



# Silver Jubilee for a Golden Key Supporter

Scott MacCallum visits Kubota UK Ltd, a big company who have recently rejoined the Golden Key scheme.

The beauty of the fine turf industry is that it caters for the huge multinational conglomerate right down to the single businessman working out of the back of the garage. Everyone is welcome and everyone has a contribution to make in this most diverse of industries.

One company which very much comes out of the multinational bracket is The Kubota corporation of Japan, who turnover several billion pounds annually, and BIGGA is delighted to welcome Kubota (UK) Ltd back into the fold as a Golden Key supporter.

"I've always considered BIGGA to be a very important part of our business," explained David Roberts, Sales Manager for the Tractor & Groundcare Division.

"We need to press the buttons of all the right people in the golf club but, most importantly, we need to get to the Course Manager as he is the key person in the club for us.

"What you can't replace in the golf course sector is credibility and BIGGA has a huge amount of credibility. It is the major organisation for the golf greenkeeping fraternity and we see many positives in being involved and Kubota's name being linked with BIGGA," said David, as we sat in the Board room the Kubota (UK)'s Thame headquarters.

"I think we owe it to the greenkeeping industry to put something back in," he added.

The more you examine Kubota as a company the more you are amazed at its sheer size and ability to pioneer the sort of equipment greenkeepers have become so familiar with over the last 25 years.

Indeed, 2004 represents Kubota UK's silver anniversary and a special silver edition tractor was unveiled at Harrogate this year to commemorate the occasion.

"The first compact tractors, brought into the UK in the early 1970s were from Kubota. In 1982 the first mini excavators in the UK were by Kubota and in 1984 the first diesel ride-on rotary mowers were by Kubota," said David, who added that particularly through the hire market their mini excavators were finding their way on to golf courses.

"The theme running through it all is that we were the first, true pioneers," he added.

Indeed Kubota were one of the first companies to introduce a reversible tractor and a zero turn mower but admits they were possibly a little too far ahead of their time when they did it. Indeed, a zero turn mower has recently

been re-introduced by the company

Add to that the fact that Kubota are the market leader in the golf market for compact tractors and that many of the major manufacturers use Kubota diesel engines to propel their own machines and you have a pioneering company with the scale to make a real impression on any market.

Kubota was founded in 1890 by Mr Kubota who started off with an engineering forge in Osaka, Japan, where he began producing engines from the early 1920's, one of the first Japanese to do so.

From those beginnings the company has grown into a massive corporation with 17 manufacturing plants in Japan alone and other major manufacturing bases in, among others, America and Germany.

"We manufacture all over the world but also have distribution companies in most developed countries in the world. We're big," said David, who added that the Thame-base covers the UK and Ireland as well as Iceland.

Although a Japanese company, Kubota is keen to ensure that the national companies are run by the people who know the local market best.

"We have a Managing Director here as well as the Financial Director, a Technical Liaison Manager and a Product Specialist who are all Japanese but the company understands that no-one understands the UK market better than UK people. They don't come here and insist that we should do things the way they are done at home in Japan," said Dave, who also dispelled the stereotypical cliché that they all do Tai Chi every morning.

"What they are doing is bringing in the best of Japanese product and allowing us to sell it our way."

The other benefit from being a multi-national is that the UK and Ireland is the first stop when the Japanese company is looking to develop new grass cutting machinery.

"No-one grows grass like we do here so if you are going to develop a new grass cutting machine you test it in the hardest conditions and with our climate we are pretty demanding in terms of grass cutting machinery."

The first compact tractors were produced around the late '50s and early '60s as fundamentally a paddy field tractor and it was these that British entrepreneur, John Croft, saw in the early '70s and realised the potential for



▲ The first compact tractors in the UK were Kubota



▲ The special edition silver tractor to commemorate the Silver Anniversary

# Kubota



commercial greenhouse owners in the UK for use in poly tunnels.

"That market, based on two models of Kubota compact tractor, ballooned as users in other markets saw the potential and in 1979 Kubota (UK) Ltd was set up to take advantage of it.

