



# On the Soapbox

As part of a mini series, people from the industry discuss what they have gained from attending Harrogate Week. This month, Past BIGGA Chairman, Billy McMillan, reminisces...

## **I attended the very first Harrogate and can particularly recall the Royal Hall where the education was held. It was an eerie place and I distinctly remember the echoes.**

Education was absolutely the main focus of why I was there and I remember Jim Arthur as a speaker, as was my dad and Walter Woods.

If I'm honest, we couldn't see the images on the screen, and the acoustics were poor because the IT at the time wasn't the best, but it was a very exciting time for a young greenkeeper.

Once a speaker had finished I used to rush out, run round the stands and get back to hear the next speaker, sneaking in the side door trying to not be found out.

Today we've found a wonderful balance of ensuring an audience for the Continue to Learn programme as well as a footfall for BTME.

This has not just happened but is the culmination of a lot of hard work and know-how.

The IT, which backs up the education nowadays, is exceptional and certainly on a par with anything else I've seen anywhere.

In fact many other bodies have said to me that they had learned a lot on how to set up their own conferences.

We have certainly done a lot of good things at Harrogate during the past number of years.

Outside of education the one thing, more than any other, that I get from Harrogate is the camaraderie.

This has grown beyond my wildest dreams and I can't think of any other industry where you can go, sit down with your peers and share time.

Frankly we learn just as much out of the Educational programme in the restaurants around the town at night then ever we do in the formal setting.

We are blessed, aren't we?

I've made so many friends, and not just in the UK. I've now got close friends in Scandinavia, Canada, America, all over the world in fact, and not just greenkeepers, there are Professors and experts in their field.

They are all accessible, give freely of their time and don't limit it to the podium to chew the fat.

This is a very personal industry and we are an extended family.

Even with the trade I have made as many friends from all the companies which show at Harrogate over the years, never mind

greenkeepers being passionate, they possess every bit as much love for the business as we do.

That's not to say that everyone agrees, but what strikes you when two people don't agree is that a healthy debate that takes place and at the end of it, there they would be in the bar having a drink together.

No malice and 99% of the time the reason for the argument would be agronomic.

A difference of opinion and a bit of passion is a wonderful thing to behold.

Some of the machinery that I have seen for the first time at Harrogate is wonderful.

There is no substitute for touching, feeling, seeing and discussing.

I can still remember seeing the latest innovations covering every area of golf course equipment we could ever wish to use on show at Harrogate.

If it is market leading and worth having, invariably it has been at Harrogate.

It is an exciting place to be on the product front and also and you can always expect to see the latest materials on show around the halls from seed to soil and everything in-between.

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After I'd experienced around 15 Harrogate's, and never getting much sleep, I introduced a basic rule some years ago.

I would try to get to bed on the same day as I got up.

I'm not a drinker, but what I am is a hoarder of information and I'm hungry to absorb everyone's views.

But there is never enough time and although I introduced this new rule it has never actually worked.

I still find myself starved of sleep during the course of a week.

I remember one year I accumulated nine and a half hours sleep over the entire week.

It wasn't uncommon for me to look at my watch and realise that it was easier for me to go to breakfast than it was to go to bed.

I'm not sure if people quite appreciate how much we take over Harrogate town during the week.

If you walk down any street or pop into any restaurant you will find that it is full of greenkeepers, sometimes upwards of a hundred of them.

I've been strolling through the town and got chatting to someone on a street corner and ended up there for an hour talking about the benefits of bent over fescue, or red machines, over orange machines over green machines or deep aeration over shallow aeration.

As for my own personal highlights I have too many to mention but I can particularly remember my year as Chairman – handing out prizes and representing the Association.

That year was the highlight of my career representing greenkeepers at our show what a treat that was for me personally.

For those people who have never been all I can say is that it will exceed your wildest expectations.

If you are not a social animal you can always tag along, not say a word and earwig.

You will still learn a tremendous amount.

I learn more in four days than I could learn in years and you can't get close to the buzz I get driving home.

My life would be a sadder place without Harrogate, of that I'm pretty sure.



BIGGA Past Chairman, Billy McMillan, enjoying a desert at last year's Social Night

*Billy McMillan*

The views expressed within On The Soapbox are not necessarily those of Greenkeeper International