

# Hands Across the Water

**Kerran Daly, MG reports on the latest Bernhard sponsored trip to the GCSAA Conference and Show in Atlanta**

Having spent a good hour in the queue at Gatwick and been personally selected for a full baggage search, I finally made it into the departure lounge and met up with the other nine intrepid travellers bound for Atlanta. The high level of airport security was comforting but as we stepped onto the plane there was still something in the back of my mind which gave the excitement of the week ahead an added edge.



Atlanta's dramatic skyline

We took off around midday for our 4000 mile journey which because of 120mph head winds was to last nine and a half hours. This was my first trip to the USA and the flight itself was for me a thought provoking experience. Cruising out over Killarney at 36,000 feet and 500mph was made all the more poignant by the sudden blasting from my headphones of The Proclaimers' powerfully nostalgic song 'Letter from America'. Images of the early Scottish and Irish settlers, 100 years before, ran like a pictorial in my mind and I reflected on how much had changed in such a relatively short time. I glanced to my left to see Alex McCombie busily tapping away on his laptop - how things have changed indeed.

I decided to try my crossword, and pulling the newspaper from my bag, I noted the headline 'Bush ready for War on Iraq'. Massive troop movements were going on right below me at that moment as we headed west to Atlanta, birthplace of Dr Martin Luther King Junior, probably the world's most famous proponent of non-violent action. The irony of the moment was not lost on this everyday greenkeeper. Martin Luther King would have been turning in his grave.

Having fought our way through heavy traffic we finally checked in at our hotel and immediately decided to recover from our journey with a reviving drink. Out we went to be confronted by police roadblocks and



The 2003 Bernhards Delegation

crowds of excited Americans filling the bars and streets. We had coincided with the NBA All Stars basketball final, Michael Jordan and all. The city was choked full of people from all over the USA and noisy parties were going on all night. It was a rude awakening for the quiet, homely boys from the old country.

On our first day out we visited East Lake GC and Atlanta National GC. East Lake was formed in 1904 but had been re-developed by Reece Jones in 1994 at a cost of \$25 million. It was now rated 3rd in Georgia, 60th in the USA and 90th in the world.

The whole enterprise was far removed from British greenkeeping. The warm season grasses, zoysia and bermudagrass were completely dormant which meant that the whole course, except for the greens, was straw-brown. The greens were Crenshaw creeping bentgrass, mown down to 4.5mm for winter. They are 3.5mm in summer, while some courses in the area cut at 2.5mm regularly. Poa annua was not considered to be a problem and they did a single hand pick each year. The greens were firm, dry and fast, 10' for regular play. This was in contrast to the rest of the course which, being based on heavy, red clay was very wet at this time of year.

The Superintendent, Senior Assistant Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent looked after a staff of 12 in winter and 18 in summer plus

two mechanics and an irrigation technician. The greenkeepers were nearly all Hispanic in origin, some working 12 hours a day, seven days a week to make as much money as possible before returning to their families in Mexico and South America. We found this practice was pretty universal and the Superintendents admitted that the quality of their greens and the high presentation standards of their courses could not be maintained without these high staffing levels.

The availability of cheap labour was readily accepted as an essential element in course maintenance. This was our first striking example of the differences between the UK and American philosophies. The total annual budget was \$1.25 million. When asked about fungicides, the Senior Assistant Superintendent said, "We don't use a lot. We spend around \$30,000, that's all." It left us wondering what he would call a lot!

The most impressive feature of East Lake GC was the clubhouse. It had a very definite UK feel to it and was full of memorabilia connected with Bobby Jones, the 1930 Grand Slam genius. This was his home club, where he had first started playing golf, there was an atmosphere of history which is probably unrivalled in any other US clubhouse. Just being there was worth the trip.

