

A Rich History

STRI

75 YEARS
1929-2004

Scott MacCallum meets Gordon McKillop and Anne Wilson, of the STRI, to discuss the Institute's 75th anniversary celebrations.

I've always thought that golf history is great. The game is steeped in it, but it's not so old that we have to rely on archaeological digs and programmes like Time Team turning up an Allan Robertson niblick to make it real.

We can still talk to people who actually saw historic figures like Bobby Jones and Ben Hogan play the game. I'm not that old but even I've seen Bobby Locke and Sam Snead hit a golf ball. I once even shook hands with someone who knew James Braid for heaven's sake. You're not that likely to get that close to a legendary figure in your field if you're a Roman or ancient Greek scholar.

Golf is so much more accessible.

Take 1929 for example. It may have seen the Wall Street Crash but it was a fine year for the game of golf.

The great Walter Hagen won The Open Championship at Muirfield and Bobby Jones, warmed up for his stellar Grand Slam year, by winning the US Open at Winged Foot. There was no Masters in 1929 and it saw only the second ever official Ryder Cup match, at Moortown Golf Club, in Leeds. Great Britain and Ireland won the Cup 7-5.

But it was another event in the north of England, not far from Moortown, that perhaps holds the greatest significance for most of you reading this article. The reason is that in 1929 the STRI, or to be more correct the forerunner to the STRI, the Board of Greenkeeping Research, was founded and began its work at Bingley.

This month the STRI is celebrating its 75th anniversary and doing so in style with an interactive activity day where the staff will demonstrate to guests what they have been up to for the last 75 years and what can be expected in the future. Guests can also get "hands on" with some of the experiments.

Again it highlights how rich, but relatively short, the history is, that current Chief Executive, Dr Gordon McKillop, is only the fifth man to hold the post since 1929. The others being RB Dawson, John Escritt, Peter Hayes and Mike Canaway.

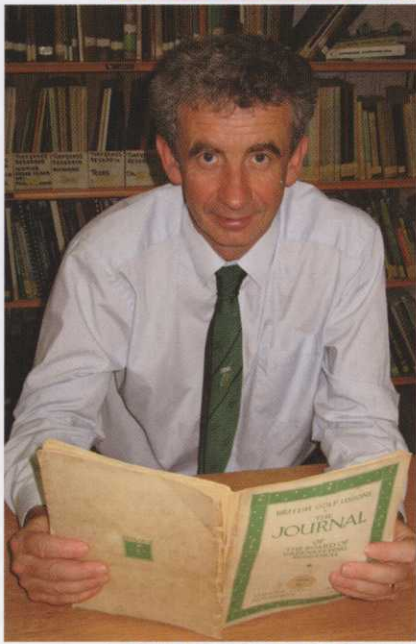
"We are looking forward to welcoming many of the people and organisations who have worked for and been helped by the Institute over the years. In particular we are delighted that our President Lord Griffiths and R&A Chief Executive Peter Dawson will be attending," said Gordon.

The quietly spoken Scot presides over an organisation much different from the one which first open its doors all those years ago.

There was initially a staff of five – two years later it had already gone up to 12 - led by the legendary RB Dawson, whose zeal and enthusiasm laid the foundations for the Institute's success, but the formation of the then Board was the brainchild of two R&A members, Norman Hackett and Percy Clough, who had seen the benefits and improvements to America's golf courses from the recently launched USGA Green Section and who wanted to see something similar in the UK.

"Bingley was chosen as the site of the new Board as both Norman Hackett and Percy Clough lived locally and knew people who offered accommodation and trial sites on the St Ives Estate. The Board was funded by the R&A and the Four Home Unions and the first office was in the original Mansion House of the Estate," explained Anne Wilson, Head of External Affairs, who has studied the Institute's history in preparing a commemorative Bulletin for the 75th Anniversary.

In the early days, while the Board was primarily concerned with work on golf courses it did undertake work for other sports and the Croquet Association was the first non-golfing body to subscribe in 1929, followed by Arsenal Football Club and Skipton Tennis Club the following year. By 1931 the



▲ Above, left: STRI Chief Executive Dr Gordon McKillop.

Bingley was conducting 181 visits a year and 1641 letters were being sent out while that same decade 1400 samples were being sent to the laboratory for testing every year.

It was in 1951 that the Board changed its name to become the Sports Turf Research Institute a move which recognised officially that many more sports than just golf were benefiting for its work.

The main means of communication in the early days was the 'Journal of the Board of Greenkeeping Research' which was also launched in 1929 and that very first issue holds pride of place in the Institute's Library. Priced at five shillings the Journal lists the founding subscribers and also gives an insight into the problems being experienced on golf courses at the time.

