

Keeping it Green



Scott MacCallum pays a visit to John Deere's UK headquarters and finds out that for such a huge company, success in the golf and grounds care industry may be relatively recent, but it's continuing to grow.



Type the name "John Deere" into Google and do you know how many entries come up? Over 2,470,000. Reduce that to just "Deere" and it's over 11,600,000, with virtually every one of them referring to "John Deere".

That's just a measure of the size of the John Deere company worldwide and the impact the green machines have had on the world. But don't just make the mistake of thinking that John Deere is purely and simply a manufacturer of agricultural, grounds care and domestic machinery. There is also a huge industry in children's toys, whether it be ride-on tractors or die-cast models; a John Deere baseball cap is now a sought after piece of apparel, while John Deere also sponsors a tournament on the US Tour which receives additional publicity each year as it offers a single qualifying spot for The Open Championship – giving Michelle Wie, a regular sponsor's invitee, a much hyped chance to be the first woman to appear in a men's Major.



Home Park GC from Surrey at Reynolds Plantation Resort, Georgia, USA at the John Deere World Championship Golf Tournament final last November. Left to right: Club Owner Neil Burke, John Deere Dealer Salesman Andy Page of Palmer's Turfcare at Hailsham, East Sussex, Richard Whyman of BIGGA, Secretary Elaine Purton, Head Greenkeeper Danny O'Rourke

It may therefore be surprising to learn that John Deere in the UK recently celebrated a joint anniversary – completing 40 years in the agricultural market and 20 in the grounds care division. In that time John Deere has made a huge impact on the golf market, and the distinctive green liveried machines can be seen at many clubs in all parts of the country.

"We built our business in agriculture around strong customer support and without a doubt that was a key element in how we were able to grow our grounds care business so rapidly – focusing on product and parts backup, and overall offering a level of support that was new to the grounds care business," explained Richard Johnson, who became managing director of John Deere Limited in the UK & Ireland last year.

"Our challenge now is to sustain that and to keep ourselves ahead of the competition. While we feel we have set the benchmark in this area, our competitors are always looking to try and close the gap."

So how do Richard and his staff of 117 at the John Deere Limited headquarters at Langar, near Nottingham, plan to move forward?

"We enjoy a reasonable market share in golf, but with the depth of the product line we have and the opportunities presented by the new products coming through, we certainly don't feel as if we've exhausted our growth in the golf market, and we look forward to increasing this in the future."

With expansion in the golf market seen as steadying off, at best, such confidence is admirable. Richard is not gazing into a rose tinted crystal ball, however, but is merely hinting at what John Deere may be bringing to the market place over the next few years.

"We are always looking at new technology. A good example of this is our new 2500E hybrid greens mower, which combines conventional diesel power with electric motors to drive the cutting reels, and this machine has already become well established at golf courses throughout the UK and Ireland. On the agricultural side we have developed market leading GPS



Richard Johnson



David Hart

guidance systems, and these are the types of cutting edge technology that the company is constantly looking to transfer across the divisions."

John Deere has always been renowned for the importance it places on research and development, and the company regularly takes greenkeepers from all over the world to its feedback sessions, with the information exchange providing much for the JD boffins to chew on.

"Today John Deere worldwide spends something in the order of \$1.5 million a day on R&D, and a key part of this is our feedback sessions," says Richard. "We have held them for many years and do so to find out what the customer – the greenkeeper – is looking for from our product range, whether it be concept machines which may take five years to come to the market place, if they make it at all, or refinements to the ergonomics of machines which are much closer to being available for sale."

And the information that the company gleans from this influx of course managers is rarely wasted.

"Many of our golf and turf machines over the years have been based on asking greenkeepers what they want to see in the future, and trying to develop the products around the answers they give, with environmental issues such as noise pollution and the risk of oil leakages on greens becoming increasingly important. So if we can save the end user money in running costs, and if we have a product that is more environmentally friendly, then everybody benefits."

Richard has been with John Deere since 1988, when he joined as a business management trainee having studied agricultural engineering at Harper Adams Agricultural College in Newport, Shropshire. Following spells as a grounds care territory manager and then homeowner equipment product manager, he became UK business development manager.

Richard then moved to Germany in 2001 for a two and a half year stint at the European HQ in Mannheim as European parts & service manager, covering the agricultural side of the business. He returned to the UK as agricultural division sales manager for southern England, before being appointed managing director in succession to Alec McKee in January last year.

"I'm lucky to have sampled life on both the grounds care and agricultural sides of the company," he adds. "Working in Germany was also extremely valuable in gaining a wider perspective of the business, on both a European and global basis."

While Richard is the MD, the man who is now the public face of John Deere's grounds care division is David Hart.

David is another agricultural engineering

student, this time from Lincolnshire College of Agriculture & Horticulture, and he joined the industry 22 years ago as a salesman with John Deere dealership Ben Burgess. He entered the John Deere fold six years later as an area manager, product support for the agricultural division, and moved on to become an agricultural territory manager based in the south west of England.

After five years he then moved to Langar as product manager for harvesting equipment, including combine harvesters, balers and mowers, before becoming commercial & consumer equipment division manager in 2003.

It may have been by a long and circuitous route, but David eventually got to where he wanted to be because grounds care is in the blood – his late

father, Ernie, was both a member of the IOG and a BIGGA Life Member.

Having already attended many of the company's feedback sessions, David is well placed to see whether there are regional differences in what the world's course managers are looking for.

"To be honest there are more similarities between golf and turf products around the world than there are in commercial mowing, for example, where you see a lot of localised or regional trends," he says.

A large proportion of the work carried out at John Deere's Langar headquarters is education and training related, with four full time trainers, five classrooms and four dedicated, state-of-the-art workshops designed specifically to help both dealer staff and end users become well acquainted with the full product range.

"We have a network of 120 dealers in the agricultural business and 44 in the golf and turf market, as well as 38 dedicated dealers on the homeowner side," reveals Richard.

Added to that the John Deere website, one of those millions of Google entries, is becoming increasingly valuable in allowing customers to do their homework and benchmarking in advance before they venture out to a dealer.

John Deere has been a Golden Key Supporter for over 10 years now and the company is committed to supporting BIGGA into the future.

"We have had a very strong relationship with BIGGA over the years and we view the activities of the association and what it does for the industry as a whole very favourably," says Richard.

"We have been very happy to support these activities through different means of sponsorship, and as both John Deere and the industry move forward I do believe that BIGGA has a key role to play."

Already prominent in that support is the donation BIGGA receives from the John Deere Team Championship – the combined golf club and dealer event for which the association receives £25 for every team entered (the donation from the 2006 event was £7200).

The Great Britain event (an equivalent is also held in Ireland) involves qualifying tournaments around the country, with a grand final – last year held at East Sussex National – from which the winning team, comprising club captain, club secretary, course manager and the dealer, goes on to represent GB every alternate year in the John Deere World Championships held in the USA.

So there you have it. John Deere is a huge multinational company, and its UK and Ireland arm is very much committed to the future well being of BIGGA and greenkeepers in both countries. And thanks to this article there will now be over 11,600,001 entries on Google!



Gregg Breningmeyer, Deere & Company's Worldwide Golf and Turf, Sales and Marketing Director presented Past Chairman, Richard Whyman with a donation to BIGGA