

Scott MacCallum travelled east to visit Bailey's of Norfolk, a newcomer to Golden Key sponsorship, and found a company which is setting new standards.

On one particular day back in the late 80s Alan Bailey set off, from his base in Norfolk, for Surrey with the aim of selling his own brand of top dressing.

He called on 14 golf clubs in one day, taking care to establish directions to and the name of the Course Manager or Head Greenkeeper of the next club on the list before moving on. At some clubs he didn't meet his intended target so left his card, a brochure and a sample before moving on to the next.

By the time he had returned home to Hevingham, close to Norwich, there were orders from 12 of the 14 clubs already at the office.

From that encouraging start Bailey's of Norfolk has grown to become one of the principal suppliers of top dressing to the golf industry with clients from as far afield as Scotland in the north and Plymouth in the south.

It is a success of which the family firm is particularly, and rightly, proud and this year Bailey's of Norfolk has taken another major step by becoming one of BIGGA's Golden Key sponsors donating money to the Association's Education and Development Fund.

So what persuaded Alan Bailey to make that trip to Surrey?

"I could see that golf was a part of the leisure industry which was poorly served by top dressing suppliers and I also knew that it was a sport which had huge potential, especially with the advent of golf coverage on the television," explained Alan, who prior to that had been in the top soil industry since 1976.

"I did my own market research and found that the demand for top dressing was not being met. Clubs were being told they couldn't be supplied for six weeks. There is no industry in the capitalist society where you can do that because there is soon someone who will move in. We moved in and filled the void.

"I considered Surrey to be the Stockbroker belt and that it was the wealthiest part of the country and so the best place to start."

It proved a very wise choice. In that first year Bailey's turned over £212,000 in the golf industry and supplied around 60 golf clubs.

"We went from a nil turn over to quarter of a million in one year," recalled Alan.

That signalled an expansion of the company which had previously consisted of just Alan and

Setting the standards



Soil scientist John Farrell at work



his son Adrian and initially it caused a few problems.

"There were so many lorries coming through the village with raw materials and leaving with the finished product we ran into difficulties with the planning authorities."

However a public inquiry, a move to a new 33 acre site half a mile from the original site six

years ago and a half million pound investment in a huge 15 bay building saw the company well placed to make the massive strides that it has.

"We have the capacity and planning consent to treble our output. In effect we are only currently operating at between 30% and 35% of our potential.

"We have our future guaranteed here. We do not comprehend, and would consider it physically impossible, to produce turf dressings or other products using the careful husbandry quality control methods we employ if we moved away from this plant," affirmed Alan.

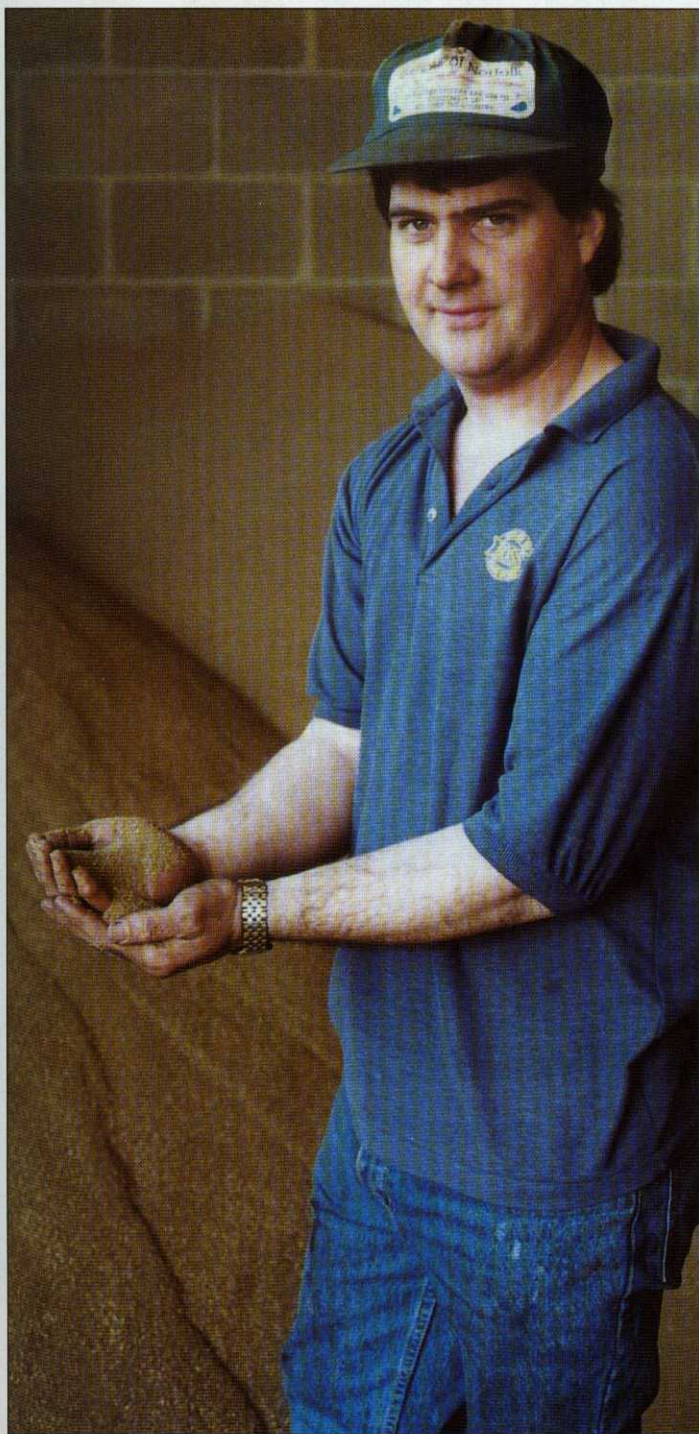
"We only manufacture turf dressings - TD1 and TD2 - that are produced with the natural

