

When Rod Feltham launched Avoncrop Amenity Products on February 1, 1990, from a converted house a few miles outside Weston Super Mare, in Somerset, his wildest dreams and most optimistic projections would not have placed him, a mere 10 years later, in his custom-built office looking back at a decade of virtual uninterrupted progression and success, as BIGGA's latest Golden Key Supporter.



# A fine crop



Above (L-R): Rod Feltham, Johanna Feltham and Chris Briggs

Sure you can still see that original house from the window of the new offices on a small industrial estate in the village of Sandford but in every other respect you would need extremely powerful binoculars to look back and view the beginnings of the company from where they are now.

"In our first two years we reached where we hoped to be in five and if we'd said, ten years ago, that we'd be as heavily involved in London and the Home Counties, and indeed the entire south of England, I certainly wouldn't have imagined it," said Rod, who has 30 years experience of the amenity industry under his belt.

The rate of expansion of the company is almost at odds with Rod's own philosophy which is to take a cautious approach and not over stretch.

"It would have been easy to have said 'we're going into London and we'll need "x" number of reps, let's put them in.' We didn't do it that way. We took on one rep and as the business grew, gradually took on more reps to the extent that in the five years since we opened our Bracknell depot we've taken on five," he said, by way of illustrating just that philosophy.

"It just evolved that way. Business came in and we needed to expand...and we still need to expand as there are some

areas - Norfolk and Suffolk - where we haven't got anyone. We certainly haven't finished expanding," he smiled.

Avoncrop Amenity Products was launched with a team of five who'd worked together for another company in the Bristol area, which had sold out, and it was to another former colleague Rod turned for assistance when the decision to strike out on their own was made.

"Avoncrop Ltd supply the commercial horticulture sector and the Managing Director is David O'niens. David and I worked for the same company in our raw, younger days and had remained friends ever since," explained Rod.

"He started Avoncrop Ltd in the early 70s and in 1989 we decided that we would form a sister company called Avoncrop Amenity Products to serve the local authority and sports club sector."

The two companies are entirely separate in their operation and are just linked at the top.

"My wife, Jennifer, and I are 50% partners with Avoncrop Ltd. It's virtually unheard of that a company should



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be in partnership with two individuals. In fact initially there were no forms to cover such a situation at the tax office," laughed Rod, as he remembered the incident.

"We decided to adopt the Avoncrop name because it had become widely known in commercial horticulture and we also decided to use the same logo." From the beginning Rod was keen

me that's not right. As far as I'm concerned we're a team and every member of that team is equally important."

When Avoncrop Amenity Products was launched it was operating exclusively in the West Country and South Wales but since then - as well as the London breakthrough already mentioned - they cover the whole of the south of the country and much of the midlands.

"If you draw a line east to west through Stoke-on Trent that is about our border line. It roughly covers the Wash to Aberystwyth," explained Rod.

If there was a defining moment for Avoncrop Amenity Products - an occasion when the opportunity to move from being a regional West Country company to something somewhat larger - it was in '95 when, together with Avoncrop Ltd, they took the decision to take on a substantial depot, deep in the heart of the Home Counties.

"As we grew we began to get vibes that we should be moving into the London area but we felt we couldn't service them satisfactorily from our Sandford depot. So we decided to take the plunge and take over a large warehouse and offices in Bracknell. Our daughter, Johanna, who had joined us from a firm of accountants went up there and now runs that depot," said Rod.

"The cost was high but we felt we could do a good job. We worked out that within a 15 mile radius of the depot there were around 50 golf clubs."

It is a nice twist that Johanna Feltham runs the Avoncrop Amenity Product side of the Bracknell business and Chris O'nions, son of David O'nions, runs the Avoncrop Ltd side.

The Bracknell and Sandford teams get together at least twice a year while Rod does the majority of purchasing for both depots. Johanna, in her other role of Company Accounts Manager, travels to Sandford once a week on accounts business.

"There is a bit of healthy in-house competition about the size of our respective turnovers and until recently Sandford always held the upper hand but I think the scales have just about tipped in Bracknell's favour with about 51% of the total turnover coming from there," revealed Rod, with mock sorrow.

"There was a degree of inevitability about that but it has happened quicker than we'd thought," he said, while Johanna, on one of her visits to Sandford, looked on and smiled.

One of the other major appointments made by the company came 18 months ago when Chris Briggs, previously with Levingtons and Scotts, joined as Business Development Manager.

"The relationship between the distributor and the manufacturer is important and Chris was brought in to keep Technical Managers up to date with the new specifications of products and new recommendations from our manufacturer partners," said Rod.

"In the 10 year period that Avoncrop has been in existence technological advance has been greater than in the 30 years previous, such is the rate of

change," explained Chris.

"I organise technical training meetings where manufacturers give presentations and training sessions either here or on their own sites.

"Our team sell a number of different ranges and to do this effectively they must carry a lot of information around in their heads. They are also in close contact with the manufacturers and their reps on the road and, if they are ever in any doubt about anything, can always give them a call."

Among the companies for which Avoncrop distribute are Scotts, Barenbrug, Green-Relief, Terralift, Aventis, Patisson, Tacit, Amenity Technology, Vitax, Rufford and Famura while they also have their own brand fertilisers and top dressings.

"One of our policies was to have a very wide portfolio of products to offer the customer so that he had a choice but over the last couple of years we've looked to trim this a little," revealed Rod.

Rod, Chris and the Technical Managers are finding that the information required by the Course Manager or Head Greenkeeper is becoming much more sophisticated.

"They are becoming degree orientated," said Rod.

"When I first started in the West Country the greenkeeper had followed his father and possibly his grandfather into the club. It was handed down. There are still a lot of guys like that and they are very important to us but the new breed are coming in and keeping us on our toes."

Avoncrop became a Silver Key Supporter of BIGGA in 1995 but had been heavily involved in the Association from day one.

"We worked very closely with the local Sections and worked closely with Gordon and Marion Child in the first two years of Westurf to get it off the ground. They did all the hard work but we gave assistance and that is typical of the relationships we've had with the Sections in the area," said Rod.

"We have always tried to sponsor a golf day or a seminar within each Section and as we have grown over the last five years we decided to put a little more in and become a Golden Key member.

"It is very important that we keep our team educated and it follows that it is important that our customers are the same. By helping the Education and Development Fund we can do that."

Avoncrop is also involved with the IOG while Rod is particularly proud to be the English representative of the European Golf Distributors' Association.

"We meet once a year and have general discussions on various trades, means of trading and products throughout Europe. In fact through this means we have introduced products like Green-Relief and Terralift to the continent which benefits the manufacturer."

If the rate of growth continues for Avoncrop Amenity Products who knows what the next 10 years will bring but one thing of which you can be sure, Rod Feltham will take a great deal of pleasure in plotting each path the company takes.



Above: Johanna displays one of the products from the many ranges Avoncrop stocks

that the company should be more than about merely selling products. They should also provide a service to clients.

"As business grew we took on more field staff and we were always extremely careful in who we appointed believing that we needed highly competent, technical people to provide the in depth back-up service we wanted to provide."

They also took the decision to start their own fleet of vehicles and now 98% of deliveries are completed this way.

"It is expensive to have your own fleet but on the other hand you do have control right to the end and that pays dividends. I believe the person who delivers the order is as important as anybody in the company. You often hear the phrase 'top management down to the lorry driver or warehouse man' but to