

# ONE GIANT LEAP...



**SPENCER HAINES caused quite a furor when he ‘jumped the good ship Greenkeeping’ to buy a lawncare franchise. His undoubted professional expertise is now reaping dividend as he explains. But is he still a Greenkeeper? That is for you to decide. Perhaps the time has come for us all to be called ‘turf managers’**



**A**t the age of 16, Spencer Haines started his working life on a building site. After being given his marching orders after 12 months, he stumbled across an advert in his local job centre for a trainee greenkeeper at Romsey Golf club near Southampton. He applied for and was offered the job and, within weeks knew he’d found his vocation.

“Being a rookie on a building site meant I was used to hard work” he recalls. “I’d always been interested in sport and represented my school and district for football, rugby, basketball and table tennis. I played a bit of golf and the advert caught my eye. I had no idea at that time that greenkeeping would become my life.”

Spencer completed his City & Guilds levels one and two during his eight years at Romsey. “I was never particularly academic, but I’ve always relished new challenges and had a determination to succeed and my new career suited me in that respect. There are many aspects of the job which suit the sort of person I

am. I like variety and being outdoors. I also have a very keen eye for detail when it comes to presentation - I’m an absolute perfectionist. Even as a youngster, I took great pride in my work which didn’t go unnoticed and I got my first deputy’s job at the age of 27.

Spencer became Deputy Course Manager at Wokefield Park near Reading in 1999. Determined to continue his training, he completed level 3 at night school, paying his course fees himself.

“Rob Weir was my Course Manager. He’s still there and has had a huge influence on my career. It was the best course I’ve worked at and it was due to his mentoring that I continued to progress in my career.”

After two and a half years in the role he accepted an identical role at the 27-hole Sandford Springs course in Hampshire where he continued to add to his CV, becoming a D32/D33 assessor.

“I reached the pinnacle of my greenkeeping career in 2003 when I was offered the Course Managers job at Hartley Wintney, a beautiful parkland

and wooded course close to the Berkshire, Surrey and Hampshire borders. After only six months in the job, I said it would be my last course. I loved everything about the job. The committee and directors were supportive and my staff were superb, but eighteen months ago I took the decision to leave. It was a huge decision for me, but I’ve never looked back.”

“I’d been on holiday to the States and saw the sheer scale of the lawn care industry over there. I’d always visualised running a business of my own with my wife and saw the advert for Lawn Master franchisees in one of the industry magazines. I picked up the phone and made a call which triggered a whirlwind year for me and my family.”

“It took nine months to carry out my research and



# “I had started to feel that the common sense had gone out of the profession”

finally make my decision. My son had been ill and the golf club had been incredibly supportive. I felt torn between a good employer and my family. My wife Claire and I sold the rental property we owned to purchase the franchise for North Hampshire and the surrounding area and I handed in my notice. The club, whilst disappointed, understood my decision and supported it. I volunteered to work a long notice period so I could be involved in recruiting my successor. I felt I owed the club and my staff that much and I wanted my hard work to be continued by a greenkeeper who shared my values and enthusiasm.”

“I left the club on 2nd March 2006 and began work immediately. A vast mailshot in my local area meant I had paid work from day one. Claire is the organiser. She deals with all the administration, ordering and sales. From day one, I worked long days, sometimes not finishing until 10.30pm. I encountered a lot of scepticism at first from potential customers, borne from their experiences of dealing with other companies but I enjoy customer contact and have achieved around a 90% conversion rate. After twelve weeks I had 200 customers. Once I start working with a new customer, it takes four to five weeks for them to see the difference. I've had lots of recommendations from the golfing world and my customers appreciate my putting my greenkeeping knowledge and experience to work on their lawn. They ask me for advice about lawnmowers

and, to me, it's all part of the service.”

“Be under no illusion, it has been hard work. I've done more physical work that I was used to and have shed a few pounds as a result! But I had always been inquisitive about self-employment and know I would have kicked myself several years down the line if I had not grabbed the opportunity with both hands and given it my all. I've now taken on two casual staff and the business is bringing in a good living for Claire and I. By February 2008 I'll have two vans on the road with full time crews, when my main focus will become business development, quality control and customer liaison, all aspects of self-employment that I enjoy immensely.”

“Some people have criticised me for ‘deserting my profession’, but what is a greenkeeper? I'm 36 and have been a BIGGA member since I was 18, taking part in regional seminars and golf days, but I had started to feel that the common sense had gone out of the profession - too much science and no feeling for grass. There are dissatisfied greenkeepers in our industry because the expectations placed on them are too high. All year round golf used to be a laughable concept and it's unachievable at certain courses.”

“I've been surprised at how interested my customers are in having a former Course Manager look after their lawn and, trust me, some of those lawns are better than some greens I've seen in my time! I enjoy answering customers' questions and solving their problems. I get such a much pleasure from my work as I did from the golf

course. In my opinion it's narrow minded to think that our skills can't be used just as effectively in another environment. We all manage turf, just in different situations and we can all learn things from each other. I've never been motivated by money but my salary has far exceed all expectations and I still carry out my work with the same sense of pride and vigour fuelled by a fresh new perspective. In my eyes, my new venture doesn't make me any less of a greenkeeper, I've simply taken firmer control of my future.”

## Projectile vomiting, christmas trees and stand up comedy - not too diverse then!

RICHARD RAINFORD, Managing Director of Amenity Contract Services Ltd: I am 47 years young, married to Dianne with two kids, Jennifer (13) and Robert (16) who are both at college. I was born and continue to live at Catchdale Moss Farm, Eccleston St Helens. I am a fifth generation farmer on this farm, the first 'Rainford' came here in 1850 from Formby.



Obviously my background is arable farming but, when the changes to CAP came in the early 90s, I knew it was time to get out or change and, by coincidence, I was asked to help out a local contractor to spray Wigan Athletic FC's ground - my very first amenity spraying job. The company is now one of the UK's largest specialist highways weed control companies covering nearly every Local Authority in the northwest. I don't really have hobbies or days off, I love what I do and am very proud of what I have created from nothing. A day off is a rare event as weekends are usually taken up in the workshop. I have to go on holiday to get away, skiing in winter, sunshine in summer and the odd foreign weekend away. I never take sick days, I look forward to getting up every morning to get on with the job! I enjoy good food, I suppose you could call me a 'foodie'. I particularly enjoy caviar, foie gras, exceptional malt whiskies and vodka. I also enjoy good traditional food and green vegetables, there's not much I don't like apart from mussels and scallops as they make me 'projectile vomit' - an allergic reaction by all accounts! I have just completed an evening class of training to be a comedian, I did my first stand up act in Liverpool last week and it went down a treat, it was a charity gig and people stated they would have paid to see it which was very flattering. I intend to carry this on next year. In the winter I operate a very successful Christmas tree retail site from my farm, something I have done since 1976 when I left school. My wife took it on to the internet ten years ago of which I was very cynical about, we were the first internet site to sell Christmas trees online, there are now dozens on there, but we sold out last January 2007 as we felt we had done all we could with it. The best thing about my job is the people I have had the pleasure to meet on the way to where I am now, many have become great friends. I try not to fall out with anyone as this is such a small industry, its surprising who you meet. I don't get it right all the time and have made some 'howlers' but, as they say, "you never make mistakes, you only gain experience". The future looks as exciting as it did in the early days; there are so many opportunities I don't know which way to turn next some days. We need to get a website done - we must be the only company without one! I miss farming very much and would love to go back to growing my own vegetables and selling them at the roadside.

