

Scott MacCallum travelled to Lancashire to visit BIGGA's latest Golden Key Supporter, Gem Professional...



# A real gem



One of the most difficult balancing acts to achieve with any degree of success must be retaining all the identity and heritage of a traditional family company whilst developing, or matching, every new advance in one of the fastest moving industries in the country. Gem Professional, based in Oswaldtwistle near Accrington, in Lancashire, and BIGGA's latest Golden Key member, has achieved just that.

The company has been in the Metcalf family since its origins back in the 1880's, and has strong claims to be the largest independently

owned company in the industry, but it is still at the cutting edge when it comes to providing modern day greenkeepers with their day-to-day requirements.

The beginnings of Gem Professional lie back in the 1880's when the Metcalf family were what were known as dry salters. It is an old fashioned name for the supplying of chemicals etc, for use in heavy industry. They also crushed bones for hardening steel and bone meal and hoof and horn meal were by-products of that process. In 1924 Joseph Metcalf first started mixing the

organic fertilisers with sulphate of ammonia and potash to produce Metcalf's Complete Fertiliser for use on bowling greens, golf greens and Local Authority parks.

Records show it was 19 shillings and 6 pence (97.5p) per bag which was considerably more expensive than a comparative price today. The range also included Earlybird Worm Killer, Velvas Grass Seed, straight fertilisers and mowing machinery.

The Company moved from its factory premises in the centre of Accrington to its present 25 acre base in nearby Oswaldtwistle in 1973.

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Here, a vast range of fertilisers and growing media are produced for both the Professional Amenity and amateur garden markets.

"Two years ago we took a look at ourselves and employed a market research company to work on our behalf. In return we were given some home truths. We knew some of the things which we wanted to improve upon but needed someone else to confirm this," explained Clive Pearson, UK Sales Manager.

To emphasise the point Gem, under the guidance of Managing Director, Brian Metcalf, and Clive, have recently repositioned the Gem Professional range under the Pro Formula brand and changed the company logo.

They have also amended the packaging to make it much easier to understand by the end user.

The point is followed up by Brian who took over the reins of the company from his father in 1968 with a handful of staff and has guided it through to today when over 200 people are employed.

"Customers don't always seem to appreciate just how large a company Gem is". One question asked 'Which of these companies do you perceive as being a manufacturer?' The customers didn't have a clue," said Brian.

In fact, the company has been manufacturing an extensive range of fertilisers and turf dressings since 1924 and owns its own sand quarry, peat reserves and bark processing factory. In response to this breakdown in communication, Gem has produced a lavish new ring binder manual which includes everything anyone could possibly wish to know about the company and its products.

"We spoke to our customers, including many greenkeepers, before we produced it and what has emerged is what is basically a training manu-

al which makes our customers' lives so much easier," said Clive.

"The binder has been designed so that a Greens Chairman or Secretary can also understand the products and relate to the Greenkeeper's choice or recommendation. Committees must be able to understand the entire package which we are offering because that is extremely important," he added.

"Sometimes you find in this industry that a Greens Committee may have to take half an hour discussing a differential of a few pounds per tonne on turf dressing or a few pounds per bag on fertiliser due to lack of knowledge. This valuable time could be better spent evaluating larger capital commitments or course improvement projects. Now this manual as been introduced people will be able to appreciate our type of products with confidence and develop an understanding of their functions and performance. They must be able to compare like with like."

Additionally, the manual is easily and quickly updated as and when new specifications or products become available.

"ISO 9002 accreditation was achieved in 1987 and now forms a central plank of company policy. Continuous self assessment, benchmarking and improvement strategies are in place which are linked to technical innovations and product development," said Clive.

Gem Professional seek to improve products and performance under the guidance of Geoff Bone Dip.C.H., Group Technical Manager. Geoff sits on the Product Development Committee and is ultimately responsible for bringing products to market. This process is facilitated by the company's in house laboratory where a dedicated team of technicians perform a multitude of analytical tasks. This work is two fold.

Routine jobs involve testing raw materials used in the manufacturing processes to ensure they meet the tight specifications laid down. A batch coding procedure is in place which guarantees traceability of a finished product right back to the basic raw materials used in production. Only suppliers who meet our strict requirements are used. Finished products are likewise examined and tested to ensure conformity before being released into the warehouse prior to despatch to the customer.

Project work is the keystone to new products and product improvement and the laboratory is heavily involved in this function. In addition, fertilisers, dressings and all growing media are subjected to field trials under

Geoff's supervision prior to being accepted into the company's portfolio.

"For example, the Super Range of controlled release mini granular fertilizers were subjected to independent trials over six months at Liverpool University," said Clive.

A further function of the laboratory is particle size examination and analysis of turf dressings. Gem own their own sand deposits at their Wroot Quarry near Doncaster where reserves are in excess of 20 years.

"A number of companies claim ownership of their sand deposits but they don't have the name on the gate," said Clive. "Ours has."

At Wroot strict ISO 9002 controls are also in place. The graded soil and washed sand for Turf Dressing is metered into the steriliser in exact proportions as per the specification, not rough bucket fulls, and our analytical records prove our technical data conform; a distinct benefit to the customer. The laboratory is also equipped to undertake soil analysis and this service can be arranged through our team of field representatives.

The decision to become a Golden Key supporter of the Association was the final piece of the jigsaw for a company which has been heavily involved with the Association at Section and Regional level for quite some time.

"We have 10 technical representatives and every one is involved in his local Section - in fact Ian Sellars, is Section Secretary in Surrey. When I was promoted to Sales Manager two years ago I felt strongly that we should get more involved with the BIGGA Education and Development Fund. It is a very good idea and I believe we should be putting something back in," he said.

The company already hosts greenkeeper visits from all over the country with the excellent training room being used to its full advantage.

"The greenkeepers learn about our products and we learn about which products they are looking for," said Clive, "and they can also see first hand our manufacturing facilities."

"So we had already put a lot into BIGGA without being fully involved and becoming a Golden Key member was the final step for us," said Clive.

You can be sure that Gem Professional will be around for many more years to come providing the greenkeeping profession with exactly what it needs. Indeed, a Gem of a company.

**Gem**  
professional