

History in the making

John Deere has a heritage to be proud of but, as Scott MacCallum found out, there is no resting on laurels



John Deere's personal history goes all the way back to the early 1800s when the then soon-to-become household name from Vermont, USA, started an apprenticeship in a local blacksmith shop. The UK Turf division of the company, however, is much younger and is celebrating its silver anniversary this year.

It is interesting that 25 years on from its launch, a photograph of the John Deere UK turf pioneers displays a group of vibrant young professionals, nearly all of whom are still connected to the company – no longer quite so young, but still vibrant and professional in every way.

Included within that number is current John Deere UK Managing Director, Richard Johnson, as well as Howard Storey, Richard Charleton, Phil Tong and Ivan Millar, who all still hold key roles within the UK and European business. The other member of the team in the photograph is Graham Williams, who recently retired, having launched the European irrigation division before being fitted for his slippers.

"The people who started the business are still an integral part of the team and I think that speaks volumes," said Joedy Ibbotson, who was recently appointed Turf

Division Sales Manager for the UK and Ireland, having been with Deere for over 12 years.

"Our wealth of experience and relationship with our customers is undoubtedly our biggest asset. We've got five Territory Managers and they've been with us for an average of 15 years," said Joedy.

One of the more recent recruits, however, is Paul Trowman, National Account Manager for Turf Equipment, who took on the role two years ago.

"It's a big company but everyone is so welcoming and wants you to succeed. We are all proud to be working for John Deere," said Paul.

It may be a large multi-national company but as Joedy explains everyone who works for John Deere is aware of what the name stands for.

"We never stray away from the core values of integrity, quality, commitment and innovation. They are at the heart of everything the company does and that will never change," he explained.

Joedy has taken on his new role at a time when John Deere has set itself the task of doubling in size by the year 2018. It sounds a mountain to climb, even more so when you learn that currently Deere has a turnover of \$25 billion, and the target is to hit \$50 billion annual turnover within the next seven years.



The golf business in the UK will provide a relatively small amount of that growth, with the hard yards being made by the agricultural side, but it will still be expected to add its share.

"The agriculture business is very cyclical, and successful years tend to be driven by commodity prices. The beauty for us, as a turf business, is that it's much less prone to fluctuation," said Joedy, speaking from the UK Headquarters at Langar, near Nottingham

So where will the new growth be achieved?

"Overall it will come from the emerging markets – Brazil, Russia, India and China. The world's



population is expanding rapidly and needs to be fed, so we will need to grow more food and become more productive. That's where our agricultural business is going," explained Joedy,

Making in-roads into those new markets is made slightly easier for John Deere as it has one of the most distinctive brands in the world and its leaping deer logo is one of the most recognisable around. Very few people, in very few countries, will not be familiar with it.

"On the golf front it is very difficult to see where any huge expansion will come from. Ultimately it comes down to the number of people playing the game and how many new courses are being constructed. So it will be on market share that we will be looking to make ground."

With every aspiration, or target, must come a strategy designed to make it possible and, in John Deere's case, a two pronged attack has been identified.

"The first very much surrounds new products and innovation and the company is investing very heavily in new technologies. Globally we invest over \$3 million every single day of the year in research and development so you can see how important it is to us.

"We were first to market with Hybrid technology back in '05 and this has been extremely successful for us," he said.

"When we introduce new technology it's always a case of how quickly it will be adopted but I believe that the greenkeeping industry, as a whole, is very quick to embrace new ideas," said Joedy, who also revealed that just last year the company turned out the 500,000th model of the popular Gator utility vehicle from its Wisconsin factory.

The company recently took dealers to Portugal to show them some of the new machines in the pipeline including a robotic mower which is aimed at the domestic market but whose technology could conceivably be transferred to the golf market offering the option of silent night time mowing.

The second prong towards the 2018 target is those John Deere dealers.

"All the main manufacturers make high quality products but the real differentiator is how well you support that product," explained Joedy.

With that in mind, John Deere has created a programme named "Dealer of Tomorrow" as the key to developing this element of the strategy.

"It is a really strong programme and revolves around the support, training and development of our dealers to ensure that they have all the skills and knowledge so that John Deere customers are provided with exactly the service they expect from us."

And that is not as easy as you might think as John Deere's dealer network across UK and Europe extends to an incredible 20,000 people.

Being a division of a mighty company has its advantages when it comes to the ever-vital spare parts service.

"We have an on-line parts services so, much like Tesco and Asda, our customers can go onto the net, select a part and identify that it is correct on screen before ordering. We launched this a few years ago and we've had a lot of positive feedback.

"If we don't have a particular part here in the UK we have a plane that comes over every night from Germany which lands at Birmingham Airport. We have the part with most UK mainland dealers by 8.30am the next morning.

"In this regard we are very fortunate that we can piggyback on the back of the agriculture business. If we didn't have that there is no way as the turf business we'd be able to provide such a service. The business just wouldn't stack up. We are a large agricultural manufacturer and we are very fortunate that it means we can provide such a service to our turf customers. It's certainly not something we would apologise for.

"We utilise the scale of the agriculture business but we are rigorously focused on the turf business. We have 13 people whose core responsibility is golf but then the roles of the back room staff are shared," explained Joedy.

The irrigation side of the business was launched four years ago and John Deere can now point to the number of clubs with full systems in the UK alone as well as many others who have purchased replacement heads as to how quickly John Deere Irrigation has established itself.

But establishing is something at which John Deere is particularly adept.

"When we started out, we could only have dreamt about being involved in events like The Open Championship and the Solheim Cup but we've just come off a successful Open Championship, at Royal St George's, where we were a Preferred Supplier, and later this month it is the same with the

Solheim Cup at Killeen Castle, in Ireland," said Joedy, who also revealed that they had recently signed a machinery deal with Donald Trump for his new course in Aberdeenshire.

"That we now regularly support major tournaments is testimony to how far we've come as a division and it makes us extremely proud.

John Deere is equally keen to support BIGGA and has been a Gold Key supporter since the early days of the programme.

"We want to be involved with the learning and development side of BIGGA as it fits well with our core values and desire to build long term relationships," said Joedy.

Another event which may make a return to the golf calendar is the popular John Deere Team Championship which, for a number of years, provided additional funding for BIGGA's education programme based on the number of teams which entered, and whose last playing culminated in a spectacular final at Turnberry.

It does all make you wonder what the young Master Deere, who started his apprenticeship back in 1821, would have made of it all. Now, 190 years on, his name is known the world over and appears on the side of sophisticated, beautifully-liveried green machinery at clubs of a global sport which barely existed when he was alive.

John Deere UK may have a more modern heritage but the progress would have made their founder proud.

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