

Sales and Marketing Manager, James McEvoy, reports on his first visit to the GCSAA Conference and Show, and his first visit to the States.

California dreaming



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Neil Thomas, Jim Fry, Ian McMillan,
Gordon Child, James McEvoy and Marion Child

Having spent a year heavily involved in organising and marketing BTME '98, when Neil Thomas suggested that I travel with the BIGGA party to Anaheim, California, (home of Disneyland and Mickey Mouse) for the GCSAA's annual show, I was delighted to accept.

However, trying to explain to my partner, Julie, that the trip was purely business proved the most arduous task and with only a week between the two shows, it was also a hectic programme. But this provided an opportunity I found difficult to resist, and I would spend a great deal of my time comparing and contrasting the two very different, yet equally successful approaches.

Los Angeles, where the sun always shines, California dreams and all that. Well before we go any further let me tell you, we saw very little sun thanks to the unfriendly weather caused by the infamous El Nino.

Rain, and lots of it, along with storms. No chance of getting my legs tanned in the shorts I'd optimistically packed (I hope Julie doesn't read this). It could have been worse though, it could have snowed at the BTME. I had foolishly assumed that unlike our show which always has one eye on the weather, theirs would be guaranteed clear blue skies. Having said that, it was amusing to watch the CNN weather reports. Oh, how the Americans have a habit of overstating things.

LA is a sprawl, extending for miles in all directions and Anaheim is just one of its many suburbs. With no obvious centre, the area is dominated by Disneyland, and the Disneyland Hotel provides accommodation for visitors to the Magic Kingdom. This was where the BIGGA party stayed for the next eight nights and in fact was one of the designated hotels for the GCSAA's show. Many of the 1000



bedrooms in the hotel were occupied by show attendees. Buses relayed visitors to and from the show on a ten minute rota at peak times. Considering the "awesome" weather (gotta use the lingo), the buses were a major blessing. The charm of Harrogate and the peace of North Yorkshire in comparison seemed more than a million miles away.

The Anaheim Hilton Hotel, just a few minutes walk from the exhibition centre, was the official exhibition hotel and was used for all the

Gala evenings and celebration dinners that were held over the week. The Americans are big on speeches and love to present every last family detail on video in their own inimitable style. Small wonder Jeremy Beadle is in possession of so much hilarious material!

Harrogate, by comparison, is a Conference town. All the hotels are within walking distance; the Majestic Hotel, which is the nerve centre for the BTME, has 156 rooms and is one the largest hotels in Harrogate. Little more than a

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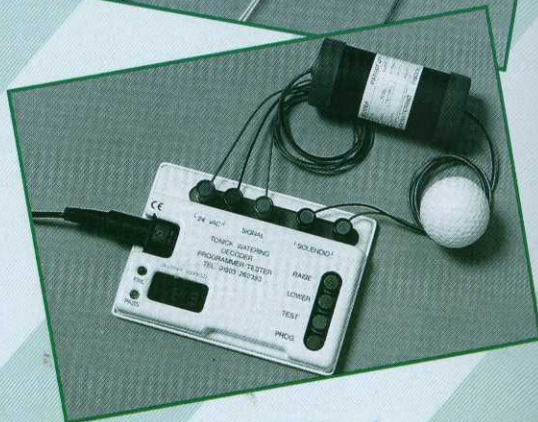
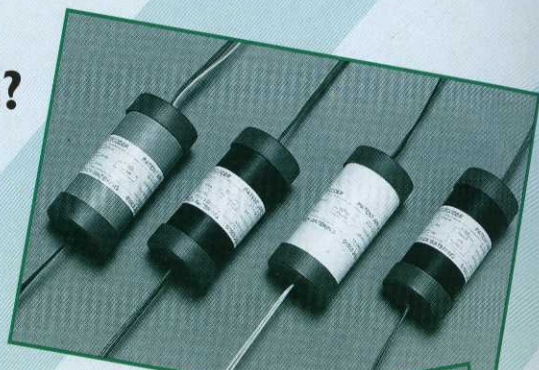
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The BIGGA stand drew plenty of visitors

Travel Lodge in comparison.

The composition of the show was similar to the BTME only bigger, a lot bigger... While GCSAA 98 had approximately 18,000 visitors and 680 exhibitors, BTME had nearly 6,000 visitors and 168 exhibitors which means that the GCSAA show is approximately three times the size of the BTME. Interestingly, the GCSAA has around 18,000 members to BIGGA's 6,500 which again is a ratio of approximately three to one.

The show lasted for two and a half days - the same as the BTME in Harrogate. The main difference is that the GCSAA vary their location each year. Next year the show moves to Orlando and then on to New Orleans for the year 2000. In total there are five different venues visited

never tire of. The success of BTME is partly due to its consistency and professionalism. We work with contractors and organisations who understand our industry, are knowledgeable and well respected by us which provides a continuity I find reassuring. Conversely it could be argued that The GCSAA show has more variety with its different location and cultures and is more dynamic as a consequence.

I had to rely on the experts within our team for their impressions of the technical quality of exhibitor products on demonstration at the show. These were this year's winner of the Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping award, Ian McMillan, the Toro student winner Steven Nixon and runners-up Alan Owen and Christopher Rawlings. They were openly

impressed with what the show had to offer and in particular, Ian McMillan was complimentary about the sheer size and variety of the exhibiting companies.

Also in our party was Gordon Child, BIGGA Chairman, and equally important his hard working and supportive wife, Marion, who is well known among our members. Having been unwell for part of the time at our own BTME, it was a delight having Marion in top form organising us all in Anaheim. I was amazed at how well informed she is on greenkeeping issues and I must express my thanks to both Gordon and Marion for their help and support on the BIGGA stand and for contributing their wealth of knowledge of the Association wherever possible.

