



Scott MacCallum slowed Jamie Bennett down long enough to learn about The Grass Roots Trading Company, past, present and future

Onward and upward



GRASS ROOTS
— TRADING COMPANY —

The name Grass Roots is perhaps a bit of a misnomer. Things are so fast moving at the Wokingham-based company, who have just become both a BIGGA Golden Key supporter and co-sponsor of the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition along with Amazone, that there is scarcely time for the grass to grow under their feet never mind have a chance to take root.

The day I visited Jamie Bennett, Managing Director of the Grass Roots Trading Company, had just returned from inspecting the premises the company were due to moving into in the first week of this month (March), having spent much of the previous few weeks recruiting new staff for a major company expansion.

"I think we've probably been the most talked about company in the industry over the last few weeks," joked Jamie, the catalyst being a two page recruitment advertisement in the December issue of Greenkeeper International asking for applicants for an array of posts, including a veritable army of Business Development Managers, all on attractive salaries with enviable benefits.

"The answer to the question of 'what's happening at Grass Roots?' is the launch of the Genesis range of natural microbial products. That's where we have focused our investment and planning," he revealed.

Grass Roots has linked up with Symbio which has 10 years of experience in the microbiological field.

"They have become the research and development arm while we're concentrating on the sales and marketing for all the products they produce," explained Jamie.

"The Genesis Range is an extensive range of natural products which provides everything a greenkeeper could need and which will assist the microbes we put into the soil to function to their best ability. It is a totally natural approach to turf management."

Warning to his theme Jamie outlined his doomsday scenario.

"I believe that a lot of golf greens and managed turf is on the edge of disaster due to the intense mainte-

nance practices in place combined with the amount of chemical that is presently used and this has pushed grass, and the soil it lives in, right to the limit.

"If I were to take a bacteria count from a domestic lawn and another from a golf green the lawn would be up here and the green down there," he asked as he held one hand at about eyebrow level and the other somewhere around his knees, adding, "When did you last see Fusarium on your lawn?"

"In simple terms the natural bacteria in the soil which are there to compete with the disease pathogens have been dramatically reduced by the chemicals which are not selective in what they damage."

However, Jamie feels that changes are taking place with legislation forcing turf managers to look at different ways of working - "We've lost 20% of our chemicals in the last two years and there will be a snowball effect" - and people are becoming a lot more socially conscious about the environment and recycling things."

Jamie is genuinely excited about the prospects for Genesis and the direction in which Grass Roots are now heading.

"In 18 months time we won't be selling anything but Genesis," he predicts.

Each of the 18 Business Development Managers, who include some extremely well known Course Managers, have been equipped with a car, mobile phone, laptop and modem so that they can download information from head office.

"They all being trained in Business Development and information technology," said Jamie who has also employed a team of five in the accounts department, an operations team also of five as well as a manufacturing team.

The company has come a long way since it was set up in Jamie's home in November '94.

"It was a family orientated business involving my mother, brother and wife while my other brother set up a sister company in the Midlands," recalled Jamie.

He had arrived in this particular

industry after having owned his own telecommunications company which he sold, before investing in the property market...in March '89 which, with painful hindsight, was exactly the worst time to make such a move.

"It was the peak of the property market and the start of the recession and within 18 months I'd lost everything.

"I think in a way that's what drives me, I've had it all and then not had it all and I'll tell which I like better. I suppose my motivation comes from fear, not wanting to be there again, while the lesson I've learned is not to put all your eggs in one basket."

Grass Roots was born - or should it be seeded? - through Jamie's desire to get into the leisure industry which he'd highlighted as a growth industry.

"I'd read the R&A report and I'd seen all these golf courses being built and saw it as a developing market," he explained, coupling this objective reasoning with his general love of sports. "I was a physical training instructor, swam for Great Britain and played rugby for the county."

He then set about finding out more about the industry and discovered that he genuinely liked greenkeepers and their attitude to their work.

"It is totally different from the telecommunications industry. Here you can make 100 calls and get 100 appointments. You do that in telecommunications and you'll get one appointment."

Having earmarked golf as the area in which he would make his business comeback Jamie crossed the pond to see how the Americans operated.

