

Neil Thomas reports on BTME 2001 and looks forward to changes next year



CHANGING TIMES AT BTME

So it's over for another year and we reflect on a successful week in Harrogate, indeed on a BTME which surpassed expectations. Perhaps we came to Harrogate this year a little apprehensive not in terms of exhibitor numbers or the year on year growth of the show, but rather from the perspective of a gloomy autumn/winter period characterised by incessant rain and transport problems. Golf courses had been closed and trading had been difficult. Would this impinge on the BTME given also the current unreliability of our train services? Snow through Sunday did not auger well followed by rain on Monday and Tuesday. Low and behold, Wednesday dawned bright and clear.

Greenkeepers were about and a buzz was in the air. The trade began to smile and we were underway.

By mid-morning on the first day it was clear that our apprehension had been unwarranted as visitors appeared in droves, clearly bent on casting aside the despondency of previous months and kick-starting a better year for the industry. Queues were forming at the registration points and certainly BIGGA had not anticipated the volume of visitors - a pattern repeated the following day. It was a nice problem but a problem never-

theless and one which will need to be resolved for 2002. Queuing in the sunshine is one thing, if the weather had been inclement it would have been quite another. While pre-registration is always preferable, we appreciate that many do not bother to fill in and return the card - hence the queues which this year were significant given the increase in attendees. Registration will be reviewed for next year. With a provisional visitor figure of 7,172 for the exhibition, some 28% up on 2000, we are delighted, but explaining the dramatic increase is more difficult. My best guess is that so many within the industry and the profession wanted, indeed needed, to get the year off to a good start and there is no better place to do it than at the BTME.

Looking back on the week, it seemed to have the right mix. From a successful conference, in depth workshops and comprehensive seminar programme to outstanding keynote speaker and hugely successful banquet, the infrastructure around the exhibition contributed to a rounded event during which the trade did good business. Some come purely for the exhibition others for the education and many more for both. Combine this with the social and perhaps the

spiritual, for BTME is now an annual pilgrimage for many, and you indeed have a potent mix. Long may it last and we are greatly encouraged by the increase in visitor numbers this year.

Some thoughts on BTME 2002. BIGGA works closely with the BTME Steering Committee made up of representatives of the trade. During 2000, the Steering Committee set up a Working Party to look at future options for BTME in terms of opening days. The recommendation of the Working Party accepted subsequently by the Steering Committee and BIGGA's Board of Management was that for 2002 the exhibition would open on three days - Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday with a later start time of 10.30am on the Tuesday. There would be a subsequent review of the opening days after the 2002 event. The increase in opening hours for 2002 has coincided with a sharp increase in visitors this year and this augers well for the future. BIGGA is well aware of the need to increase still further the visitor base and this will be a priority for 2002. BIGGA and the Steering Committee are looking to grow the event and will work closely together to ensure this is achieved. Breakdown next year will be on the

Friday morning thus ensuring three full show days. This is considered essential if the exhibition is to prosper under the revised opening days. There is a partnership between BIGGA and the Steering Committee and we consider that the mix I referred to earlier running throughout the week is essential to the continuing success of the BTME. Friday breakdown is considered by both parties to be an integral part of this mix ensuring that the exhibition finishes on a high note on Thursday evening.

Planning is already underway for BTME 2002. Bookings from new exhibitors are coming in at a fast rate and current exhibitors are requesting more space. We will do all we can to meet the needs and wishes of our exhibitors who make the BTME possible. It is not always practical to satisfy all needs but we will do our best in this regard. I believe that BTME 2001 has set up the year both for the trade and our members. I trust that the prevailing optimism after BTME will translate into a prosperous year all round and that the months ahead will be characterised by some warm and sunny days. Here's hoping.

Neil Thomas