



Charterhouse has grown from a company based on a single product to one which offers a full range...

A machinery charter

There can be little argument that the praise the greenkeeping industry has received for its progress over the last 20 years is well deserved.

In that time the sophistication required to produce premier quality golf courses has grown to the stage that it bears comparison with the jump from the pioneering work of the Wright Brothers to the warp power of the Star Ship Enterprise.

Identifying the key developments within those 20 years would obviously take in the formation of BIGGA in 1987 and the huge leap forwards in greenkeeping education, but on the machinery side there is one piece of equipment which could lay claim to being the most significant innovation over the last two decades. That is the vertidrain.

It was introduced into the UK in the early 80s by Charterhouse, a company which since then has been responsible for several other innovative pieces of equipment and grown to the extent that it now offers a product range exceeding 2,000 items. Charterhouse has also just become a BIGGA Golden Key Supporter donating money to the Association's Education and Development Fund.

It is perhaps appropriate that the Haslemere-based company has become a Golden Key supporter because, as Chairman and Managing Director David Jenkins is quick to explain, much of the company's success is down to the improved education and status of the country's greenkeepers.

"We have always recognised that the status of greenkeeping is absolutely vital as the products we sell enhance the golf course but it is imperative to understand agronomy and fine turf maintenance to recognise their importance," explained David, who added that Charterhouse's range covered compaction relief, overseeding, top dressing, scarifying and sweeping.

"These are all things which can be perceived as a nuisance by the average golfer, who doesn't think much beyond the cutting of the green. We wanted the standing of the greenkeeper to improve because, around the early to mid 80s, we discovered that many greenkeepers could understand the benefits of the vertidrain but when they went to the Greens Committee it was a closed book.

"In a lot of cases that the local solicitor, accountant or JP couldn't possibly conceive that their own greenkeeper was also a professional so when he came to the committee proposing that the club buys a sophisticated piece of machinery, costing several thousands of pounds they merely applied their own thinking with no knowledge of agronomy whatsoever."

The Vertidrain was being produced by a Dutch company in the early 80s and when David, along with Philip Threadgold, the Sales Director, set up Charterhouse they took on the franchise in the UK.

"Initially we had to persuade people that a tractor could be driven onto a green with a vertidrain because prior to that greenkeepers didn't even want trolleys on certain parts of the fairway never mind the aprons or surrounds. We had to explain that the vertidrain was taking the compaction out as the trac-

tor was being driven off the green."

The big breakthrough came when Jack McMillan, then at Sunningdale, hired one and used it on the worst piece of fairway he could find.

"He vertidraind about 50 yards and following a particularly dry summer one side of the fairway it was burnt up, the 50 yard stretch was still nice and green because the roots had gone down, and beyond that it was all burnt up again."

That experiment persuaded Jack to buy a vertidrain and he was followed by the Course Managers at some of the finest venues in the country.

"Jack is one of those characters who is so committed and enthused all the time and he was very dynamic in communicating the benefits of the vertidrain to others," recalled David.

"Somehow the vertidrain caught the mood of greenkeeping and we were very fortunate in that respect because, at the same time as we wanted to improve the status of the greenkeeper to help us sell, the leading personalities in greenkeeping were wanting to achieve the same thing."

Originally David and Philip had thought that only contractors would actually purchase vertidrains and then that perhaps the top ten or 20 golf clubs would buy but each year the level of golf club to purchase moved down. Now the market is virtually mature and most clubs have them.

"A club would perhaps hire one for two or three years then discover that the cost of leasing was not that different from hiring and it would enable the club to do the job when it suited rather than having to book the vertidrain two or three months ahead."



Above: David Jenkins and Below: Philip Threadgold



Charterhouse Turf Machinery



Having, as David is first to admit, been "Born of the Vertidrain" he and Philip took the view that Charterhouse shouldn't be a one product company.

"We are both technical people who enjoy being creative and because of the relationship we enjoyed with the greenkeepers we found that they would come to us with ideas.

"One said that he wanted a seeder which actually got the seed into the ground so when we came across a company, again in Holland, which made just such a thing we imported it into the UK and when they stopped making it they allowed us to produce it over here.

"We also found people saying that they needed a top dresser which they could pull behind a tractor so we developed one of those. In fact, we've developed a

whole range of products all focussed on turf maintenance."

That is identified as the second thrust of Charterhouse in which it broadening out into supplying a range of products which complemented the vertidrain.

"We looked for several features which complemented the vertidrain. For instance the vertidrain is a long lasting machine so our machines had to be long lasting. We wanted original features in all our machines, just like the vertidrain, so we didn't get involved in making something unless we could see that there was originality in the new machine."

Charterhouse developed right through the 80s to the stage that when manufacturing became a problem because the whole of British industry was booming and no-one could be persuaded to make the products the company bought a plot of land in Haslemere, moved from Godalming and built a new factory.

Almost as soon as they had moved in, the recession hit, and hit hard.

"Like so many other companies we felt as though we were over-stretched. So we went to Redexim, the Dutch company which had originally developed the vertidrain, who agreed to take an interest in Charterhouse which cushioned us through the difficult times."

Charterhouse has since moved away from manufacturing its own product line and con-

tracted the work out to agricultural manufacturers.

"I met a lot of them when I was President of the Agricultural Engineers Association and they were both geared up for manufacturing on a bigger scale than us and because much of their work was seasonal they were able to offer us a facility outside of their own busy period," explained David.

It was around this time that Charterhouse moved into its third area of involvement.

"Knowing that recessions come in cycles it would be too much to expect that we would have steady growth without any downturns for the next 25 years. It is also easy for people to cross capital items off their budgets and particularly so for a golf club to not bother to buy a particular machine one year. If every golf club did the same it would create a real problem."

The answer was to increase Charterhouse's product portfolio and this they did to the tune of over 2,000 items.

"We talked to our French distributor, which ran a company supplying a whole host of sundry items, and said that now with the Channel Tunnel it was just as easy to transport goods from Paris to Glasgow as it was from Paris to Marseilles so why didn't we operate the catalogue in the UK. This is what we've done," said David, whose links with Holland have given him valuable experience of operating in an international market - "We now quote all our European and Scandinavian distributors in Dutch Guilders so the current high rate of the pound doesn't affect us."

The catalogue is circulated to every golf club in the UK each year

and all orders are administered in Haslemere, shipped out of Paris and delivered within three or four days.

"That completes the three main developments of Charterhouse - first the Vertidrain, secondly our own machinery and thirdly our own consumable products."

Last year the Anglo-Dutch partnership which had been so successful between Charterhouse and Redexim was reinforced when Redexim purchased the remaining Charterhouse shares.

"It made organisational sense because Philip and I now handle both our product lines in North America and Scandinavia respectively while the Dutch do the same in the Far East. It made a good fit and a very good use of our business acumen."

David now thinks "group" and sees the advantages of the new found size.

"I think we will grow to enhance our position of number one in the First Division, with the likes of Ransomes, Toro, John Deere, Jacobsen and Kubota in the Premier Division," said David who is quick to credit his staff and a top quality dealer network for the success the company has enjoyed.

On Golden Key, David reaffirms his belief that some of Charterhouse's success is down to an environment in which BIGGA's members are respected.

"BIGGA's progress has been very impressive and they occupy a key role in creating an environment in which their members become respected, and we felt that we should put something back into the industry. I see it as a long term partnership between ourselves and the Association."

