

Scott MacCallum met up with Victor Jamieson of Rain Bird at the home one of the company's highest profile clients...

'Bird's in The Belfry



The venue for a meeting with BIGGA Golden Key Company, Rain Bird, was not too difficult to agree. With a substantial distance between BIGGA HOUSE and the company's UK base, at Lewes, near Brighton a point between the two was the preferred option and where better than The Belfry, the scene of Rain Bird's biggest, and probably highest profile, UK contract to date.

Having won the initial contract to install full fairway irrigation to the recently-built PGA course, Rain Bird was in pole position to secure the contract when the famous Brabazon course was upgraded and a full wall to wall irrigation system was agreed upon. On a real roll now De Vere Hotels decided to go the whole hog and fit out the Derby course as well and again Rain Bird were chosen. So now the company can boast that it has supplied all 54 holes on the development which will be in all the headlines later this year when the Ryder Cup is played - for a record fourth time - over the Brabazon course.

"It was good news because the fact that we won one job, completed it and then won the next shows how pleased De Vere was with what we had done. Pleased with the product and pleased with the work carried

out by the contractor, MJ Abbott," said Victor Jamieson, Rain Bird's Area Manager for UK and Ireland.

However, it is not just the high profile contracts which brings a smile to Victor's face, he is also delighted at the number of regular golf clubs, many of which perhaps hadn't until recently considered installing automatic irrigations systems, which he now counts as clients.

"Smaller golf clubs like the Rain Bird product. They like what our new sprinklers provide and they like the reliability of the decoder systems which have been around now for around 12 years and have good track records."

Another benefit of the Rain Bird systems from a smaller club's perspective is that, like an over grown school boy's train set, you can start in a small way and then build on what you've got.

"You can start with our smallest wall mounted controller and at any time in the future add on to that system. Even our smallest system can be extended to a PC controlled system without changing the hardware out on the golf course," explained Victor.

He is also finding that more people from smaller golf clubs are asking for specific products having heard from neighbouring clubs on the benefits.

"It used to be only the big clubs who asked that. Smaller clubs just asked about an irrigation system in general terms," said Victor.

The company, which has its roots in Los Angeles, California, has enjoyed substantial growth in the UK

and Ireland over the last five years and Victor has a theory on why that should be the case.

"I would put it down to our insistence that our product is installed well and we only supply to certain contractors who we know will do a good job - companies like Ocmis Irrigation, MJ Abbott, Arden Lea Irrigation and a number of smaller but equally skilled companies. They have been doing a very good job for Rain Bird and this has helped to enhance and spread our reputation.

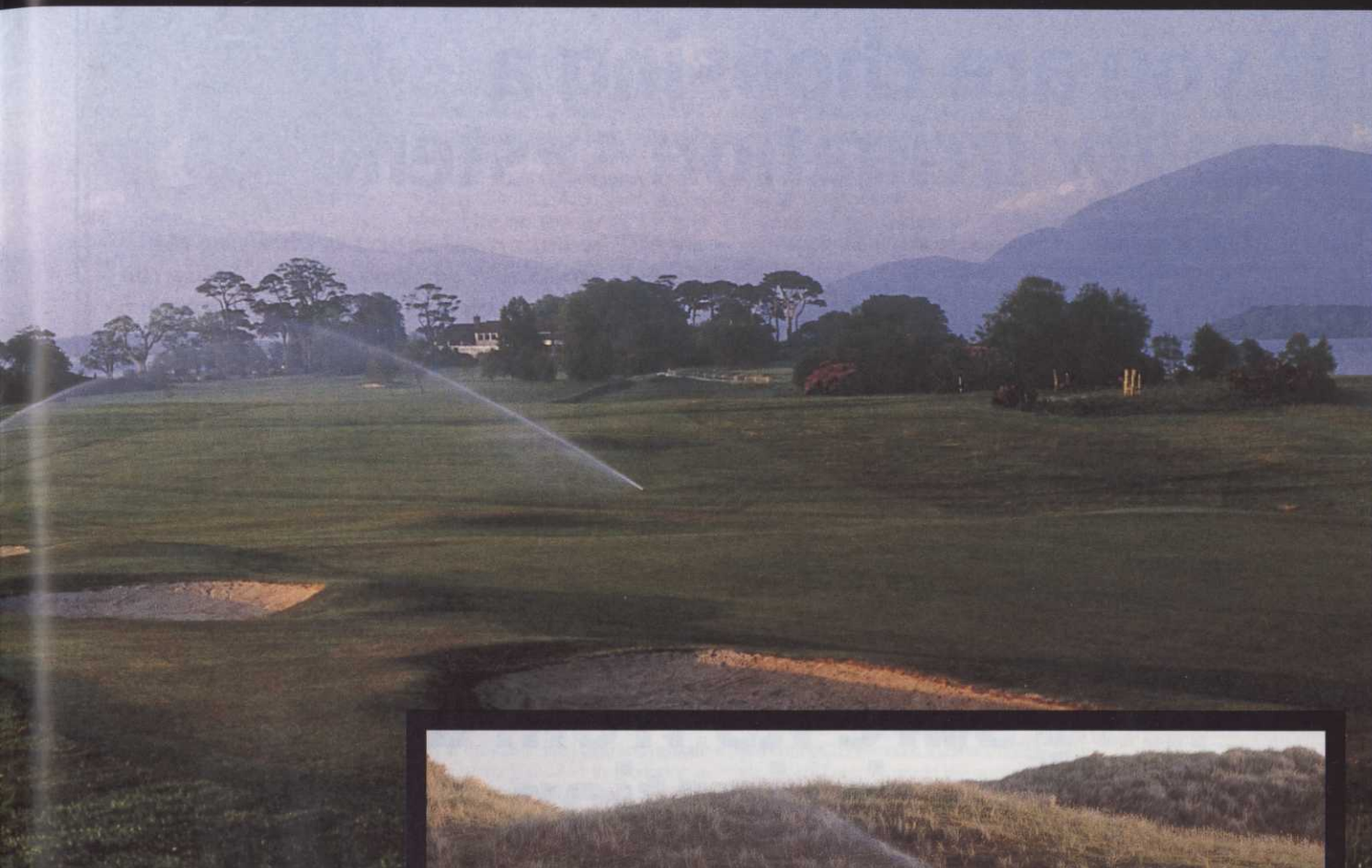
"After all you are only as good as your installer because if things go wrong, customers tend to blame the equipment rather than the installer," said Victor, who added that only 20% of a contract covers the cost of the equipment, the other 80% is the cost of the installation.

