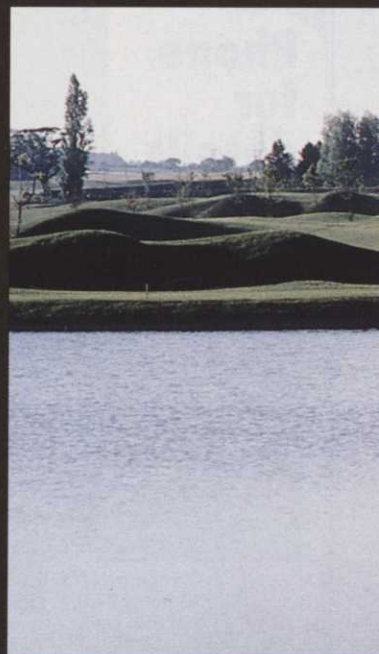


Rain Bird has made a big impression since it flew into the British market. The company has now become a BIGGA Golden Key Supporter.

The Rain Bird has landed



When Clement and Mary LaFetra began producing the world's first impact sprinkler in Los Angeles in the 1930s they turned to Native American Indian legend for the company name.

The story goes that hundreds of years ago a terrible drought befell the land. Crops withered, watering holes dried up and for an entire generation there was no relief. Everyone but the children gave up hope of there ever being rainfall again when one day a great bird overheard the children's prayers, flew to the heavens and returned with life-giving rain.

There have been times in the recent past when Britain's greenkeepers have also prayed for rain but now that Rain Bird, for that is the company in question, has begun to make a significant impact in the British irrigation market, a reliance on natural intervention is

not always quite so vital.

The legendary Rain Bird is incorporated into the company logo and must guarantee that it wins the prize for the most romantic and appropriate company name in the industry.

Rain Bird's decision to become more involved in the British market in recent years has been followed by the company becoming a BIGGA Golden Key supporter.

"We felt that we had come a long way in the last two years. We are now becoming a recognised brand name in the UK with more and more people buying our product and we felt that we should give something back to the greenkeepers," explained Victor Jamieson, Area Manager for UK and Ireland.

"We thought the best way to do that was through BIGGA by becoming a Golden Key supporter and donating to the Education and Development Fund," he added.

Such involvement is not unique as Rain Bird was also one of the two founding sponsors of the Environmental Steward Award run with the GCSAA.

While it was the LaFetras who formed Rain Bird back in 1935, the patent for the first sprinkler, a spring-activated impact sprinkler, was awarded to their

Los Angeles neighbour, Orton Englehardt, a citrus farmer two years before.

Clement and Mary were so taken with the device, a spring-activated impact sprinkler, which was durable and distributed water further, more evenly and more efficiently than existing sprinklers that they arranged with Orton to manufacture the sprinklers in their barn. Thus Rain Bird was formed.

From day one the company focussed on the golf market - the prestigious Los Angeles Country Club was the first golf club to be fitted with its sprinklers - and it has grown to the extent that around 1500 are employed and as well as Los Angeles there are now bases and manufacturing plants in Tucson, in Arizona, and Tijuana, in Mexico. The European Headquarters in France was created 26 years ago. It is a mark of success that Rain Bird products are now used in over 130 countries.

Modifications of that original sprinkler idea was still the mainstay of the company right up until a few years ago with the development of gear driven sprinklers.

"I'd say that up until three years ago we were probably selling about 70% impact to 30% geared but since then the position has been reversed. We've been producing gear driven sprinklers for just about four years now," said Victor, who revealed that the research and development for a new gear driven





sprinkler can be as much as \$5 million.

When Rain Bird first came to the UK they had one main distributor, Rite-Rain, and it was not until three years ago that the decision to go for a larger market share in the UK resulted in a change in the set up.

"It was and is our aim to become market leader in the UK and we're not far off now - if indeed we haven't already achieved it. To that end we looked around and picked out various installers whom we thought would do a good job for us. We now have around ten companies in the UK and Ireland who install our products and three of these are large irrigation led companies, Ocmis - also a BIGGA Golden Key Supporter, MJ Abbott and Arden Lea Irrigation."

Victor is adamant that a good installer is the key to success.

"At the end of the day the irrigation equipment which we supply is only about 20% of the irrigation contract and for us to gain a good reputation we need a good product but we also need good installation and that is something with which we feel we've done very well in the UK."

Rain Bird Installers in the UK receive back-up from both Victor himself and Mark Ganning, the Midlands based Field Service Engineer, who joined the company last August having previously owned his own irrigation company.

"This back-up is reinforced by staff from Rain Bird's European Headquarters in France while I can also talk directly to the relevant engineer in the States via e-mail if we've got a problem."

Among the courses which are now equipped with Rain Bird sprinklers are, Sunningdale, Muirfield, The London Club, The Roxburghe, Mount Juliet, Killarney, Celtic Manor, Forest of Arden, Carden Park, The Brabazon Course at The Belfry as well as the new PGA course there and Ballybunion.

The Rain Bird product line includes pieces which have been designed specifically for the golf course applications with the latest Maxi Nimbus and Maxi Cirrus systems which can be coupled with weather stations for maximum efficiency and precise water application. They can also be controlled remotely from anywhere on the course while they act as an ideal measure of just how far the irrigation industry has come in the last 60 years.

"Because Rain Bird is privately owned it is far easier to communicate with the higher management as there isn't the bureaucracy other corporate companies have to deal with. It also means we don't have to deal with shareholders and can plough more money back into product development and research and that breeds success and gives us a high quality of product," said Victor.

Watching the irrigation market over the past few years Victor has noticed change.

"There are not as many courses being built now as there was in the late '80s and now 90% of our market is retrofit as many older systems become due for replacement," he said while agreeing that more clubs which would previously not have countenanced installing irrigation are now looking at it.

"The entire irrigation market in the UK is just about 20 years old and installations which were installed at the beginning are now coming to the end of their life and clubs are having to look at upgrading and taking advantage of the new technology which is available."

Of course this doesn't come cheap and Victor estimates the average cost for a tees and greens system at around £80,000.

"Tees greens and approaches comes in at around £100,000 with a full fairway system being anything up to £270,000 to £300,000."

Victor also believes that the changes in climate has also had a beneficial effect of the industry.

"In the past irrigation was used as a supplement to rainfall but now the drier summers are beginning to show up the faults in the older systems. Rain used to cover up any mistakes which had been made in the installation but you can't get away with that nowadays," said Victor, who also felt that the water

companies had cried wolf too often about water shortages and that their criticism of irrigation had therefore been devalued.

"It has made more golf clubs think about irrigation. Summers have been getting warmer while, thanks to television, there is greater expectations from members as to what their course should be like."

Looking into a crystal ball Victor sees the industry embracing more reliable and efficient products. "It is a case of trying to take the guess work out of irrigation and much of this development is achieved from feed back we receive from greenkeepers and information as to what they require."

Another look into that crystal ball would probably show that Indian Rain Bird soaring yet higher as more success comes the way of the company which took its name.

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