

Watermation has undergone some major changes in the past 18 months as Scott MacCallum found out when he visited one of the latest companies to join BIGGA's Golden Key programme.

Watermation has been a name synonymous with golf irrigation since installing its first fully automatic system at Sundridge Park in Kent over 27 years ago. It is the company's proud boast that almost every Open Championship venue which possesses automatic irrigation has a Watermation system.

It is a record of which any company would be proud but, under new ownership and management introduced at the beginning of 1996, the company is now looking ahead to greater success rather than harbouring any thoughts of resting on its laurels.

"Over the years Bill Hawthorn and Robin Sitwell built up a superb brand name," explained Managing Director Ray Lewis, of the two original founders of the company. "Go to almost any golf course in the country and you'll get some sort of indication of Watermation's influence. We've got a very good and a very loyal client base," explained Ray, who showed his own prowess on the golf course by captaining Watermation's team to victory on BIGGA's 10th anniversary golf day.

Ray bought into Watermation when both Bill and Robin expressed a desire to wind down from the rigours of running the company and, as well as a shrewd business brain, Ray has brought a brand of enthusiasm and drive to the company which has seen major changes in the last 18 months.

"The first thing the managers and I did was have a brain storming session which lasted 12 hours during which ideas, potential improvements and criticisms were aired. These were all fed into a computer by everyone independently so no-one knew where they had come from. Everyone knew what the problems were but no-one wanted to admit to them. That's not uncommon.

"By the end we were all absolutely exhausted but I had a hit list of what needed to be done," said Ray.

The principle objective highlighted was a need to regain Watermation's original market.

One of the first tasks was to put in place a sales team and a Production Manager, both of which were new to the company.

"We had been a reactive rather than a proactive company. Sales were generated by phone calls which came in. That was it in terms of getting business. I saw it as extremely positive that the company achieved the level of business which it did without a sales force or a production manager," said Ray.

Next we needed to look at the sourcing of components for the Watermation product range.

"I thought it would be better if we bought our parts from a number of suppliers and not just one."

Since those initial changes were put in place the company has benefited immensely.

"We have made tremendous progress. We have grown by around 35% on a year on year basis and our staffing level has risen from 45 to 65," explained Ray.

Included in that number are four installation teams who, together with two long estab-



Watermation A company

lished and highly regarded sub-contractors, ensure that the company's commitment to quality is consistent.

"We've gone out to recruit people who have a greenkeeping background and who know what they are doing on a golf course. We spent a lot of time last year finding these people and training them," Ray explained.

"Most of the work we do is upgrades although we also do completely new systems. We sell anything from something worth a couple of pounds to others worth as much as half a million."

Another area which is receiving the Ray Lewis attention is the service division.

"We have half a dozen qualified engineers who are on the road continually and we are going to spend more time on our maintenance activity. That will be one of our key strategic moves for the next 12 months."

While ensuring that the home market is not neglected Watermation is researching possible markets in Europe.

"We've got to find a formula which enables

us to do business in Europe and to do that we must do a thorough research into the opportunities. We want to do that before we commit our investment," explained Ray, as we sat in the Aldershot Headquarters of the company.

Richard Pocock, as European Contract Sales Manager and Training Manager, is the man charged with researching the business opportunities outside the UK.

"In America we are not seen in the same profile as some of the other companies but in Europe we operate on a level playing field," he explained.

"We provide what we feel is needed out in the market place. We listen to what our customers want and design their systems accordingly," explained Richard, an Australian whose irrigation experience has taken him all over the world.

Watermation produced an extensive "Mission Statement" at the beginning of the new regime. An internal document, it outlines the aims of the company and the way it intends achieving them. Training looms large throughout.

The company has embarked on a programme whereby every individual undergoes





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some form of training whether it be internal based product training, working under the NVQ system for customer service on which around a dozen people are working at the moment or advanced sales management training.

"We identified that there was a bit of a gap in the greenkeeping industry in its knowledge of irrigation," explained Ray.

"Richard is engaged in a training needs analysis, part of which is talking to BIGGA, part of it is talking to colleges and part of it is talking to greenkeepers so that we can get an overall idea of what help we, as a supplier, can give in that respect," said Ray.

"We stood back and took the decision that as a large player in the industry we ought to be part of BIGGA's Golden Key sponsorship programme," explained Ray.

Watermation claims a unique place in the irrigation industry as the only company which manufactures its own components, designs and installs the system and maintains the whole system. Last year, amid all the other progress, it was decided to move away from being a company which purely sold impact drive sprinklers to become a company which

would offer the customer a choice.

"I don't see too many changes in the fundamental mechanical product in the future but where I do see a change is on the electronic side. I am sure there are a lot of things where we can learn from other industries and apply them to this area," said Ray.

Watermation may suffer in comparison with the larger companies when it comes to investment potential but they have hit on an innovative way around that shortcoming.

"We, as a company, are too small to invest a great deal in research and development so with that in mind we have linked up under the Government's Teaching Companies Scheme with the University of Reading. The University provides us with access to all of the facilities and a graduate who can work on research for us.

"It's another example of us thinking 'outside the box' and coming up with a way in which we, as a small company, can compete and develop."

One of the string of new employees to Watermation is Phil Langdon, the Contract Sales Manager.

"A major benefit we offer to the customer a

total service concept. If they ring us we can handle all their needs. I also believe being a British company gives us an advantage.

"We can react quickly and also tailor product to suit the customers' needs throughout the UK," explained Phil.

The Contract Sales Department splits the UK into three with each area having its own salesman and design engineer.

"That way the customer gets to know his engineer and build a long term relationship with him."

The man who heads up the new sales team is Joe Turner, the Distribution Sales Manager.

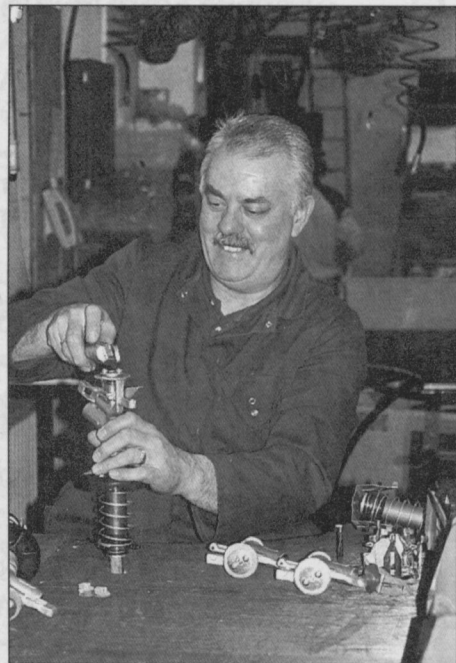
"I have a team of four professional salesmen who have been chosen for their industry expertise. They are the Watermation ambassadors out on the road and responsible for promoting all aspects of Watermation's services.

"The irrigation industry has had a very reactive approach in the past and the only time the customer has seen someone is when the system developed a fault.

"We have developed a more pro-active approach and call on golf clubs as part of our routine. After all the irrigation system is probably the largest single investment the club has to make outside of the clubhouse and the course itself so it makes sense for us to show an interest in them," explained Joe, who added that his team are all linked to the head office by laptop computer and e-mail.

"Every call that we make to a golf club is logged onto our database and with communication being such a vital part of any successful business, everyone in the company has access to the information within hours of a call being made," said Joe.

The pace at which Watermation is putting its new strategies into practice, allied to an attention to detail and refusal to accept second best, is a credit to everyone at the company and should ensure a rosy future for one of the best known names in the industry.



Production work at Watermation HQ