



Scott MacCallum didn't have far to go to visit Rolawn, BIGGA's newest and nearest Golden Key Supporter

Turf's up



Rolawn's turf is collected via a miracle of modern machinery

As a measure of the progress made by a company, not to say an entire industry, it is interesting to hear the story told by Ken Dawson, Chairman of Rolawn, BIGGA's latest Golden Key Company.

In the mid-70s, not long after Rolawn was founded, Ken was visiting a 10-acre field. But this wasn't just any field. No, this was the field which contained an entire year's worth of production for the company.

When he pulled the gate shut and walked away, the enormity of what was facing the company began to hit home. Just how exactly were they going to sell that much turf?

Now that 10-acre field doesn't represent one morning's work for Rolawn.

As I said. Graphic indicators of just how far a company has come in that short time don't come much better.

"Now we have 800 hectares - 2000

acres - of land in production at any one time," revealed Sales and Marketing Director, Terry Ryan.

Nowadays all the turf is grown in the Vale of York, within easy distance of the Elvington-based Headquarters and not far from BIGGA HOUSE, but that wasn't always the case. The company roots belong to an area which is better known for oil rather than turf production.

Rolawn, which is now the largest turf company in Europe, was originally started on the Aberdeenshire Estate of Lord Forbes, the company's founding Chairman. However, as you might expect for the area around Aberdeen, which is affectionately known as the Granite City, the soil was granity and not ideal for growing turf.

Detailed soil surveys earmarked the Vale of York as the ideal location and the company moved south, although

its registered office has always been retained in Scotland.

"A number of factors have contributed to the successful relocation not least the availability of sufficient quantities of ideal land. Farmers have also become more comfortable with the fact that responsible turf growers do not strip the land and we do actually improve the fertility of the land... We also pay our bills," said Terry.

In addition to the growth of the turf growing industry in terms of size it has also come on leaps and bounds in terms of sophistication.

"Seed mixtures have moved on. Even in the short time I've been in the industry I've seen a huge difference. The quality of the grass sward just gets better and better," said Terry, a man whose ready wit and enthusiasm is known throughout the entire turf industry.

Turf's^{up}

For You



Hang out your washed turf, with Rolawn's wash and go turf

"We took a decision a few years ago not just to publish the cultivars we use but also to show the sown percentages. We print 100% of what we sow."

The arrival into the big time for Rolawn came in 1977 when a well known lawn tennis club ordered turf for several of their courts.

"Up until then the basic concept of high quality cultivated turf wasn't accepted in the UK. It was the pivotal point for us," said Terry.

"At that time there was little in the way of competition in the quality end of the market. There was a turf market involving meadow turf but not an industry as such. It was a very low quality product."

When people discovered what could be done with good quality turf sales rocketed.

"People could see that they could have a domestic lawn, or, in the golf market, a green or tee in play much sooner, much quicker and be much surer of the outcome."

With its Scottish roots, and having started in the golf sector, the Royal and Ancient game has always played a big part in the company's thinking although nowadays it represents only around 15% of its business.

"It is fair to say that every famous golf course in the country has used

Rolawn at some stage or other. We recently supplied 25,000 square metres to Carnoustie while we also sold some washed turf to St Andrews."

"In fact during the last three years we have seen an increasing demand for washed turf and we are responding to this by commissioning a brand new turf washing plant that is due to come into production this spring. We will be able to produce more washed turf than anyone else in the market in both standard and large roll formats."

Rolawn's activities in the golf course sector have helped create business in some of the other bigger markets.

"It is helpful if you are sitting with someone for a housing company, seeking specifications, and you can say you supply Wentworth, St Andrews and Carnoustie. They sit up and take notice. On the back of the golf course market you can push into other markets."

One of these areas is gardening and Rolawn has benefited greatly from the fact that television programmes, like Groundforce and Home Front in the Garden, have brought gardening to the masses - people who would not perhaps have watched the likes of Gardener's World.

With mention of Groundforce, Terry produced a signed photograph of Alan Titchmarsh and the Groundforce team. The one disappointing element of which was the fact that the two most prominent features in it were Charlie Dymock's muddy knees. But that's another matter.

"Charlie came here to see us," he announced with justified pride.

"She was on the back of a turf harvester. You can imagine the tractor driver. We nearly lost him in a ditch! But seriously, the day after garden programmes air the Rolawn phone lines light up."

Most of the gardening programmes get in touch with Rolawn from time to time. "We have a policy of co-operating with them and while we don't get a straight name check we always appear on the fact sheets that accompany the programmes."

The company also sponsors the Family Garden at the Royal Horticultural Society grounds at Wisley.

In addition they supply football grounds in the UK and Holland, including the famous Ajax stadium with its retractable roof, in Amsterdam, and northern France.

The Elvington base - when it's not featuring in the National news as a result of horrendous flooding - is ideally situated for Hull and the ferry services to northern Europe. Incidentally, during the flooding, much of the worst of which was less than a mile from the Head Office, they kept harvesting every day.

"It is a logistical real challenge when you have to send 25 wagons in a two day period on the ferry. You have to sit down and plan it because turf is a highly perishable product and will die if it doesn't get where it's going on schedule. We've discovered ferry services no-one even knew existed," said Terry, who added that ironically it is cheaper to ship turf to Holland than it is to get it back to its ancestral home in Aberdeen.

While there are other markets which are more lucrative in terms of volume it is to the golf sector that Terry naturally gravitates.

"We have exhibited at Hampton Court and Chelsea Flower Show but when people ask me which of the shows is my favourite I always say BTME... and not just because I happen to live in Harrogate.

"That's because I'm not talking to people who think I'm talking Chinese. Greenkeepers talk the same language. If I mention to a greenkeeper that Aberelf, the number one cultivar in the STRI listings, is in our turf for '99 he'll appreciate that fact because he's educated to look for that sort of thing."

Rolawn were one of the first

exhibitors at BTME and Terry has noticed a change in the habits of visitors to the show.

"We still take the odd order at exhibitions but we used to take orders of thousands and thousands of metres at shows. I believe that is a sign of a mature industry because there is more competition, people have more choice and they want more time to think about what they are doing before placing an order."

While they are delighted when they get a an order to cover an entire new golf course many sales come as a result of a no minimum order policy which means if a golf club wants 50 metres for a new tee they'll supply. Anything indeed down to one square metre.

"It is sometimes difficult getting this through to greenkeepers who tend to think that we're a big turf company so we only deal in huge orders. Our bread and butter is small amounts."

A significant event in the history of Rolawn occurred on February 12th '98 when a successful management buy-out was completed with the support of Lloyds Development capital.

"It means we are now a lot more flexible and can move a lot quicker," explained Terry, who is one of the shareholders.

"It's been a hard 12 months but a good 12 months. We've hit the budgets we set ourselves and a little bit more," he said, speaking on the day which marked the end of the first financial year under the new regime.

One change that has been seen within the company is the willingness to look at products outside of the pure turf which was always their sole product.

"We are now evaluating new products all the time and have our first coming out next month. It is a turf and seed establishment fertiliser called Groright which we've aimed at the trade rather than retail market."

Future plans for the company include expanding further into the European mainland and strengthening their brand name.

"In the industry Rolawn is a well respected name and a well known name and we'd like that to be true for beyond our industry. We want to achieve wider recognition within the UK, even You wouldn't bet against them because you can be sure Rolawn won't let the turf grow under their feet.

Another truckload of quality turf from Rolawn