"Believed you me nothing changes in terms of what issues were being discussed and it's interesting to read the letters from golf clubs describing the problems they are experiencing," explained Anne, who was also delighted to discover how many of the original subscribers are still involved with the Institute today.

"However, one of the earliest problems was that there was no fertilisers as such and no dedicated pesticides or weed killers so the mass destruction of



▲ Centre: Anne Wilson, Head of External Affairs. Left: The STRI Trial Fields. Top: The entrance to the STRI offices in Bingley.

weeds and pests was just not possible, while there was only manual or horse drawn machinery. Another issue was that back then there were no grasses bred purely for amenity use and the grasses on golf courses tended to be from agriculture."

Indeed, part of that latter problem was addressed by RB Dawson himself, as he was heavily involved in the development of new grasses. There is actually a grass named after him – the Dawson Red Fescue. The STRI has long since stopped breeding its own grasses preferring to leave that to the seed companies.

The early success of "Bingley" can be judged by the fact that staff numbers grew year on year as the quality of the services offered grew and they became known to an increasing number of golf clubs and sporting bodies. That now stands at 70, including a large team of people who look after the extensive trial sites.

High on that list of services offered by STRI is the agronomy which was based solely out of Bingley, with agronomists making tours of the country before returning to base, until 1992 when Andy Cole became the first regionally based STRI agronomist.

"The main benefit of the original method was that the agronomists all saw each other regularly and were able to share experiences and issues, but now we have the benefit of an agronomist being based in a local area, getting to know the local people and building up relationships and knowledge of the area. It also cuts down on travelling expenses," said Gordon.

There are now 17 agronomists, each of whom operates under the agreed policies of the STRI under the control of Jeff Perris, and they all meet twice a year to discuss agronomic issues as well as more regular meeting with colleagues in their area.

"They also go on joint visits to see how each other works and studies the reports that each other writes," explained Gordon.

The Institute also has its own golf course architecture department led by Jonathan Tucker; a construction division and an ecology department comprising Bob Taylor and Lee Penrose.

"The increasing importance placed on golf course ecology has been one of the most significant changes in recent years. Bob and Lee judge the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition sponsored by Scotts, Symbio and now WRAP," said Gordon.

The STRI enjoys a close relationship with the USGA Green Section and their other sister organisation, the New Zealand Sports Turf Institute, and there is a regular exchange of staff and knowledge with each.

"On the advisory side we have an annual exchange with the USGA and Steve Baker has sat on a number of the USGA committees including the one looking at the USGA specification. We also have a research and a construction departmental exchange every other year.

"With the NZSTRI we regularly send speakers to their biannual conference. There is a whole raft of benefits to be had from such arrangements including seeing how different people and organisations tackle problems in different climatic conditions to how different organisations manage and run themselves and how they interact with their governing bodies," explained Gordon.

For instance the USGA Green Section is purely golf and is funded for by the USGA and it means agronomists can visit golf clubs throughout the county and offer heavily subsidised advice. In New Zealand, the New Zealand Golf Association or the Cricket of Bowls Association give the Institute a sum of money to visit all the golf, cricket or bowls clubs.

"Neither, as we do, relies on individual subscriptions. It's swings and roundabout really. It would be nice to have that sort of income but having to depend on ourselves keeps us on our toes," smiled Gordon.

Among the research work which is being carried out at Bingley at the moment is glass sand testing for WRAP; composting trials on behalf of the R&A and Stephen Baker's work on the European green specification.

One area which has had a significant impact on the Institute is in the area of professional indemnity insurance which has become increasingly hard to get and, particularly after 9/11, become much more expensive.

"When I started we were paying £15,000 a year for it but it has escalated to the stage where we now pay £65,000," said Gordon, who added that living in such an increasingly litigious society was one of the reasons behind the STRI splitting into two with STRI and STRI Ltd.

"That way we can protect the assets of the main organisation by grouping everything we do which isn't liable to come under the professional indemnity into STRI Ltd. Unfortunately we have to pass on the added cost of insurances to our customers but some companies must have gone out of business because they couldn't get insurance or it was too expensive," explained Gordon.

Both Anne and Gordon are relieved, not to say adamant, that it will be someone else who is involved in organising the Institute's Centenary as the 75th celebrations have taken up considerable time and effort.

You can be sure that their work will be rewarded on the day and that staff and invited guests will be toasting 1929 and wishing the STRI every success for the next 75 years and beyond.