In contrast, Atlanta National was only 14 years old. It was a Pete Dye creation with feature bunkers which often ran the whole length of the



fairway. Indeed the bunkers were so large and intrusive that the cart paths ran through the middle of them. I don't think there are any courses in the UK where you can drive a buggy through the bunkers. Conditions were pretty similar to East Lake, with very wet fairways and tight greens. They did however have a problem with *Poa annua* which was invading all greens. Unfortunately the Superintendent and his Deputy were not available so we did not discover why there was such a difference between the two courses. Other differences were apparent. East Lake had been truly awesome in its facilities. The equipment stores, staff rooms and organisational policy were all first rate. In comparison, Atlanta National was some years behind. It was comforting to see that not all US courses are way ahead of us in this regard. Indeed it was quite apparent that in many ways, particularly health and safety, we are far in advance of our American counterparts.

We soon discovered a quaint American custom which we all agreed should be introduced back home immediately. The courses closed for one day a week so that essential maintenance could be done. That was a luxury we all wanted a part of. Quote of the day was from Tony Mears, who, while passing the 15th tee at East Lake, turned to me and in his bluff northern accent said, quite seriously, 'The trouble with these courses is that they are all American. You know what I mean?' Funny thing was, it sounded quite sensible at the time.

This interesting day was rounded off by a cracking night at Joe's Bar on Juniper. We entered the team pop quiz as 'Class on Grass' and with a little assistance from our waitress, managed to get second prize, \$25 between all of us, it was soon consumed. We would recommend Joe's, but don't go alone. There was strong evidence that some of the local guys were 'batting for the other side' so to speak.

Day 2 was taken up by a full day seminar on communication. Much of the time we worked in groups of 15 or so greenkeepers. We were expecting the Americans to be very extravert and open but were surprised to find that they were generally quite reticent, quiet and unassuming. We found that we had to break the ice but once we got going our

communication problems were remarkably similar. Course closure, trolley bans and aeration formed the major topics. During the session I had to do a very brief talk on the communication problems identified by my group, but Jeremy Hughes drew the short straw and had to do a full job interview while being quizzed by the audience. Jeremy performed admirably, doing an excellent job of flying the flag for BIGGA.

While the content of the seminar was excellent, we urge BIGGA not to implement the format of 8am to 5pm. This distressingly early start to such a long day would not go down too well with the Harrogate hangover. We thought it was very uncivilised.

The next day we joined fellow greenkeepers from across the world on a full-day field trip to investigate the use of recycled sewage water as an irrigation source for golf courses. We stopped at two golf courses and two sewage treatment plants. Being Southern states there is a big demand for water, every house seemed to have a sprinkler system in the lawn. Weather pattern predictions have shown that there is going to be a big water shortage so innovative solutions such as re-use of sewage water are given high priority. The systems were fairly simple in concept. Pipe the town's sewage to the treatment plant, use physical and chemical processes to purify the water content, pump it into storage lakes and then sell it by licence to the end users.

As you can imagine, this was a particularly pungent day. One of the highlights was our lunch break at a Hebron Baptist church. The size of the building was enormous, as was the size of the lunch. Half a chicken and half a leg of prime pig was piled on every plate. Sewage plant or no sewage plant the boys tore in.

The church had served to remind us that we were in Bible belt country and this was reinforced that evening when we all attended the GCSAA opening ceremony. The Keynote Speaker was a tub-thumping, Bible-pushing former Ohio Congressman, Mr John R. Kasich. In an extraordinary display of political haranguing he explained how Ronald Reagan had single-handedly torn down the Berlin Wall and how Mr Bush was an angel of mercy about to rid the world of all evil. The audience seemed to love it

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The scale of the GCSAA Show is quite breathtaking

and gave him a standing ovation.

We all found it rather worrying but in our usual reserved British way declared it slightly inappropriate. We could not have imagined Willie Whitelaw addressing BTME with an impassioned plea to support British policy in the Falklands or Northern Ireland. It's just not cricket.