"Superintendents in the States make many more demands on their suppliers. If something goes wrong here we used to be fairly laid back about it - if an order didn't come for a week or so it didn't really seem the supplier would lose business over it."

Jamie set about introducing some of the things he'd learned in the States as well as others from the telecommunications industry.

"I wanted to make greenkeepers realise they could have a much better service and should expect much better."

As its name suggests Grass Roots



Above: Jamie Bennett, Managing Director, Grass Roots Trading Company

Below: Stella Inglethorpe, Technical Director, Grass Roots Trading Company





Above: The Genesis Sales Team take delivery of their Honda fleet, aiding in Grass Roots' guaranteed 48 hour order turnaround

Trading Company was initially a trading company.

"We introduced a product base and then when a customer asked for a specific product we'd set up the deal. We'd source the product, ring four or five companies to get the best price then give a definite time for it to be delivered. If it didn't arrive the customer would get a discount for every day that it was late," explained Jamie.

"Over a period of a year we started with 800 products but now we have 18,000 in our product range which, on the whole, we can supply within 48 hours."

As you can imagine, with over 1200 suppliers, it is an administration headache.

"We have a financial controller who came from a company which turned over £60 million. We turn over a fraction of that but there is more paper work with us. It is an administration nightmare but it set us up in business."

Among the other innovative approaches taken by Grass Roots was to operate some unusual business hours.

"We were the first company to operate the same hours as the greenkeeper and we do more business between 7 and 9 in the morning than in the rest of the day."

To reinforce the benefits of the "one-stop shop" philosophy employed by Grass Roots they asked a greenkeeper to note how much time he spent talking to suppliers on the phone, chasing products, making

enquiries and distributor meetings.

"Over a six month period he spent over 180 hours doing this which, worked out over a year, relates to a month and a half worth of work.

"Clubs are under enough pressure as it is without this additional burden and they know that if they phone us we can get them any product they need, in the time that they need it."

As well as products Grass Roots also supply manpower and this was particularly vital to one club a couple of years ago.

"Just before a big competition the greenkeeping staff went out for a meal and all came down with food poisoning. I got a call, put a team together and we set the course up and sorted everything out," recalled Jamie.

Having operated from the Bennett home, and a old pig farm which was used for storage, Grass Roots moved to new premises in April '96 on an industrial estate in Finchampstead, near Wokingham. Such has been the rapid rate of growth these have become overly cramped for the company's latest expansion hence the need for more new premises.

"We smashed our first year target by 300% and achieved our first three years of objectives in the first 18 months. Our success was recognised by winning the Lloyd's Bank Small Business of the Year Award of which we were very proud!"

The company always has and will continue to spend a significant proportion of its marketing budget on hospitality events.

"Reps from other companies were very well known by their customers - they'd become friends, so it was difficult to pull customers from them.

"So we put on go-karting events, five-a-side football competitions, take them to top sporting events anything just to get to know our customers better," he said.

They also sponsor many of the local BIGGA Section events and run educational seminars free of charge.

"This will continue and each of our Business Development Managers will have a budget to spend on market relations in their area."

The company also made strides when it took on Standard Golf at the beginning of last year.

"While we were predominately South East based, Standard Golf were national and had a data base of 2700 golf clubs.

Standard Golf products are being used as incentives to companies who take on the Genesis products.

"We will go into a golf club and take soil, tissue and water analysis and find out everything we need to know. Then we'll put together a programme in conjunction with the greenkeeper using the Genesis range which are all natural products and totally beneficial to everything else you're trying to do in the soil. The package is bespoke and we've priced it so that it will save the club money. Having agreed a programme we will guarantee results from the initial objectives having mutually agreed the quantitative criteria"

Jamie sees this as the springboard to Grass Root's next phase of development.

"We are clear about where we intend to go as a company. In 2002 we intend to float the company and within that time we will have developed the Genesis range from which is currently about 62 products to around 200. We know exactly what we need in that range and we know in which areas to invest money in research and development to achieve that.

"We want to venture into Europe and then maybe global," said Jamie, who doesn't rule out the purchase of other companies to assist in this expansion.

