

# THE

David Winterton MG reports back on the second Bernhard Scholarship Trip, this time to the GCSAA Conference and Show in Orlando

# FLORIDA

Photography:  
Tony Dunstan

# EXPERIENCE

Ten very lucky guys met one rain filled day at Gatwick, bound for Florida. Like Knights of the Round Table we took our places on the plane. Landing nine hours later I realised what a diverse group of greenkeepers we were, coming from areas so completely different from each other. The world's greatest playground heaven welcomed us with its riches of con-

crete, tarmac and hotels, surrounded by amazing golf courses with wetlands galore.

Our first day was kissed by sunlight as we travelled out into the 'boonies', countryside to us, to visit Orange County National Golf Centre & Lodge. This proved to be awesome in comparison with the courses our group manages. There are 36 holes on 584 acres. The greens are an average size of 2000 square metres, set among bunkers with pampas grass or trees set inside and a backdrop of pine flatwoods, natural oak hammocks and wetlands. They have the largest driving range in the world at 42 acres; circular in design with eight driving ranges all firing into the centre. They average 85,000 rounds per annum at \$135 each. The Superintendent, Carl Benedict, has a staff of 35 in winter and 45 for summer. The course is managed by a budget of \$2 million but this does include leasehold machinery. Whenever a member of staff meets with a golfer they stop and switch the machine off. That relates to lots of downtime per day and a serious wear and tear factor for the machines.

What really struck the group was the use of labour to maintain these big courses. The normal set-up consists of the superintendent, two skilled assistants, two to three mechanics and one to two irrigation technicians. The rest of the staff consists of Hispanics, Latinos, Guatemalans and Mexicans. These live together in groups near the course and stay for two to three years before going back home to family. They are trained to do specific tasks only.

What a difference to us where we have a smaller team but want all team members fully trained to a high level.



Above: Photographer Tony Dunstan gets on the other side of the camera for a change

Below: Sam McLean and Ronnie Bunting in discussion

Right: Close examinations



Above: The Orlando Convention Centre

Over the next few days we visited several other courses on our turfgrass field seminar. The most outstanding feature of the courses we visited like Magnolia Creek and Champions Gate is how they manage water. Summer temps are high with incredible evapotranspiration rates so the superintendents use lots of water. Orange County often applies one million gallons per day through 40,000 sprinklers. This seems extreme but the way they manage this usage is the key. Effluent water is pumped from Orlando and surrounding places like Disney's Celebration Village to large rectangular percolation basins called RIBS (Rapid Infiltration Basins). These are created on the natural soil that is very sandy. This soil allows 2.5m of rain to drain through in one

This page: Some sights you don't often see at UK golf clubs including, centre, a Pro Shop the size of a small department store!

# A



## Tread Lightly On The Land

We all make impressions. The osprey leaves bones from its last meal. The robin makes a rounded print in the sand. A towhee cries "drink your tea." There's wind in the pines and a butterfly floats by.

Come walk the woods as generations have before you. Seek the impressions of the preserve's inhabitants and diminish your own. Explore. Take notes and pictures. Share your discoveries.

Said Alice when she found Wonderland, "Curiouser and curiouser... now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was."

If you open out like Alice, what will you find?



hour. The effluent water goes back into the artesian water basin for use again but the golf courses can draw off this water for irrigation.

Another new build site at Magnolia Creek will cover 2100 acres with three 18 holes designed by Watson, Nicklaus & Palmer respectively. The irrigation requirements are awesome and will be supplied by a horizontal

well that extracts water from the water table and stores the water in a holding

lake. When the course is irrigated the excess water will drain back into the water table to be reused, thereby creating a self-sufficient water supply.

Serious ecological mistakes were made years ago when the everglades were drained. Now in more enlightened times Florida is trying to do a U-turn and make sure the wetlands are protected from developers. We visited the Nature Conservancy Disney Wilderness Preserve. This is 12,000 acres of natural wetlands that have remained free of any development. It holds one of only two lakes in Florida that does not have any property built on the edge. When big companies like Disney build in Florida they have to agree to protect an area of land similar in size, to balance out the loss of land. This is how Disney Wilderness Preserve came into being. It was great for us to wander through such wilderness, spotting tortoise burrows and armadillos but luckily no snappers!

Florida is now in the process of opening up old watercourses to recreate the original wetlands and improve the bio-diversity in those areas.

Some of us were lucky enough to visit a course at Titusville, near Cape



Canaveral where a British greenkeeper, Geoff Coggan MG, CGCS resides. This course is set in the middle of wetlands with the 18-hole course weaving its way through several hundred road vehicle parks. It was great to get an escape from the surreal world of Orlando and visit authentic Florida. All in a day's work could be getting rid of nuisance alligators. These are ones that have become overly friendly due to people feeding them. Big holes need to be filled, made by Armadillos who can go some distance due to the sandy soil. The irrigation pumping system has to be checked regularly as this system is used by the fire department. It has a back up generator in case of powercuts. Many thanks to Geoff for his personal guide around the course.

Another seminar we attended covered professional presentations. My dialogue coming from Ronnie, at

Kilmacolm, Jim, at West Kilbride or Patrick, from Nefyn, was greeted with "Pardon?" or "Sorry?" as Mimi, our delectable instructor, deciphered the language. This is only Tuesday and already someone, no names mentioned, had the audacity to fall asleep! This caused ripples of comment for the ongoing activities. As this person, quite rightly, had to give a 10-minute presentation, the nine-crew members fell asleep in the back row. If any man can continue his presentation after this, he's a star.



