



**Scott MacCallum met up with John Deere's new American boss at the company's Langar base**

# Room to grow



Above: Clay Sherrill, General Manager

Below: Clay with Graham Williams (seated) and some of the John Deere team



The last nine months in this country have been quite remarkable. Floods have been followed by a disease not seen here for 34 years and as I write we are still to see the evidence that the pronouncements of a scorching summer have any truth in them.

Into this unique set of British circumstances has arrived American, Clay Sherrill, the new General Manager of the UK John Deere headquarters.

Since taking over the reins at the beginning of the year Clay has seen the Langar base caught in the middle of a Midlands Foot and Mouth exclusion zone - there is still a disinfectant mat at the entrance to the company's superb building - while markets for much of the company's product have shrunk as revenue streams at many golf clubs have reduced to a trickle thanks to extended flooding induced course closures up and down the country.

Surprisingly this has not prevented Clay, previously the General Manager of the company's Minneapolis branch, from turning on his heels and heading back across the Atlantic and he is

delighted to have landed his new job.

"Earlier in my career I can remember being in Fargo, North Dakota, in the middle of winter with the temperature 30 degrees below and the wind blowing at 60 miles an hour. I started to think back to who I might have angered in the company. I certainly don't view the UK that way as it's an extremely important part of John Deere's business," said Clay, as we spoke in his new office, housing in a building which boasts five huge training rooms and state-of-the-art conference facilities.

And while many have suffered through the financial downturn John Deere seems to have continued to trade relatively unscathed.

"Actually, Foot and Mouth has not affected our business as badly as we thought. It has had an impact because without Foot and Mouth we think we would have had another really good growth year. With Foot and Mouth we're not going to have as much growth as we'd expected but we are still going to be slightly above where we were last year. So that's not bad," said Clay, who, although a non-golfer, is originally from South Carolina, an hour inland from the golfing hotbed of Myrtle Beach.

To reinforce the point on the state of the market, Graham Williams, Division Manager for Commercial and Consumer Equipment and the owner of a face well known within the UK greenkeeping industry revealed some interesting statistics.

"Figures around at the moment show a decline in the golf turf business brought about by the flooding of something like 20%. The effect of the Foot and Mouth has not been evaluated yet but budgets have been cut, that's for sure. However if we have a good summer season I don't think we'll have any long term problems. There is a lot of business being done

at the moment and in the Commercial and Consumer Equipment sector we're actually up 10% on last year, and that's in a down market," revealed Graham.

The C&CE Division is responsible for home owner products, including lawn tractors and walk behind mowers; commercial mowing equipment, which comprises the compact tractor range plus out front rotary and wide area mowers, as well as the golf and turf equipment.

"So the C&CE division encompasses all three of these different market sectors and right now we are ahead of last year which is good news," he explained.

For many years John Deere cast a huge shadow over agriculture, and the impact such a massive company would make if it did turn its attention to other areas could only be imagined.

When it did turn its attention to the market which encompasses the golf industry about five years ago it was not a case of half measures. A goal was set of becoming clear market leader, a target which they feel they will hit within five years.

"If you go back five years we were hardly a player in the golf and turf business. There were three main companies, Toro, Jacobsen and Ransomes. Now, with the merger of Jacobsen and Ransomes into Textron, there are still three main players and we are one of them and it is very difficult to pick out who is the market leader," said Graham.

Clay is very keen to grow the UK and European business as much as possible over the next few years.

"Part of my own goal is to support the company strategy which is growth, and the UK and Western Europe is an important part of that. We believe that Western Europe is a huge opportunity for us. There is enormous potential with the amount of business that is



Above: John Deere's brand new headquarters allow plenty of room to display their equipment  
Right: One of the custom built training facilities at the Langar Headquarters



here, coupled with the ability of John Deere to increase its market share," he explained.

The delayed entry into the market was due in part to the fact that without diesel powered products - the staple fuel of the UK and Irish markets - they didn't have the product line to meet customer requirements.

