

**Bernhard & Co Ltd. has traded for almost 25 years as the export arm of Atterton and Ellis Ltd. In December 1997 Bernhard's (BCo) bought Atterton's and the newly expanded company has now become BIGGA's latest Golden Key supporter. Scott MacCallum spoke with Managing Director Stephen Bernhard...**

# Life at the sharp end



Atterton's grinders, play a pivotal role in supporting an increasing number of greenkeepers in their efforts to produce superb playing conditions - ensuring that the cutting units he uses are razor sharp at all times.

Ask any group of golfers what a greenkeeper does and you won't lose money by betting that cutting grass will appear in the first couple of answers.

Of course we all know there's more to it than that, but grass cutting, rather like a policeman on the beat, is the visible bit and grass quality is the basis upon which they are judged. Produce a nice striped fairway or help an old lady across the road and "Boy you're doing a good job."

Stephen Bernhard, Managing Director of Bernhard & Co, aware of this, knows that producing the best possible cut, with the sharpest possible blades, results in benefits far greater than the merely aesthetic.

A horticulturist from the landscape industry, Stephen makes sure his company is run by people who know about growing grass and who appreciate information greenkeepers feed back to them after using mowers sharpened by Bernhard's machines.

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ence should always be paramount in our thinking," explained Stephen.

To highlight an example, he recounted how, years ago, Breckenridge Golf Club, in Colorado, had asked him to visit a year or so after buying a set of Express Dual and Anglemaster grinders, to discuss why snow mould diseases had been significantly reduced. Having being voted "best looking greens in the Rockies" their Superintendent said much of this was down to using the grinders, coupled with changes in his maintenance routines.

Sharpening was rescheduled to the autumn, when the grass was stressed by frequent play, drought and high temperatures. Rescheduling meant that mowers cutting during the last months of the season would be super sharp. This significantly reduced the damage to the grass blade tips thus reducing the susceptibility to fungal attack. The crew noticed lower demand for nitrogen and instead they encouraged root growth and plant development.

The grass seemed to be stronger and healthier through winter and as the Spring season began, they used the same mowers, sharpened in autumn, to mow through worm casts and accumulated winter debris. Only

then, after all rough work was completed, they re-sharpened the mowers, ensuring the turf would be mown cleanly to be at its best when the golfers came back to play - and to judge the conditions.

"By analysing this sort of experience, we constantly learn about implications of sharpening and programmes which could reduce costs," explained Stephen, who talks with great zeal about the grass research in which he and his team

are involved with a number of US turf research institutes and universities.

"We have developed a superb Cost Analysis Programme which evaluates the potential savings a course can enjoy by modifying its approach to sharpening. There are huge savings to be made from improved environmental practices and from understanding the practical implications in both agronomic and mechanical terms." Sharing this information with many organisations, colleges and mechanic associations has made Stephen a popular speaker at seminars and workshops all over the world.

Bernhard and Co arrived in the sharpening business because of what Stephen learned when in the family landscape company in the 70s. His father, Jeffrey, began his business in the early 1940's in the Midlands and he opened the first ever Garden Centre in the UK.

Stephen studied at Pershore Institute and then traveled extensively, working for landscapers in England, Holland, Germany France and in the USA, adding to his knowledge.

Returning to the family firm, he initially headed up the design side of the business and later took over the grass maintenance division.

"To reduce mower problems we embarked upon several tests that demonstrated how different techniques of sharpening could significantly improve the mower's performance and reduce our costs."

