due to be launched at the '95 GCSSA show in San Francisco, is a walk-behind mower for the American market. Apparently American superintendents prefer wider machines with horseshoe-shaped handles and more aggressive bedknives.

This machine, like its other products, has been produced by listening to end users, distributors and dealers. Asking them if their needs are changing, if they have any problems or suggestions.

"We try not to develop a product unless people want it. It used to be that our development was engineer or manufacture-driven. Now it is definitely customer driven. So before we start we take a lot of notice of what people want us to put into machines."

Once they have consulted with greenkeepers and dealers about what machines or features they would like to see, Ransomes builds a prototype. This is shown to groups of greenkeepers and their comments are noted. A pre-production batch is then built and demonstrated before the product goes into production.

At Ransomes' factories in England and the USA they use Computer-based Numerically Controlled (CNC) machine tools of different types for accurate and economic machining of components. These CNC tools include memory-learning robots and flexible machining centres, capable of self-diagnosis and unmanned running.

High-tech gear is also used in the development of products,

including Computer Aided Design and computer-controlled test rigs which operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week so that components and machines can be subjected to a lifetime's wear in a matter of months.

"There is no doubt that new technology has speeded up the process of introducing Ransomes products to the market place. It has increased the versatility of design and manufacture and been an immeasurable aid to improving cost-efficiency," according to Chris Macgowan, the commercial division's sales and marketing director.

'We're pleased to be involved with BIGGA and support them'

But do these improvements in cost efficiency mean cheaper products, we wondered?

"We offer value for money. Too often we see people looking at two machines and saying 'Ah, this one's a much lower cost'. My answer is 'Yes, but this one (the Ransomes) has got a lot more benefits'," says Mr Wilson.

Which is why their machines can be seen at many of the top courses, including Augusta National and The Belfry.

And the new products are attracting a great deal of interest from clubs which have traditionally bought other brands. The super quiet E-Plex which draws power from eight 6-volt batteries is certainly attracting a lot of

interest from clubs in resort and residential areas and there is a back order of 200 machines in the US. With 40 years experience of electric vehicles at Cushmans to take advantage of, Ransomes is well placed to lead the way with other electric machines.

Peter Wilson also believes Ransomes is setting the industry standard with its Fairway 300, Groom Master bunker raker, Ryan aeration equipment and Cushman Turf Truckster.

"One of the criticisms of Ransomes in the past was we didn't have a full range of golf equipment. Now we do. I think now we have the newest and the most innovative, most up-to-date range of golf equipment of any company in the world," says the 22-handicap Hexham GC member.

In the UK they claim to have 35-40% of the golf market. In the US they have just 1%. "But with the new machines I think we can take a very large percentage of that market," comments Mr Wilson.

This new-found optimism sees Ransomes moving back from a silver key member of the Greenkeeper Education and Development Fund to a Golden Key member, alongside business rivals Hayters, Jacobsen and Lely UK Ltd.

"We're pleased to be involved with BIGGA and support them. We are THE British company and we think it's right that we should have as strong a position as we can. The stronger the financial position of the company the more we are able to do."

As long as they don't run ads like they used to when they launched the world's first lawn mower. The copy for that machine stated: "This machine is so easy to manage that persons unpractised in the art of mowing may cut the grass... with ease"; "...more than double the work may be done with the same manual labour that is requisite with the scythe."

Support grows for Golden/Silver Key Circles

BIGGA's Education and Development Fund goes from strength to strength. New members for 1995 already include Amenity Technology and Rhône Poulenc as Golden Key members and the Association's insurance brokers, Fenchurch, as a Silver Key member. Additionally Ransomes have announced that they will be upgrading their membership from Silver to Golden Key status (see opposite).

Commented executive director, Neil Thomas: "This is great news and significant in the fact that the fund is now beginning to have a major impact as knowledge of it spreads and greenkeepers are beginning to receive practical benefits to assist in their education and training.



"Our plans for 1995/96 include developing a local training initiative with two day residential courses planned for our regions. These will only be possible through the ongoing growth of the Education and Development Fund. The fund is now three years old and with the pending announcement of additional company members for 1995, it is clearly of major significance for the future training of greenkeepers. With continuing industry support from our Golden and Silver key members, greenkeepers can look forward with optimism to the development of training opportunities which would not have been possible without the establishment of the fund".

The fund currently has 11 members. In the past this money has been used for videos, such as 'Raising the Standard in Spray Application' and 'Keeper of the Green' (in conjunction with the GTC), and for the 'On Course Field Guide for Major Diseases and Pests of Fine Turf'.

We would like to see just the one show

Ransomes would like to see one show for the turfcare industry. But while BIGGA and the IoG continue with their shows Peter Wilson says Ransomes will continue to support them, and he made it clear Ransomes do not intend exhibiting at the new show proposed by P&O Events.

"Ransomes would like to see one show for the industry, one show we can support in a big way rather than having to support a number of shows to a lesser extent. But while these various shows are in existence we need to spread our resources to be in them." He stressed, however, this does not include the new show.