A desire to grow into a completely different customer base and the knowledge that there was so much shared engineering technology between the agricultural business and the C&CE market hastened the change of focus, into four main sectors - agriculture, C&CE, construction equipment and John Deere finance.

"Our agricultural customer base is shrinking. We all know that there are fewer, bigger farms and fewer farmers so C&CE allows us to grow our business into a completely different customer base yet the design and engineering of quality power products and the services which go with them are very much our strengths," said Clay.

"It is a pretty good mix. The construction equipment and C&CE business track the general economy, whether it be in the UK or USA - house building, consumer confidence and more general factors while agriculture tracks the price of wheat, soya beans, corn and cattle.

"To us it has been a superb diversification as we have been able to spread our existing skills and technology over different markets," said Clay.

Graham believes that the key to the golf and turf markets was the introduction of the 2653 tees mower and the 3235 fairway mower.

"Those two machines changed the market with their concept. Prior to that, the only John Deere equipment on golf courses would have been compact tractors and out front rotary mowers."

Having made the commitment to

move into the golf and turf market the special nature of the industry meant initial progress was steady rather than spectacular.

"Frankly it took us a while, both in North America and Europe, to develop the products we needed to penetrate the market and establish relationships within the industry itself. That is key and you don't just do that overnight. You must earn respect and credibility," said Graham.

One of the great successes which has enabled John Deere to develop machinery and build relationships are the feedback trips which in recent years has involved large numbers of greenkeepers from all over the world converging on Germany and the States to ensure that the new machinery being developed was what greenkeepers wanted to buy.

"The feedback sessions do produce tangible benefits, there is no question about that," said Graham.

"For example a recent success for us has been the 2500 greens mower which has been fantastically successful. Without the input of greenkeepers that wouldn't have happened. The whole operator station, the controls and adjustable steering arm came about purely because of feedback. We went to an awful lot of trouble to ask them what the operator wanted and this was designed with those guys in mind," explained Graham.

Clay is quick to reinforce the point about the benefits that come from such events.

"One of the key components of our product development process is the early involvement of customers. The best way to get the attention of a design engineer is to put him in the same room as a set of customers. We do exactly the same in the agricultural sector," he said.

The company is also extremely proud of its parts support and recog-

nises the importance of minimising down time.

"Part of our commitment to customers is to keep their machines up and running to help protect our customers' revenue. We a substantial investment in parts supply and offer true 24 hour turn-around. I think we do a better job than anyone else in that score," said Clay.

Looking ahead, John Deere aims for steady innovation and evolution rather than any quantum leaps and this is likely to be seen in the area of environmentally friendly equipment.

"We introduced the electric Gator last year which has been a big success and I can see an extension of that technology into other machines as well," said Graham.

Uniquely among the major manufacturers John Deere sponsors an event in Tiger Woods' playground - the US Tour. The John Deere Classic is played on a TPC course Deere Run built on land donated to the US Tour and runs in the same week as The Open Championship here.

Another event which will be of great interest to BIGGA members next year is the John Deere Team Championship involving the club professional, a greenkeeper and two club officials.

"This is an established event in the States but one of the wishes is to extend it worldwide and the likelihood is that two teams from the UK will be sent over to play in next year's event," said Clay.

But there is another golf event, in which John Deere has an input, which is causing huge interest all over the world.

John Deere is the exclusive supplier

of equipment to The De Vere Belfry which this September hosts The Ryder Cup.

"We are running an incentive programme on a worldwide basis and a number of dealers will be attempting to win a trip to the Ryder Cup. Everyone is fired up about the Ryder Cup and from our point of view it will be the first time that the North American and European guys will have come together," said Graham.

The key question, however, is which side will the new General Manager of John Deere's Langer headquarters be supporting?

"I'm supporting Europe. I go where my customers are and my customers are in the UK and Europe. They're the ones who sign the cheques," said Clay, with just a trace of a smile.

