



On the Soapbox

As part of a mini series, people from the industry discuss what they have gained from attending Harrogate Week. This month, Tim Merrell, MD of The Grass Group gives his thoughts



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I first visited BTME in the mid 90s and have been coming ever since.

Initially we operated under the wing of Kawasaki UK, and our Trillo products were used on Kawasaki Mules, which had just been launched onto the golf course market.

My first impressions of Harrogate were that I was genuinely surprised at how busy it was. At that time I had no experience of this market sector, but it was lively with a very good atmosphere.

At that time our products didn't automatically drop into this market and we had to amend our range to meet the requirements of the greenkeeping world. The Show gave us the opportunity to meet greenkeepers and discuss exactly what they were looking for.

Even if we produced a product which wasn't precisely what they wanted, the Show gave us valuable information and allowed us to develop the product from there.

As our range started to develop it became clear that we needed to take a stand in our own right and since then there has never been a doubt about our attendance in Harrogate every year.

As a growing company we haven't been drawn towards exhibiting on a biennial basis as that model doesn't fit with how we wanted to do business.

Indeed, in the years when some of the large manufacturers have not been there we have had some of our better shows. Perhaps it is a case that when the larger exhibitors are there they tend to draw people to their stands and when they are not there we are top of people's agendas rather than second.

During Show hours we just don't get off the stand at all. Over the years we've worked our way to the front of the Show and our stand is now at the front of Hall A and it is manic from minute one.

I remember about three years ago that it got to around 3 o'clock in the afternoon and my colleague and I were feeling awful. It then dawned on us we hadn't even had a chance to have a drink, never mind something to eat since 8 o'clock that morning and we'd worked straight through. Our bodies were saying "Hang on a minute, you've got to have something to eat".

We do enjoy the evenings. We go for a drink straight from the show then, in the evening, we need to catch our breath so we usually meet our suppliers for a meal, talk through the day and generally catch up.

The days are so full, and I don't want to sound lightweight, but if I did now what I have done once or twice in the past and

gone right through to the next morning I'd be in no shape for the next day's onslaught.

However, Harrogate does give some great opportunities to meet customers after the Show and we have looked at how we can utilise what the town has to offer. We have come up with some creative ideas, some of which didn't get past the planning stage!

I have some wonderful memories of Harrogates in the past and one of the main ones was the occasion, I think it was in 1995, when the snow came and many people were trapped in Harrogate.

I remember looking out at around 2pm and seeing snowflakes the size of 50 pence pieces. The entire town became gridlocked. Lucky we were driving a Range Rover Discovery, which was about the only way to get out, and we joined our Kawasaki colleagues in Knaresborough. We found a restaurant and were the only people in it but we made it worth their while to remain open.

Year on year we evolve and our Stand size increases and or activities broaden and Harrogate takes on a new dimension for us.

I was particularly pleased last year that more recognition was given to the exhibitors. We are an integral part of the success of the Show and our views should be considered. We are fundamental in the development

of Harrogate, particularly at a time when things are so difficult in the market place.

It is a very fluid situation at the moment and those who are not questioning themselves are mismanaging the situation. I don't believe that the way things are at the moment that there is a road map to guide us through.

Change can happen so quickly, just look at the money market. Things can turn on their head in no time at all.

I always feel the year has started when we get to Harrogate and we can look forward to the new season. We always find it a little frustrating that we can't go out immediately and demonstrate the kit. We've got to wait six to eight weeks until the weather is kind enough to let us out, but it certainly sets up the on-coming season and allows you to consolidate any business that you have been negotiating.

What was very apparent last year was that it was the education that was bringing in the greenkeepers. Education is very much what it is all about.

We look forward to Harrogate each year.

Let's shake off Christmas and the New Year and get some business done.

Tim Merrell, MD, The Grass Group

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