It may be that they will sit down and think of a more appropriate company name. "Fast Track" perhaps...



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Continuing the research into the cultural control of earthworm activity, Dr Stephen Baker & Daniel Binns of the STRI, conclude their studies with their most recent findings...

Worm food

In the February 1999 issue of *Greenkeeper International* we reviewed recent research work at the STRI on the effectiveness of chemical control in tackling earthworm casting. To an extent chemical treatments are a last resort and the number of materials that can be used has been substantially reduced, a trend which is likely to continue as pesticide legislation becomes more restrictive.

An alternative to the use of wormkillers or lumbricides is cultural control. Environmental manipulation to reduce earthworm activity has of course been carried out for many years and is well documented in early STRI publications from the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's. As lumbricides become less persistent and increased application frequency makes earthworm control more costly, our research (funded by the R&A) has increasingly looked at the ecology of earthworm populations and cultural control methods.

Earthworm Populations

Knowledge of the distribution of earthworm species on golf courses is important if we are to gain an understanding of how environmental factors and management practices affect earthworm populations. Table 1 shows species identified from over 8000 earthworms collected from 59 sites at 32 golf courses throughout Britain in a joint study carried out by the STRI and the University of Lancaster. It is an unfortunate fact that the three earthworm species that are most closely associated with casting

activity are by far the most abundant species on UK golf courses. *Aporrectodea longa* is a large, lightly pigmented earthworm, with adults 90-170 mm in length. It constructs permanent burrow systems to a depth of about 0.5 m and is common in gardens, pastures and cultivated soils.

Lumbricus terrestris is another large earthworm, brown to purplish red above but pale beneath with a flattened, paddle-shaped tail. This is the species that is regularly seen on the surface on mild, moist nights when it emerges either to forage for plant material or for reproduction.

Aporrectodea caliginosa can be both variable in colouration and size. Small individuals are common in the upper 70 mm of the soil from where they can produce some cast-

ing, but it is the larger, deeper burrowing "nocturna" form that is associated with large surface casts.

In our survey, significantly higher rates of casting were recorded on areas with higher soil pH, higher soil moisture content and more vigorous grass growth.

These relationships suggest that manipulation of pH, food supply and soil moisture content can all be used as mechanisms to reduce earthworm populations, particularly of casting species.

Soil Acidity

Two of the main casting species, *A. longa* and *A. caliginosa* are intolerant of acid conditions and the use of acidifying fertilisers has long been known to reduce casting activity. On some courses it may be appropriate to reduce soil pH using

FIG 1. Rates of casting in relation to mowing treatments with return and removal of clippings (the vertical bars show the least significant difference).

Earthworm species found on UK golf courses		
Species	Percentage of all earthworms collected	Percentage of samples containing species
<i>Aporrectodea longa</i>	39	98
<i>Lumbricus terrestris</i>	22	98
<i>Aporrectodea caliginosa</i>	26	88
<i>Allolobophora chlorotica</i>	3	56
<i>Aporrectodea rosea</i>	3	54
<i>Octolasion cyaneum</i>	3	42
<i>Lumbricus rubellus</i>	2	27
<i>Lumbricus festivus</i>	2	24
<i>Lumbricus castaneus</i>	<1	10
<i>Dendrodrilus rubidus</i>	<1	5
<i>Aporrectodea icterica</i>	<1	3
<i>Octolasion tyrtaeum tyrtaeum</i>	<1	2
<i>Satchellius mammalis</i>	<1	2