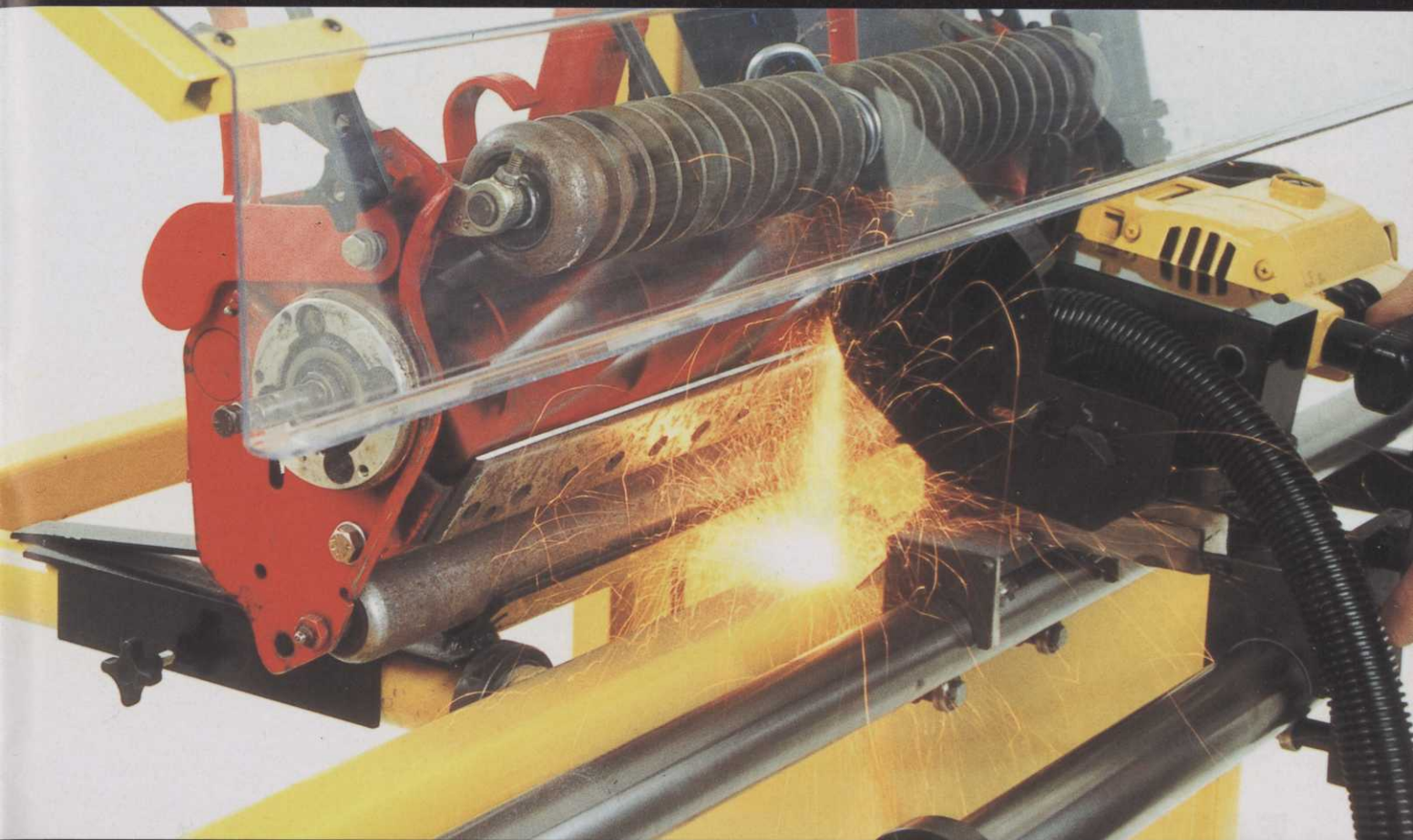
The company then invested in sharpening equipment and soon became involved with Atterton and Ellis, who had made the first cylinder



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grinders for Ransomes back in the 1800s.

"Going through old records and working with Ken Boardman, the then MD of Atterton's, I learned a lot about the actual construction of a cylinder and bottom blade," recalled Stephen. "It was fascinating discovering original developments of the mower and how they were designed and built back then, in the early 1800's."

On the strength of that, Bernhard's and Atterton's began developing machines which adopted a whole new approach to sharpening.

"The new grinders were fast and simple to use. Grass areas cut with these sharpened mowers looked greener, healthier and our costs reduced dramatically. We never looked back."