Having teams of good quality installers is not something that can be put down purely to good fortune. Much work is done on building sound relationships between Rain Bird and the contracted companies and ensuring that they are up to date on the innovations that emerge from the Rain Bird Research and Development boffins.

"We give a lot of assistance to contractors with regard to installing our equipment to our specifications. They get a lot of training, particularly on the control systems, from our full time Service Manger in the UK, Mark Ganning, who can be on hand to provide technical assistance at all times.

"Having said all that we are fortu-





nate that the contractors do take pride in producing a quality installation."

One of the benefits Victor finds in working for a privately-owned company is that they are not weighed down in as much bureaucracy as might be found in other companies of similar size.

"For example we can talk directly to the engineers who are developing our product and we can send requests to the States to develop new equipment for use in the European markets.

While Victor feels the current family of Rain Bird golf course controllers will probably remain much as they are for the foreseeable future they are having what he describes as the "bells and whistles" becoming attached to them now.

"It started with the radio remote control facility and we now have a telephone remote control so a greenkeeper can be sitting at home, discover it is raining, dial in and stop the system. Likewise he could start all or parts of the system from home if he wanted to."

Over the last five years Victor has witnessed a startling rate of progress in the industry much of it made possible by the increased knowledge and ability of the greenkeeper.

"More and more greenkeepers are trained to use PCs whereas a few years ago the technology did not appear relevant. A lot of them are using their irrigations systems properly as a result and taking full advantage of the control that is avail-

able to them. Five years ago a greenkeeper might have run all his sprinklers for five minutes every night in the summer regardless of whether it had been sunny or raining. If they were a little more conscious of their system they might make some percentage adjustments day by day to everything on the course.

"Now people are making adjustments down to the specific sprinkler head to cater for high or low spots and other factors that might prevail."

To assist in the development of the greenkeeper's irrigation knowledge Rain Bird puts on training courses.

"We put one on at Celtic Manor recently and it was great because they also act as refresher courses for people who perhaps need reminding of how to use the system at the beginning of the new season," explained Victor.

With as much rain as many parts of the country have endured in recent months you would have thought selling irrigations systems would have been set alongside the task of selling

ice cubes to the Eskimos and Victor admits he is praying for a long hot summer.

"It has been a tough time particularly for the contractors who often haven't been able to complete the work they began during the winter as quickly and efficiently as they would have hoped and I think if the wet weather does continue over the summer I think it is going to make it very difficult," he explained, adding that from his side he has attended several Extraordinary General Meetings at golf clubs torn between installing irrigation systems or not as the case may be.

"These have got heated at times and yes I have got involved at times as well. There is still the odd member who thinks that bowsers should still be used on links courses and doesn't see the benefits of irrigation as a management tool. Used properly it shouldn't change the condition of the course. For example, used for the establishment of overseeding the benefits are enormous. In the past overseeding work, and therefore

money, could be wasted if the weather was not as expected and irrigation gives a guarantee that there will be some success."

The benefits of responsible irrigation are becoming increasingly well known and that is why companies like Rain Bird continue to enjoy success - a brand new European headquarters have just been opened in Provence in France, to take advantage of the growing mainland Europe market.

The continued growth of golf there will be apparent in the Ryder Cup when Europe's finest 12 golfers, probably containing a few Continentals, compete against the Americans over the beautifully manicured Brabazon course at The Belfry. Victor will be watching, proud of the small part his company will have made to the success of the event.