"We capitalised on having the market to ourselves. It was very embryonic but we had 100% of it. Obviously over the years other people have come in including some strong competitive names and our number one position has been attacked, but our heritage and legacy, is that history is very strong with Kubota.

"People don't forget that they first bought a Kubota tractor in the '70s, it served them well, had a good second hand value and that the next one they bought was also very good," said David.

The number of compact tractors in the Kubota range rose along with their popularity and new markets were identified, including chicken and pig farmers, horticulturists, estate managers and, of course, golf.

In percentage terms of the overall Kubota business golf does not represent an enormous element but David is of the opinion that in real terms golf has a significant strategic role for the company.

"With so many golf courses in UK and Ireland and so many people playing the game, golf is a superb shop window for our products. More than that it fills a huge chunk of the 30-60 horsepower market and if we didn't have golf we wouldn't have such strong sales in that sector."

He also sees the role of the tractor, which was under some threat a few years ago, growing. Eight years ago people were probably sounding the death knell for the tractor with self propelled fairway mowers and utility vehicles, but you need a tractor with creep speed and a good lifting capacity to carry heavy deep aeration equipment and we can offer that.

"The compact tractor is still the ultimate versatile tool. ATVs and utility vehicles are great at getting you from A-B but as a workhorse you can't beat a tractor.

"The role of the tractor has changed for us and there will always be a place for the tractor on the golf course."

Indeed, David feels that with the American influence, where larger, heavier implements are being introduced, you need larger, but lightweight, 80+ horsepower tractors with turf tyres and these are now being seen on UK courses.

"A Course Manager may need a larger but lightweight tractor on turf tyres but now farmers are asking for these tractors and we can add weight to them and put on agricultural tyres," said David, who added that Kubota were now exploiting the higher horsepower markets in general.

He is also keen to take increasing advantage of the fact that there are some sophisticated budgets operated at golf clubs and the fact the Kubotas

hold their value and that maintenance costs are low makes long term budgeting much easier.

"You can only set five year budgets if you know how much things are going to cost in the first place, how much they are going to cost to run over the period of the budget and, most importantly, how much they are going to be worth at the end of that period. Then you can fix your costs.

"Kubota have one of the best residual values in the business - second hand Kubotas are like hens' teeth at the moment, you just can't get them - so it makes them extremely attractive propositions."

The Thame headquarters of Kubota UK Ltd has a full time staff of 72 and the dealer network numbers 47 with many of them being multi branch operations.

"I place a great deal of emphasis on our relationship with dealers and know full well that while they can't do without us, we certainly can't do without them.

"Our job is to service the end user and we can't do that without a dealer so we are intrinsically linked. I certainly don't tell them that I want 50 more units a year out of them or which demonstrator they must carry. That's down to them. If they are successful we're successful and vice versa."

Thame is split into three stand-alone divisions, Tractor & Groundcare products, an Engine division and the Construction Machinery Division.

Kubota supply diesel engines to Ransomes Jacobsen, Hayter and Toro among others and that particular division is enjoying a boom time at the moment.

"Kubota engines have very low emissions and with regulations becoming more and more stringent this is a very strong element in our favour.

"In the early '90s we were the first diesel manufacturer to meet and surpass the California Air Resources Board Emissions Test and now in Europe the Tier 1, Tier 2 and soon to be Tier 3 and 4 of regulations are raising the bar every time.

"We've got great confidence in knowing that in Japan there is a massive amount of engine development going on, because, as we are the largest manufacturer, we can afford to invest a lot of money into research and development," said David, who added that as well as low emissions, lower noise levels are also a great plus for the Kubota engine.

Kubota sees joining BIGGA's Golden Key programme as putting something back into the industry and an opportunity to get out and meet more greenkeepers.

"We'll be wearing our Golden Key ties with pride at BIGGA functions," said David.

I'm sure everyone at BIGGA will be delighted to see Kubota representatives at National, Regional and Section events.