Other European landscapers and maintenance contractors, keen to reduce their own costs, soon started to buy these new sharpening machines from Bernhard's who, in 1972, formed a new sales and marketing company, Bernhard Rugby Export Services.

Jacobsen's Sales and Marketing Director met Stephen at a show in Paris and asked him to meet their service people at their US factory in Racine.

"We already had good links to Ransomes and soon found ourselves working with Toro in Minneapolis too."

While visiting US manufacturers and dealers, it was surprising to discover how sharpening techniques there were so different to those in Europe.

"We began selling our machines

which, in those days retailed for about \$12,000 while in the States machines they used were costing as little as \$2,000."

Using these cheaper machines in the USA almost invariably involved operators having to backlap afterwards to make mowers cut. This made it necessary to thin the blades, making them more fragile. (This is the process they call relief grinding). The whole process often took over two hours.

"On the other hand, using Express Dual and Anglemaster grinders, they were able to sharpen greens mowers in only 20 minutes, floor to floor - including the cylinder and bottom blade."

This huge step forward made these British machines very attractive to the Americans, particularly as they were so much more user friendly and required less skill. The dealers were excited by the prospect of this speed and their increased profits.

Sales took off in the USA and since that breakthrough there are now something in excess of 10,000 in the States and over 14,000 worldwide.

Over the last few years the Express Dual has changed a lot. Now there is no need to remove the bottom blade to grind the cylinder, a big advantage. Sharpening takes under five minutes. Machines are almost fully automatic, electronics are incorporated and the use of hydraulic lifts enables one operator to raise mowers automatically onto the work table.

One aspect which has delighted Stephen and his team is the positive way the company is treated by its customers.

"Our users are all like members of a

family. Whenever we exhibit we get top Superintendents coming to our stand to tell their success stories and pass on information to whoever will listen. It's great for our sense of pride," he said.

In July 1997 Bernhard & Co Ltd. was the proud recipient of the prestigious "Small Business of the Year National Export Award" from the Department of Trade and Industry. This award recognises significant contributions that companies with fewer than 300 employees, make to the UK's exports. Over 80% of Bernhard's production goes to overseas markets.

BCo has two locations, the central office and marketing base with its team of 20 in Rugby and the factory in Haverhill Suffolk where the machines are produced.

"We continue to trade in England as Atterton and Ellis Ltd," explained Stephen, "as it is the name that started the grinder business in 1856, and we are very proud of our roots."

The company is very progressive. Part of the philosophy is to encourage all the employees to think of the business as their own. This leads to excellent quality and product reliability. Consequently BCo is able to offer a unique 10 year warranty. It is something which Stephen always makes a point of emphasising when talking with his team.

"We actually exchanged an eight year old machine with a brand new one, free of charge. It was showing signs of metal fatigue

having sharpened 1600 fairway mowers every year," he told me.

"With the amalgamation of Bernhard's

and Atterton's, we try to ensure that key employees who make and assemble machines and our Research and Development people, go out and work with machines on site, to learn what it's like to be a mechanic on the shop floor at a golf course.

We need to build machines that are easy and fast to use, simple, reliable and cost effective. We're not interested in bells and whistles - they complicate maintenance and are often counterproductive."

Hands-on quality control is led by BCo's Managing Director.

"I try to spend almost half my time at golf courses, frequently working on our machines. Our users are the people who influence the business most. It's essential to hear what they say and be guided by them," Stephen maintains.

Bernhard's and Atterton's are delighted to join BIGGA as a Golden Key Supporter.

"We want to become a really effective partner of BIGGA, contributing to its membership by helping to develop understanding of what goes on when you have a cylinder and bottom blade that sort of try to murder the grass!" Education has been an important part of Bernhard's success around the world.

"Mowing is the last thing done to the grass every day before customers are let loose on the golf course. Our job is to make that mowing job easier, more cost effective and to produce a superb result that pleases players and Greenskeeping staff alike."

Sounds like a life at the sharp end.