

From mangles and tights to laptops and bytes...

RiteFeed has come a long way since its early days but BIGGA's latest Golden Key Sponsor is still progressing at great pace.

It would perhaps go down as one of the more unusual conversation topics for a dinner party but when John Walker and Richard Lawrence got onto the subject of cow slurry during one such memorable occasion 11 years ago it resulted in the birth of a company which has not looked back since.

Eight years after the launch of RiteFeed Richard, a man with 22 year's experience of the industry as Marketing Director for Rigby Taylor and National Accounts Manager for Rhône Poulenc, was persuaded by John to join the company. Between then and now RiteFeed has grown to 15 times the 1994 size.

"I would hope that we at least double the size of the company next year and continue to double it year on year," revealed Richard.

"That means that next year the company won't be 15 times the size it was when I started but 30 times the size."

To help make that possible RiteFeed has been recruiting its sales force covering the country - Robert Bruce in Scotland; Brian Mainwaring in the North West; Alan Cordingley in the North East and John McCully in London.

The company may never have been launched at all if it hadn't been for that dinner party back in 1986.

Richard explained the background to the bizarre tale.

"John's family rent out some farms which they own and over dinner at my house one night I told him that we were selling cow slurry. When I told him the price he just couldn't believe it - it was more expensive than petrol but they had been just tipping the stuff away."

The beginnings of the company are a typical example of the heroic "Heath Robinson" methodology which has been at the root of many a successful British innovation.



The Rite stuff: John Walter, Brian Mainwaring and Richard Lawrence



"John started off with a mangle and a pair of lady's tights," revealed Richard.

"He filled the tights with cow slurry and put them through the mangle to force out the liquid. Unfortunately the tights exploded and John got covered.

"Things have changed a lot since then and now we offer what I believe is the most technically advanced product on the market."

It is through this insight into the early days of RiteFeed that you realise why John says, "I just can't believe the success that the company has enjoyed since we launched. There is a tremendous difference now to when we started."

Much of the success of the company is down to an ability to listen to the customer and cater for what he wants.

"Everything we do is led by the customer. I think the trade has been wrong for a number of years in going into golf courses and saying, 'This is what we offer'. We have changed that totally by going into golf courses and saying, 'What do you need?' There is a massive difference between these statements," said Richard. "The majority of the good new products we've launched have come from ideas from greenkeepers and Course Managers. They come to us, for example, and say they've got a problem and that they believe it to be sulphur. So then we work on that and end up with a product."

RiteFeed has a product list of 12 but the vast proportion of the business is specially formulated for each golf course. From a production base in Preston, Lancashire, the company have the capacity to produce enough product to service 10% of the market with the scope to double produc-

tion if required.

"It is a very efficient process which John has developed," said Richard.

The sophistication now employed is a league away from merely grading the product through a range of 7 to 40 denier tights.

"We have developed a way of putting nitrogen, phosphate and potash into the product. It's a secret method and we're very proud of it.

"We also give a choice of source or nitrogen so customers can have fast or slow release of ammonium nitrate, very slow release with methidine urea or anything in the middle," explained Richard, who added that they have also found a way of keeping the microbes in the product live through to the application stage.

"If the Course Manager says he wants an 8-0-6 with iron we make him an 8-0-6 with iron. We make whatever they want whether it is on our catalogue or not."

Together with Gleneagles, RiteFeed has also developed a computer programme into which they

'We can do a full year's programme for a greenkeeper in about 25 minutes'

can feed a golf courses soil analysis and it will give the ideal fertiliser for every hole on the course.

"We can do a full year's programme for a greenkeeper in about 25 minutes," explained Richard, who added that he reckoned RiteFeed do more soil analysis through the STRI than any other company.

"A number of Course Managers have asked me to take the computer and show the Greens Chairman - we'll never speak to anyone without the Course Manager's approval. Often a committee will have no idea how complex it is to run a golf course and the problems which face the Course Manager every day. The computer shows the situation in a very graphic way and highlights why problems exist and, importantly, what is being done to solve them.

"Course Managers are often criticised for things that are frequently beyond their control and that annoys me."

The delicate balances that are required can be illustrated by one of RiteFeed's clients.

"We actually have one course which has 18 different mixes for

18 different greens. That's rare but you might find a need for three different mixes and do six greens with each mix.

"What golfers look for is consistency and if it takes a range of tailored formulas to achieve it that is what should happen," said Richard.

It is in answer to the question "Why do you think liquids are still a smaller proportion of the market than granules?", that Richard drops the baton in the Modesty Olympics.

"Because I haven't been to every golf club yet!" To be fair to him he did follow it up with a laugh.

He does, however, extol the virtues of liquid with all the zeal of a prophet.

"If you've paid £100 for a round of golf you don't want to putt over granules, you want the course to be magnificent but you want them to feed it some other day. But at most courses there is play every day of the year. With a liquid you can spray the course and play on it half an hour later and no-one would even know. It's also much faster to apply."

Warming to his theme he continues.

"If you think about it a granule is ineffective anyway. No grass plant has teeth so it can't chew a granule and eat it. The only way a grass plant can take up a granule is if it turns it to liquid first.

"I'm firmly convinced that the days of the granule are finished. If you apply an 8-0-0 granule you are putting on 8% nitrogen and the other 92% is filler," said Richard who claims a 90% conversion rate when he visits golf courses.

"The only limitation was until recently I was effectively the only salesman."

RiteFeed took the unusual decision not to use a distributor network to promote its products.

"Our product is highly technical and highly complex and it doesn't fit into a distributors normal catalogue. They were unable to stock it in large quantities because they didn't know what the customer was going to want. We have to be very flexible and unfortunately the distributor system doesn't allow for that," explained Richard.

"So we took the decision to go direct and instead host golf days which we organise including

some at Gleneagles and The Belfry.

"I've heard people in the trade say 'How can RiteFeed afford these things?' The simple answer is that we use the money we would have paid the distributors to pay for these events. We find that every efficient."

Becoming a Golden Key sponsor and contributing to BIGGA's Education and Development Fund is just part of RiteFeed's overall involvement with the Association.

"Between John and myself we have a number of year's experience in the trade and in that time we have known and appreciated how influential BIGGA is. It is important that greenkeepers speak with a unified voice and BIGGA has enabled this to happen and done a massive amount to benefit greenkeepers and we want to be involved," explained Richard who added that John is currently President of the North West Section.

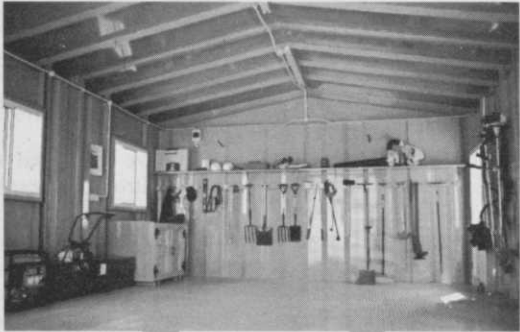



"Greenkeepers and Course Managers are our livelihood and without them we would have no business. We will continue to support them and their association," he added.

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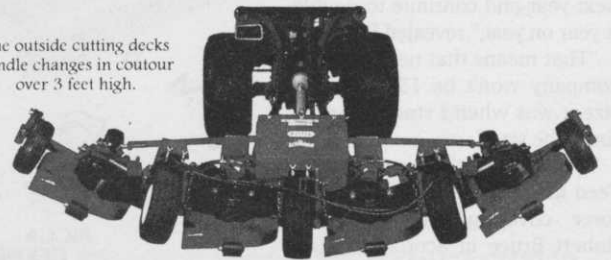
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