# THE FLORIDA EXPERIENCE



Below, below middle and right. The GCSAA Exhibition in full swing

Bottom: The Bernhard's team. Sam Nurse, Technical and Development Manager; Ulrich Kayser, Director of European Sales; Stephen Bernhard, Managing Director, and Sam McLean, Director of Sales and Marketing



In discussion with many superintendents they were interested how we managed to get such great results on our courses with such small budgets. It goes

to show we have very skilled greenkeepers in the UK who can produce first rate surfaces and a great course to match.

Ronnie Bunting has recently seen his course achieve the Award of Recognition for Environmental Achievements through the Committed to Green programme.

Ronnie has a fascinating story to tell, backed up by a document on how his course went about improving their environmental standing. Should anyone be interested to know more I know that Ronnie would be most helpful in your requests.

Thursday and Friday were a mixture of visits to the show or short seminars. It made me proud to realise just how well BIGGA organises the Harrogate show. For the first time I

was able to compare it with a similar show and I feel we give our international visitors something worthwhile. The GCSAA were celebrating their 75 years in fine style with a special showcase of historical artefacts and articles that took me quite some time to get through. The GCSAA has come a long way from humble beginnings but today they have an Association that is very big business. Harrogate had 8000 attend this year while the Orlando show had 20,000. Our group made good use of the Internet Cybercafe. This consisted of 10 consoles, set up by the GCSAA for use by members or visitors, free of charge. It was a great service and could be used to find out details of the show or seminars or simply to hassle the wife!

I became aware just how much money the GCSAA puts towards further education of their members. They have several programs that greenkeepers can apply for such as the Watson fellowships, the GCSAA Scholars competition or the Legacy awards. They produce several documents, free to members, that help give detailed information on a particular subject. Two that I found interesting that perhaps reflect present times are Managing Unemployment and How To Help Your Course Weather An Economic Downturn. Another sign of the times was the fact that many superintendents are now employed through a contract of employment that terminates after three to five years. The views on this among superintendents varies but the main emphasis seemed to be that the contract does give good security in your position and if you are doing a good job then the contract will be renewed.

A highlight of the trip was our Friday evening's activities. The

President's Dinner started with a long list of thanks from the outgoing President, Tommy Witt, and the new President being introduced. Several speeches later it ended with an emotional Tommy gathering his family together on stage, a moving and fitting tribute to those who had supported this man through the year. It was good to see Tommy's employer get up to give support and high praise of the man in charge of his business even though he had been off-site for a great part of the year.

Naturally we were all moved when Walter was presented with his Old Tom Morris Award. His speech was impeccable and did not need translating! It showed high regard for Walter that so many Scottish greenkeepers had travelled out to be with him for his special moment in their tartan cloth of the clan with sporrans gleaming. You could visibly see the strain of receiving this award drain away as he enjoyed the company of fellow greenkeepers throughout the evening. He must now be the most photographed greenkeeper on this planet, excepting Richard Barker of course, but Walter stands tall and proud as one of our greatest ambassadors, living proof that hard work and a keen interest in golf and greenkeeping can give you a good life.

It gave me great pride to see the BIGGA delegation in their blazers standing out in the crowd.

Later on in the evening we had the honour of a special invite to a private party given by Tommy Witt in the Peabody Hotel, a rather luxurious building indeed. This was the time to undo the collars and his superintendent colleagues treated Tommy to great ridicule as they told embarrassing stories. Later a slide show of the great moments of Tommy's year showed just how much he cares for





Above: The Bernhard Scholarship winners



Above: Congratulating Walter Woods on his Old Tom Morris Award

his profession and the effort and support from other board members to make a difference.

Stephen Bernhard and Sam Mclean were wonderful hosts, making sure they spent some time with each of the group at the various functions we attended. Their enthusiasm for helping greenkeepers expand their horizons is a great example to all who meet them. Whatever steps Bernhard & Co make in the future to co-host visits abroad or introduce Internships for young greenkeepers, I would urge members of BIGGA to apply for these places. You have so much to gain from such experiences and along the way promote the advantages of working within this industry. My short presentation ended with me making the point that our group of greenkeepers deserved to be on this trip because we had goals and were willing to strive for them.

You only get out of life what you put into it, so let's see more BIGGA members apply for educational visits and courses.

They should have no qualms about what level of new contacts or friendships are formed between our visiting party and the superintendents we met. I have already had several contacts through email from some of those I have met. It is true what they

say about the UK having a special relationship with the Americans. They were openly friendly and one could strike up conversation at any moment and find a warmth of friendship evident.

During my precious social time I treated myself to a visit to Islands of Adventure on my last day that came highly recommended by Sami, our authentic American ambassador, and found myself at one point in a line to travel the Hulk rollercoaster. As I trembled with fear for 30 minutes I struck up conversation with a huge fella from New Orleans. We talked golf among other things but he helped me get on that ride and survive it. Afterwards we laughed at the photo showing sheer fear on my face as he had gladly waved his arms in the air. Outside he introduced me to his wife and children who had been patiently waiting for him. Such contacts confirm that life is for living and I know the group I travelled with heartily thank Bernhard & Co for their sponsorship and BIGGA for their support in making this happen.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our intrepid greenkeeper travellers for their part in making this a memorable trip and especially Tony Dunstan who very quickly became the honorary Lord Lichfield in the group. I learned a lot about greenkeeping in our part of the world that would have been difficult any other way; such was the fine meeting of minds.

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