In Atlanta, politics was never very far from the surface. Despite the outward signs of integration of the black and white communities, it was obvious to outsiders that some clear divisions still remain. This was perfectly illustrated by an incident on our journey back to our hotel on the MARTA underground system. We witnessed a very loud argument between two black youths about the status of negroes (that's not the word they used) in Atlanta society. This debate raged while the rest of the 'mixed' passengers giggled with embarrassment. There was a final cutting remark from the youth who felt disenfranchised. "What about the Hispanics?" he declared. "I suppose you gonna tell me they have equal rights too?" The silence that followed was crushing.

Next day saw the opening of the show. Having been warned how enormous the show was going to be we were slightly surprised that it did not appear to be much bigger than BTME. The fact that it was all in one hall and that there was lots of space between stands made it appear bigger than it actually was. We searched the stands for freebies and bumped into quite a few British greenkeepers. I particularly appreciated the opportunity to talk directly to Penn State and Michigan State Universities to discuss the latest developments in greenkeeper education.

In the evening we attended the Prestige Club Dinner at the invitation of our hosts, Bernhard & Co. Apologies to all dignitaries involved but the highlight of the evening had to be the lift ride in the Marriot Marquis Hotel. This is a truly stunning building and we all piled on to fly up to the 47th floor in the glass-panelled lift. Some of us could not resist a second and third trip. Others, with white knuckles and pale faces, looked on.

On return to our hotel we caught the news that a grenade had been found in a suitcase at Gatwick. Rumours also abounded that terrorists were trying to knock an aeroplane out of the sky with missiles and the army had been called in and sealed off the airport. With the usual British aplomb we decided to turn to the golf channel and have another beer.

Our last full day was a Show day. Right next door to the Show was the CNN news building. Having come all this way some of us decided we would like to see something a little different and so we did the 45 minute tour. It was very interesting to see the news desk which had brought us

the story on Gatwick the night before, live from Atlanta. At 3pm we sat down with representative greenkeepers from the GCSAA Georgia Chapter. The one hour exchange of views was one of the most interesting sessions of the week, we all wished it had gone on longer. The Americans seemed mystified by our greenkeeper training scheme. Their reliance on the unqualified, largely Hispanic labour force was total. We were equally non-plussed by their complete and unwavering obsession with green speed. Although admitting it gave them severe agronomic problems, they simply said that if someone down the road gets 11 feet then you have to get 11 feet or you are out of a job. Admittedly, their Georgia climate, their budgets and their staffing levels make it much easier to achieve than we could but the logic in producing greens which the average golfer would find a tad frustrating simply passed us by. Our thanks to the Georgia Chapter for a frank exchange of views.

Our last morning was a mixture of show, shop and sight-seeing. A group of us did a brief tour of the headquarters of Coca-Cola. It was good fun sampling other flavours from around the world but we don't recommend the Italian style. We had great difficulty in getting Kevin Hodges out of the souvenir shop. Getting Kevin out of shops was a recurring problem.

Finally it was time to make our way to the airport. We had all had a great time and enjoyed each other's company. Relationships were cemented which will no doubt be of value to us all in the future. Meeting greenkeepers from Miami to Canada had also been a unique opportunity and a great learning experience. I must take this opportunity to thank all at Bernhard's who organised and made our trip such a memorable one. Thanks especially to the upfront team of Kim, Janet, Maureen, Bob and Sam and to all of those who worked so hard behind the scenes.

As the oldest member of the team I was, paradoxically, probably the least streetwise. I would just like to thank the two Tonies, Gordon, Kevin, Jeremy, Alex, Mark, Colin and my roommate, Duncan, for chaperoning me in the big city. When I flew out I had a healthy scepticism about corporate America. For me, much was confirmed. As I touched down at Gatwick, I had to admit, however, that as a group we had benefited enormously from the experience. As an individual, my horizons had been broadened. I had gone forward and learned some things about greenkeeping and some things about myself. In anyone's terms that means that the trip was a success.

So it's 'So long Atlanta – thanks for the ride!'