

The Coordinator

Gareth Jones travels to Hollywood to meet a man responsible not for directing films, but greenkeeper education.

When told that I was to visit Hollywood for a story I got rather excited. All that glitz and glamour, a chance to see the famous Hollywood Sign and the possibility of spotting a celebrity or two sounded great. I was then told it was Hollywood, Birmingham - so not quite as glamorous then.



Saying that, the UK's Hollywood does have some similarities to its American namesake. While Hollywood USA looks to set the standard for 21st century cinema, the UK version is equally determined to rise the bar, but in education. Instead of the Walk of Fame on Hollywood Boulevard, where all the famous film stars have their names and handprints immortalised, Hollywood, Birmingham, should have a Walk of Education - or something slightly snappier - to recognise all the highly

trained greenkeepers that are being produced within the region.

If such a Boulevard existed it would run alongside Gay Hill Golf Club and, to date, there would be 86 stars imprinted on it celebrating all those who have successfully attended varying training courses that have been held at the club, through the BIGGA Midland Section. Paul Woodham is the Course Manager at the club, while he also fills the position of Training Coordinator for the Section, and his progressive nature, encouraged by the Section, has seen a renewed focus on local education for the average greenkeeper.

"I attended a A1 Assessor Course, but had to travel all the way down to Heathrow for it. So to get qualified involved a lot of expense in terms of

Assessor Course becoming one of the first courses to run at the club.

Paul's strong relationship with Gay Hill's hierarchy and the club's forward thinking approach has also knocked down one of the major barriers to education - cost. The club give their facilities for free, cutting out a major outlay for any education event, and Paul, through the Section, takes every opportunity to gain subsidised funding from BIGGA. It means that the Section can offer dramatically reduced training to its members. This, combined with the fact that the training is in the local area, means that vital training and career development has become instantly more accessible to the developing greenkeeper.

"The set up we have here at Gay Hill and the great funding we get from BIGGA means that we can offer quality training at a inexpensive cost. In turn, this lower cost and the reduced travelling time means more greenkeepers are willing to attend and clubs are happier about paying for it. The GTC provides quality training for work based assessors and other training programmes, while BIGGA provide training through their Continue to Learn Regional Training programmes. These come with great financial support, but I don't think that they are utilised enough by other Sections. I am always onto the BIGGA Education Department asking what funding we can get. All I can do is ask the question and most the time we get the help we need. I don't think enough people realise what financial help there is for education from BIGGA," stated the progressive Course Manager.

The help from Gay Hill clearly makes a huge difference to Paul's campaign



travelling costs and time away from doing my duties on the golf course. I was lucky that I could attend, but I knew there must be loads of greenkeepers who couldn't attend courses like this due to the travelling distance and the inconvenience of location. I thought that there must be a better way to do this and realised that the key was setting up somewhere local for quality training," explained Paul, who has been at the club for over five years.

The light bulb flicked on in Paul's head. Gay Hill was the perfect place to hold such training. It is in a central location to the Section and just two minutes off the M42, while it boasts a good workshop, an array of equipment, a strong, healthy golf course and a clubhouse with ideal facilities for training. After gaining advice from the GTC and speaking with Gay Hill's Captain and Chairman, the future of Midland Section education was born, with the A1



to increase greenkeeper development. By offering their facilities and use of their equipment for free - they only charge to cover the cost of providing lunch for the course delegates - they may not be benefiting financially, but they certainly are in reputation and staff moral.

"The club are building a reputation for training and by doing this they are showing a clear commitment to our industry, which can only be a good thing. One benefit is that by offering training here it means that our staff are at the front of the queue for it. The club is giving the staff a chance to improve themselves and develop new skills, this in turn improves job satisfaction and motivation levels. A lot of it isn't just giving the boys new skills, but giving them the confidence to achieve. So then the more qualified they are, the more responsibility they can take on, which is great for everyone concerned.



"Of course, if we do lose a member of staff you would hope that our reputation for training would then attract a higher standard of applicant. It all leads itself to a greater standard of golf course, which is the overall aim for any golf club really."

It's not just the staff at Gay Hill that profit from this type of local training, it's the green staff at surrounding clubs too. As word spreads of this initiative more clubs are sending their staff to these programmes. In turn these members can return to their club after their training and pass on what they have learnt to their colleagues. These courses also allow neighbouring greenkeepers a chance to meet each other and discuss native greenkeeping topics.

This is highlighted on the day 1 visit, as Gay Hill is busy hosting the final afternoon of a two day chainsaw course. Led by GTC recommended Trainer Alan Stephens, the course has four members on it - the maximum limit for Health and Safety reasons - all from differing local clubs.

"We had some trees that needed cutting down and wanted to train another member of staff for chainsaw use. So we set up the course here, got in Alan and the funding sorted, and then spread the word to the local clubs. They were keen to send their boys to such a local and cheap course," said Paul, who also pointed out that one of the members of the course didn't have access to a car and wouldn't be able to attend such a course if it was outside the local community, emphasising one of the true appeals of this training.

The four members of this particular course aren't donning Course Manager jackets, they are instead the life blood of the industry - the members of the everyday green staff that crave to develop more practical skills and play their part in the progression of both their own course and greenkeeping as an industry. This local, inexpensive, practical type of training is perfect for such greenkeepers and the rewards are plentiful for the individuals, the clubs and the industry as a whole.

"If we want to be seen as a fully professional and progressive industry we have to take everyone with us. We have to raise the level throughout all elements of greenkeeping, not just the top few percent," concluded Paul.

That just sums it all up.