At Harrogate this year, the BIGGA stand was 55 metres square and was resourced by a staff of 14 plus the Regional Administrators and Board members. At Anaheim we had a stand measuring three metres square staffed mainly by Neil, myself and Pauline Thompson. Our time was spent responding to questions on all

aspects of the Association including education, membership and sales. Pauline noted a great deal of interest being shown in The Master Greenkeeper Certificate. The stand was also used as a meeting place for many of the "ex-pats" who attended the show, all keen to come and chat over old times and ask after mutual acquaintances. It was interesting to chat with Association Officials from worldwide. It's reassuring to know that despite differing cultures, climates and so on, many similar problems arise in providing for the needs of the membership and it was enlightening to hear their solutions and remedies.

On a personal level, the show enabled me to search out US companies who showed an interest in utilising BIGGA as a marketing vehicle for their own export activities. Many



Gordon Child and Neil Thomas manning the stand

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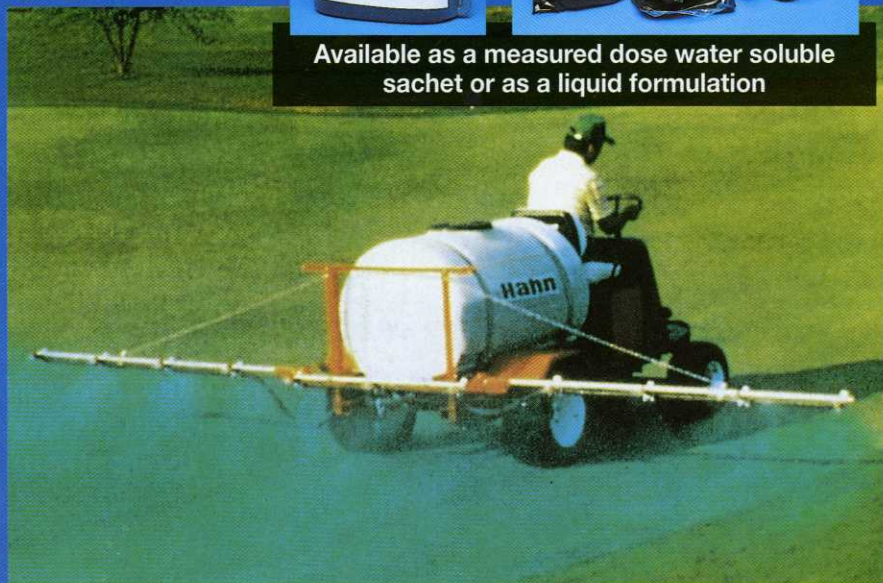
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leads were obtained at the show and these are now being followed up back at Headquarters. BIGGA is the second largest greenkeeping association in the world and our presence at the show is an indication of our commitment, as an international body, to the Fine Turf industry. Hopefully, we can build on the relationships that we have cultivated with our colleagues world-wide as we strive to become a truly International Association.

Peter Jacobsen's speech was, for me, the highlight of the week's evening programme of entertainment. I came away wondering who from the PGA European Tour contingent could articulate with the same eloquence and charisma while maintaining interesting and intelligent conversation as this man. Peter Jacobsen's support of the GCSAA was also admirable and I was left considering how BIGGA might nurture its relationship with the professional playing fraternity.

Watching how the GCSAA organised their show and marketed their Association left me a little bewil-

dered initially. That is, until I realised that they have 105 full time staff, compared to BIGGA who have 14 full time staff. Inevitably, one is left with a greater impression of what they can offer as a consequence. One example of the comparatively huge GCSAA resource available to stage an event was the banquet on the final evening of the show. This is a major event in the GCSAA's calendar (where have I heard that before?). The turn out was excellent (mainly members) and the organisation impressive. The evening is a drawn out affair in comparison to that staged in Harrogate with many more speeches and videos. However, there was a grandeur and professionalism about the evening that was to be admired. For approximately £75 per head, attendees received a pre-show bar and nibbles (perhaps nibbles is the wrong terminology for what seemed to me like a mountainous feast) followed by two hours of speeches from the past, present and the future Chairmen of the GCSAA together with the sponsor. A dinner

with wine followed before finally the night was rounded off with the entertainment for the evening which this year was provided by top Country singer, Trisha Yearwood.

Incidentally, the banquet was sponsored by the Textron group, who have recently acquired Ransomes to add to a portfolio which also includes Jacobsen, E-Z-Go and Iseki.

Finally, who could go to Los Angeles and not find time to visit the array of attractions and entertainment that is on offer. With Disneyland on our door step it was an obvious place to visit, as was Universal Studios which was one of the official trips organised by the GCSAA. It is amazing to see how (mature?) grown men behave when they are put into their natural environment - a playground! Picture the Executive Director, Neil Thomas and Chairman, Gordon Child sitting inside the 'Back to the Future' simulator screaming for their mothers!

Toro Winners
Ian McMillan,
Alan Owen and
Chris Rawlings



Pauline Thompson who can usually be found in the Accounts department at Aldwark was the only casualty of the trip, pulling a neck muscle on the 'Indiana Jones' ride. Pauline recovered quickly enough and was later seen around the shops canoodling with Mickey Mouse. I don't think it was a dream, but I'm certain I saw the Chairman himself being snapped with Spiderman. After Neil's recent rendition of "My ding-a-ling" with Linda Nolan at the BTME Banquet, one could be forgiven for thinking a normal day at the Association is like something from Alice in Wonderland.

Yes, the Americans certainly know how to stage a show, whether it be the GCSAA or Mickey and his friends.

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