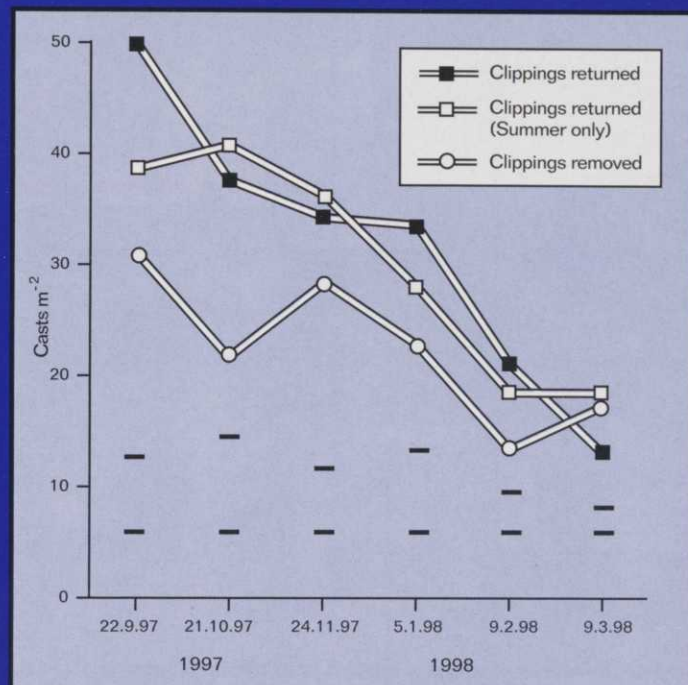
sulphur based compounds and in a previous article in Greenkeeper International initial trials with sulphur and aluminium sulphate were discussed. In this work (on a sandy clay loam soil with an initial pH of 5.7) a total application of 65 g/m² of sulphur and 360 g/m² of aluminium sulphate applied in up to four dressings was sufficient to reduce casting by 50%. In our most recently reported work, carried out on a clay loam soil, 40 g/m² of sulphur, applied as an aqueous suspension, reduced the pH of the surface 25 mm from 5.8 to 5.2 and the pH at the 25-75 mm depth fell from 6.7 to 6.4. Casting was substantially reduced by sulphur and one year after the initial application, rates of casting relative to the untreated turf were 48% and 36% respectively for total sulphur applications of 20 g/m² and 40 g/m².

The use of sulphur is not without its risks and problems of scorch were recorded when sulphur was applied as two dressings of 20 g/m². In addition over acidity may in the long term impair healthy grass growth. In consequence a series of trials have been established this autumn at eight separate sites to help us predict with greater certainty, the effects of sulphur on a wide range of soil types.

Mowing Practices

All animals need food and earthworms are no different, with the organic matter produced by golf course grasses seemingly providing delicious fare. If the food supply is reduced the size of the earthworm community that can be supported is also reduced and in management terms this can be achieved by collecting clippings and disposal away from the main playing areas on the course.

Organic matter production, even on relatively infertile golf course soils, may amount to 0.5-1.0 tonnes per hectare dry weight per year and this is a considerable amount of material to be collected and disposed of. We have therefore been looking at the timing of clipping removal to see how this affects



casting rates. We have considered three possibilities; (a) letting clippings fly all year; (b) boxing off all clippings; (c) an intermediate treatment whereby clippings are removed during the spring and autumn, when earthworms are most active, but allowed to fly in the summer when earthworms are dormant, especially in very dry conditions. This latter strategy would in theory substantially reduce the amount of clippings needing disposal but still allow some nutrient recycling associated with the breakdown of mown leaf tissue.

This trial started in October 1996 on fairway type turf mown at 13 mm growing on a sandy clay loam soil with a pH of 5.7. Results for the main period of casting from September 1997 to March 1998 are shown in Fig. 1. Apart from March 1998, when casting activity had already slowed down, the boxing off of clippings consistently reduced the rate of casting, by an average of nearly 30% over the whole year. Selective removal of clippings in the spring and autumn only brought about a significant reduction in casting on one occasion.

Unfortunately, it would therefore appear that the overall productivity of organic material is more important than the time when clippings

are added or removed from the surface.

Removal of clippings means that nutrient cycling is reduced so we included light fertiliser dressings of 25 and 50 kilogrammes per hectare per year of nitrogen in the experiment (applied as two dressing in the spring and summer). This compensated for an estimated loss of about 30-45 kg/ha per year of nitrogen through clipping removal. Ammonium sulphate was used because of its acidifying effect, which as we have seen earlier can help reduce earthworm activity. The use of ammonium sulphate at 50 kg/ha per year reduced casting by 26% when averaged over all mowing regimes. However when comparison is made of the use of 50 kg/ha per year of ammonium sulphate on turf where the clippings are removed against turf with no acidifying fertiliser and clippings returned the reduction in casting was 48%. Some care is needed in this policy as acidification can go too far, but adjustment of mowing regimes and fertiliser practices will certainly influence casting actively. It may not be practical to remove clippings on all parts of the course but it should be considered where possible for more sensitive areas such as landing zones and approaches, as well as tees and greens.