resources of the area. We have indigenous sources of lovely lime free sand and vast supplies of Norfolk fen soils and the indigenous Norfolk sandy loam which we can make into divot mixes and fairway dressings. It really is a lovely unique product with a very low clay content."

They can also counter any criticism that being "out in the sticks" in Norfolk they cannot compete with more centrally based competitors.

"If someone were to call now from Plymouth wanting a load we would have it to them by the time they start work tomorrow morning," said Alan having first checked the clock and found it to be reading 12.10pm.

"We can deliver within 12



Adrian Bailey who, with his father Alan, founded Bailey's of Norfolk

hours anywhere in the country. We have an excellent relationship with the haulage companies we use and it is probably quicker and cheaper than if we had our own vehicles," said Alan, before revealing that the bill for haulage would this year be over £400,000.

Despite its growth Bailey's still remains very much a family firm. The production staff of six is headed by Adrian as Production Manager/Partner and Alan's wife Mary runs the office. Alan's best friend from his youth also works for the company.

It was as a family that 12 months ago they discussed the future strategy of the company.

"The options were to continue to supply the existing demand or

to plough a lot more money into the business and become 100% professional and sell 100% professional product which would meet the highest standards.

"I spoke with various agronomists and learned more about the industry and which way it was going. We then decided to produce all of our products to USGA guidelines."

To achieve this aim soil scientist, John Farrell, a graduate in Natural Resource Management was employed on a full time basis from the middle of last year.

"When I arrived here all I had was an empty room and in the first four months I set up the laboratory. I want to be able to set up more tests for things like compaction and porosity and we are

'We also offer a service to our customers whereby we test samples from their course so we can give them independent reports what their problems are or are likely to become'

just getting the equipment for them in now," explained John.

His arrival has enabled Bailey's to be totally confident that whatever is sent out through the gates is of the highest possible quality.

"Everything is tested on a daily basis. Each bay holds 200 tonnes and I take 10 samples from each one. The replication ensures that the analysis is representative of the dressing in that bay. The samples are then analysed, tests include particle size distribution, pH, organic matter content, permeability and porosity.

In an industry where an inferior product might not produce a problem for three or even five years it is sometimes difficult to persuade the purchaser away from products that do not meet our stringent specification but are nevertheless easy to apply.

Alan and John are keen to ensure that greenkeepers do not have problems which are stored up for the future.

"Each load which leaves our plant goes out with a full specification sheet which the greenkeeper is encouraged to file away and keep.

That is his guarantee that he bought the right stuff for the job.

"We are producing a product which is as tightly controlled as is possible in this country," explained Alan.

"We are embarking on a course to be registered by ISO 9002 so our current laid down laboratory procedures will be under constant scrutiny. We should have achieved this within the next three months," he added.

"We welcome the fact that people can take samples and have them independently cross checked whenever they wanted," confirmed John.

"We also offer a service to our customers whereby we test samples from their course so we can give them independent reports what their problems are or are likely to become.

"I believe that if the USGA specification with regard to porosity, capillary action and particle size distribution were to be adopted

universally in the production of turf dressings and root zones the long term future of golf courses would be safeguarded. There are things within the industry which make me concerned but obviously companies which do produce quality products have nothing to worry about."

It is with the aim of becoming more involved in the industry and assisting greenkeepers wherever possible which persuaded Bailey's to become Golden Key sponsors.

"Golden Key was something which we discussed and we believed that BIGGA's objectives with regard to maximising the knowledge of members for the benefit of the turf are compatible with our views," explained Alan.

"If we are going to work to a standard we want the greenkeepers to be aware of what we are trying to achieve and what the benefits will be. That way the industry can move forward together," said John.

With Golden Key membership bringing a higher profile for Bailey's of Norfolk the company will no doubt continue its growth and Alan Bailey will continue to travel up and down the country on the kind of sortee which brought him so much success as when he first visited Surrey.

"The majority of my customers are also friends and I want to support this industry as much as I can. I think it has a huge future particularly if industry standards can be set and met by everyone and the speculative amateurs and their inferior products are driven out."

