



Scott MacCallum headed west to Bolton to learn about BIGGA Golden Key supporter Rigby Taylor's consultancy agency Grass Science...

The appliance of Science



Clockwise from top right: Grass Science's consultants Chris Peel, Tim Colclough, Noel MacKenzie and Andy Cole

In the last six years an advisory service has grown from a standing start to become the second largest in the country... with its sights set on the number one slot.

Grass Science now has four full time consultants, working under the direction of Director of Agronomy, Brian Robinson, each offering advice to golf clubs, operators of amenity turf and on environmental issues up and down the length of the UK.

The company was born out an appreciation of Rigby Taylor Chairman, Bernard Hedley, that customers were becoming increasingly interested in advisory support and that the industry itself had become more technical and research driven.

"We were conscious that advice was becoming more and more important to customers and in 1995 we felt that we'd got to the stage where we wanted to offer advice in a more formal manner. We felt that there was an opportunity to build a separate division of Rigby Taylor which would be dedicated to offering advice on a commercial basis," explained Bernard.

Brian Robinson, a former Groundsman of Lancashire County Cricket Club, who had for the five previous years been managing one of Rigby Taylor's sales teams, was asked to take the project on board.

"Brian was a good example of someone whose natural inclination was to give advisory input to customers and he too was keen on the idea. So Grass Science was born with in the beginning Brian basically managing a department of one with the help of

some internal resources. The business flourished thanks to Brian's enthusiasm and capacity for hard work and within six months we'd appointed consultant Chris Peel, from ADAS, and the business continued to develop from there," explained Bernard, as we sat in the Bolton Headquarters of Rigby Taylor.

The next major leap for the company came last year when two further appointments were made with a fourth consultant being added earlier this year, all from the STRI.

"We appointed Andy Cole and Noel MacKenzie, both well known and well established agronomists about nine months ago with another, Tim Colclough, joining the team earlier this year."

"Our sales reps were used to offering advice and still do and this is welcomed by their customers, but now we also have a team of consultants whose entire focus is advisory input," explained Bernard, when tackled about the potential conflict of a product supply company setting up its own advisory service.

He added that while a consultant may visit a course three to four times a year the rep may visit 12 times a year so the greenkeeper is always going to hold great store on conversations with his rep.

Grass Science is marketed independently of Rigby Taylor and maintains links with other parties out in the field, whether they be contractors and supply companies.

There is a financial link between the two organisations but in terms of man-

Brian Robinson, right and Bernard Hedley, left



agement the two are 100% divorced from each other.

"Brian has no responsibilities to Rigby Taylor and there are no Rigby Taylor managers with any responsibility for any Grass Science management," explained Bernard, who offers the only genuine link as Chairman of both companies.

Indeed convincing customers and potential customers that Grass Science was an independent company was never a problem.

"It was always more of an issue in theory than in practice. I'm not aware that there has ever been an occasion when a client has felt uncomfortable about the Rigby Taylor/Grass Science link," said Bernard.

While it was something Brian did consider prior to Grass Science being formed, he is happy to admit that it has never become an issue.

"Even from the word go it was never a concern and over the last three years it has got less and less so to the extent that it is never brought up at all now. That was particularly obvious at BTME this year."

The benefits which come from having a link are informal. If a Rigby Taylor rep sees that a customer has got a need for advice he'd be happy to recommend Grass Science. Likewise if a Grass Science consultant is looking to give a product solution he'd be happy to recommend a chat with the Rigby Taylor rep.

"That's the way it works and to be honest pretty much every consultancy tends to have a leaning towards a good product supply company, one that he

trusts, knows will deliver a solution and not do his reputation any harm if he recommends it," said Bernard.

That said there is nothing to prevent Grass Science consultants looking elsewhere for solutions to problems.

"There are no restrictions preventing the consultants developing contacts with other supply companies. In fact it is positively encouraged to ensure their product knowledge is as comprehensive as possible," explained Bernard.

It is a point reinforced by Brian who pointed out that it is not unusual for one of his team to recommend a product for another company.

"We approach our work as a professional organisation which has merit and credibility and to do so it has to stand alone. So there have been cases, quite a number of cases, where it has been necessary to specify other materials... which doesn't make the Rigby Taylor reps too happy," he confessed.

However, such occasions offer the opportunity to assess the Rigby Taylor product range and see whether there is a gap that requires filling.

"As a product supply company we are looking to supply a need and one of the best ways of recognising a need is to be aware of what consultants generally are recommending to their clients," said Bernard.

"The way that Rigby Taylor benefits from our relationship with Grass Science is that we are able to tailor our product

range to find solutions to the problems that the consultants are identifying.

"This has been the case in terms of grass seed development and in some fertiliser formulations within our range," said Bernard.

As an aside he recalled how Rigby Taylor first got involved in fertiliser production 50 years ago when it mixed up the fertilisers prescriptions the STRI recommended to particular clients.

"In large measure we are doing no different now only we have our own consultancy service which enables us to work that much more closely. But the same processes take place."

Bernard and Brian are keen to stress that each consultant brings a specialist skill to the team but that the individuals do offer a collective approach to their work.

"Andy and Noel have specialist golf knowledge; Tim's particular strength is in training while Chris has skills as an expert witness," explained Brian, whose own specialities are grass seed and environmental issues.

While those specialist skills are regarded as important the team, to use a footballing analogy, does play the same formation

"We didn't want people at opposite ends of the consultancy spectrum and that, although they are individuals they will offer advice which is along the same lines," said Bernard.

"The team is able to dovetail so that if another member of the team has to stand in for whatever reason the advice would

be of the same calibre. People have had to change slightly to fit in with that approach," explained Brian, one of whose projects has taken him to Scotland on a regular basis over the last two years.

He has been contacted by the Highlands and Islands Development Agency to look at the Cairngorm Ski Lift Company project to build a funicular railway.

"It is a site of special scientific interest and my role is to ensure that everything is reinstated to how it was... not just after this project but following the bulldozing work that was done in the 60s when the original ski lifts were put in. So far we've photographed rock structures and plants so they can be reinstated just as they were."

The work has enabled Brian to plant our trial plots for grasses to see how they cope at 1,000 and 2,500 feet.

"Taking this work into the mountains has enable me to research how grasses cope with extremes of weather and this will be of benefit to many golf clubs in years to come," he explained.

The future for Grass Science looks rosy with continued expansion on the cards.

"We see Grass Science developing a wider geographical spread over the next five years certainly throughout the UK while we do believe that Europe remains an attractive proposition," revealed Bernard.

Their sights are still firmly set on becoming the number one consultancy in the country but they are also rightly proud of the strides they have made since Grass Science was formed.

Grass Science can be contacted on 01204 377757