Soil moisture content

Earthworm casting falls rapidly in dry conditions but at the same time earthworms have considerable ability to survive drought, either moving into moister soil lower in the profile, by curling up in a mucus lined chamber or by ceasing feeding and existing in a dormant state. Our work has shown that wet areas on a golf course have higher earthworm populations.

Furthermore, the effects of casting are probably more severe in wet areas because the cast soil is more easily smeared. In consequence improved drainage may reduce the effects of casting problems.

Turf needs at least moderate rainfall or supplementary irrigation for its survival and it is unlikely that moisture content is one of the main factors limiting the presence of earthworms on golf courses.

However the consequence of factors such as fairway irrigation in areas with potentially high earthworm populations must be considered because of the twin effects of higher moisture contents and greater organic matter production. Both properties are associated with increased earthworm populations and casting. More research work in this area is required.

The outlook

In the absence of persistent pesticide materials such as chlordane (now withdrawn from use) no single factor is going to bring about total control of earthworm casting. Indeed it is highly unlikely that even in combination the good management practices discussed above can bring about a complete cessation of casting. However it should be possible to bring about reasonable suppression of casting using cultural control techniques, so that only the worst areas on the course need pesticide applications for casting control.

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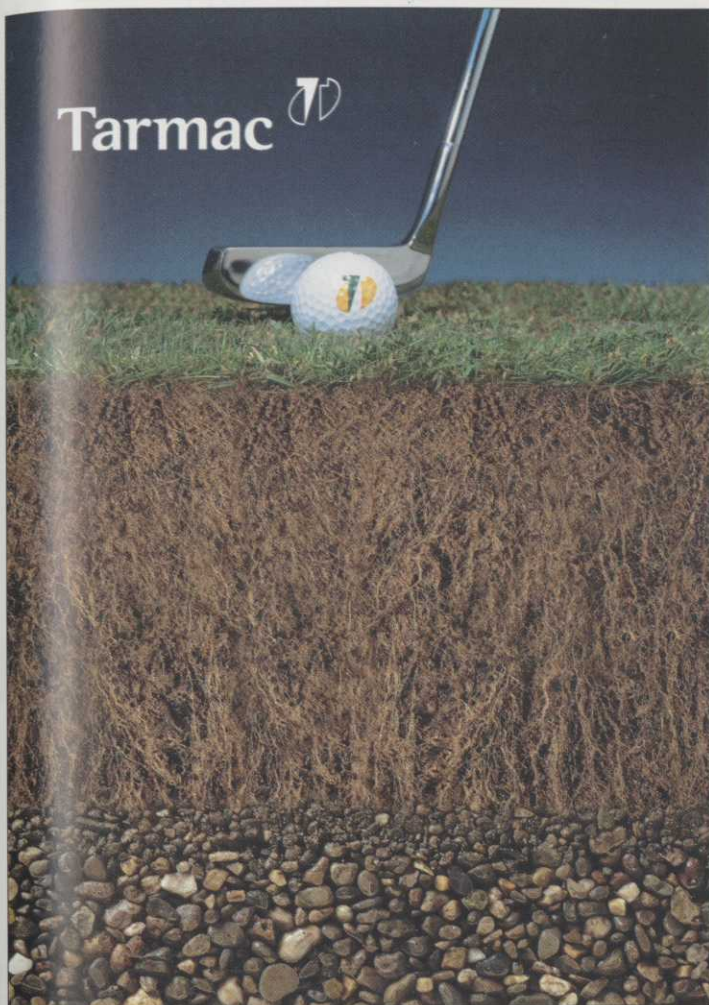
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- Quick change tine holders (under 30 sec each)
- From micro to jumbo tines, hollow, solid and chisel tines
- Depth adjustable up to 5"

YOUR CONTACTS:

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