



NEW FRIENDS AND NEW KNOWLEDGE

By Daniel Lightfoot

When the letter came through the door to tell myself and the other nine successful applicants that we had been chosen to represent BIGGA and Bernhards at the GIS conference in Orlando, I don't think any of us quite realised what we had signed up for. It all started at Harrogate Week, our own show that we can all be very proud of. We were invited to a presentation at the Majestic Hotel which gave all the new delegates a chance to meet and talk to those who had had been on the trip before. I was a little surprised that 10 greenkeepers were given their plane tickets at a free drinks gathering at Harrogate, but the selection committee must have had confidence in their delegates. It also helped me to know who to look out for at a crowded Gatwick airport.

Everyone made it to the airport and with no delays we were soon on our way. The flight landed on time but we were nearly reduced to nine, as Alan Walker was detained at Orlando airport, suspected of being an International Terrorist. After some expert negotiation by Kim - and Alan threatening to put his kilt on again - they let him in and we set off for the short trip to the hotel.

Sunday evening was enjoyed acclimatising to the weather, finding our bearings and getting to know the other delegates over dinner. Unfortunately, there were two restaurants with Fridays in the title, which caused a little confusion, but it wasn't long before the night was over and the trip

really began. Bernhards had organised a fantastic schedule of events for us which began with one of the most impressive.

MONDAY

The first trip of the day was to Isleworth Country Club. A Steve Smyers designed golf course, where the fusion of sport and art created some impressive and radical images. We were met by the Equipment Manager, Chris Langley, who gave us a tour of the "shop", as they called it in the US. It was very impressive and the attention to detail was second to none. I tried to justify whether 36 hand mowers were necessary for 18 holes but I decided it was best not to think about it.

The impressive machinery shed and the even more impressive Kerry Jones!

After a tour of the maintenance facility we went for a drive around the property. Similar to many courses in the US, a large community of houses surrounds the golf course, one of which belonged to Tiger Woods. The golf course is set up to accommodate the touring pros that live on the site and in March they compete in The Tavistock Cup against the pros from Isleworth's sister course, Lake Nona, which we had the privilege of visiting in the afternoon.

At Lake Nona, we were met by Murray Russell, the Superintendent, who gave us a tour of the "shop" before we ventured out on to the golf

course. The course was in excellent condition and the chance to ask the Superintendent about the course and find out a little more about warm season grasses was great. My favourite answer to why it was so quiet was that the course was closed on Mondays for maintenance. I don't think that will go down well with the General Manager back at home. Murray was great fun and I would like to thank him again for the time he gave us on a memorable trip. There was little time to relax though. Soon we were back to the hotel, quick change and out for dinner and a few beers. Not too many though as we had to be ready for lectures at 8am.

TUESDAY

Tuesday was spent at the Conference Centre for a day's lecture on tournament preparation by John Millar CGCS, agronomist for the LPGA tour. It was an informative talk, but it did remind me that we do things pretty well in the UK. There was nothing new or groundbreaking, but just a reminder to stick to sound greenkeeping principles, as well as making sure no one drives a stake in to your irrigation pipework before an event. The evening was spent having dinner, a few beers and a chance to meet our new Chairman, Kenny Mackay. It was also a wonderful opportunity for some of the guys to show off their karaoke skills, apart from Ian and Mike who shamefully refused to get up.

WEDNESDAY

Wednesday was another highlight with an all day field trip. It began with a trip to Arnold Palmer's Bay Hill Club and Lodge. The Superintendent, Matt Beaver, gave us a tour of the maintenance facility followed by a trip to the turf nursery where we looked at six turf grass trials. They were also working on a sub-air type system to manipulate the temperature of the root zone to enable them to grow one type of grass all year round. It is amazing how some areas of greenkeeping have changed over the last 20 years.

We all got back on the bus for a short trip to Shingle Creek Golf Club where we were met by Superintendent, Rickey Craig. He was a very impressive individual. The "shop" was spotless and he seemed very much in control of the operation. It was a shame with so many in the group we could not see more of the course and with a quick look at a green we were back in the bus for a trip to Orange County Golf Club and driving range.

The driving range was outstanding. All turf and bigger than most golf courses in the UK. A quick lunch was organised with an opportunity to hit some balls before a looking at the maintenance facility and a few holes.

Next up was Disney's World of Sports. It was great to see something different and to witness how baseball parks and soccer pitches are prepared. In many ways it was no different to home, too much play and



not enough time to rest pitches between games. Disney is a very profit orientated facility and the Turf Manager, Preston Courtney, seemed to be under a lot of pressure to get pitches turned around quickly for the next game. Even on the turf tour we were taken past the Disney shop before getting back on the bus!

No sooner were we back at the hotel, it was suit on and off to the Rosen Centre for the official opening of the show and a poolside reception. The evening was spent on International Drive and at a bar called Howl at the Moon. A wonderful venue with live music and lots of laughs.

THURSDAY - THE SHOW BEGINS

Thursday's highlight was being invited to the GCSAA Opening Ceremony where Greg Norman was honoured with the Old Tom Morris Award. He spoke openly and passionately about his views on golf course management. His comment that "you can't beat a bit of brown!" went down well with those following the sustainable path! The rest of the day was spent looking round the show. It was big, but in all honesty no better than our own show at Harrogate. This was a pleasant surprise and made you very proud as a visiting UK greenkeeper. There was a still lot to see, many people to meet and an informative day was had by all.

In the evening we were invited to the Prestige Dinner hosted by Bernhards. The guest list read like a who's who of golf and greenkeeping with illustrious names such as Turgeon, Vargas and Dye. The security of sitting next to a fellow delegate was gone as we were all put on different tables but it was a great opportunity to meet some new faces. Another trip to Howl at the Moon in the evening and we were suddenly over half way through.

FRIDAY

Friday was spent having another look around the show and spending a couple of hours manning the BIGGA booth. The Master Greenkeeper Award was popular and it was great to see a lot of interest in the Association. A few book purchases, chance meetings with old friends and numerous cups of coffee in the international centre (which is a great resource for those going next year). The evening was spent at the Presidents dinner and at an out of town steakhouse, which was enjoyed by all.

SATURDAY

Saturday was an opportunity to do a bit of sightseeing with a quick trip to Universal Studios. The evening was spent at the Ransomes Jacobsen function at City Jazz and we would all like to thank Dave Withers for his kind hospitality. The evening finished with a game of crazy golf at the Pirates Cove. My putting was awful, but the deserved winner Kerr Rowan can add this victory to his Longest Drive trophy from this year's National Championships.

SUNDAY

Sunday was spent relaxing by the pool or doing a bit of shopping before the flight home. Alan managed to get through customs safely this time, but the Captain's message of a 2-degree, wet Gatwick airport told us our trip was nearly over. A flurry of emails when we got back confirmed everyone got home safely.

On behalf of all of the delegates I would like to thank John Pemberton and Sam McLean for selecting us and Stephen Bernhard for his support of the programme. Stephen's vision is to expand the delegation across Europe and beyond. It is a great commitment and all the delegates who have been lucky enough to be selected appreciate his generosity.

Our thanks also go the large group of lecturers and superintendents who made our journey so enjoyable and to Kim Furnell for organising such a wonderful trip. Finally my personal thanks go to all of my colleagues on the trip for making it so much fun and an experience we will all never forget.