Regional representatives and section secretaries take a look at BIGGA HQ

Equipped for success

On December 17/18th last, an inaugural meeting took place at Aldwark Manor between the officers of BIGGA: Neil Thomas, David Golding and Debbie Savage, and representatives of the various regions and sections-secretaries, administrators and committee members. The purpose was to give an opportunity for those present to familiarise themselves with headquarters; staff; and facilities available, and for the officers to outline BIGGA's current progress and future plans.

Most sections were represented and there were quite a few new faces (seven of the twenty-five section secretaries this year being newly elected). Amongst the newcomers, I'm sure all were pleased to see Jane Ryan, our first lady secretary, from the Sheffield section.

On first impression, many were overwhelmed by Aldwark Manor's baronial splendour: lofty oak-beamed ceilings, grandfather clocks and the like. For a lucky few, rooms even had four-poster beds (no preferential treatment, but Jane had one, of course). Neatly tucked around the corner from the hotel, the BIGGA offices were a hive of activity. Samantha Flint seemed permanently occupied just answering the phone, with a visitor's chances of catching anyone else's attention dependent upon speaking quickly as they rushed past. The offices themselves are light, airy and packed with technology, but hardly large enough to accommodate dedicated cat-swingers! Neil Thomas later explained that another section of the building was available and that the Association hoped to make use of it in the near future.

For the body of the meeting itself, the party divided into three groups, each spending a couple of hours with the officers in turn. Discussions ranged over BIGGA's whole current sphere of operation, with the most recent activities being highlighted: the launch of the Education and Development Fund, the reduction of the Master Greenkeeper Certificate registration fee, and the preparation of a greenkeeper 'training' video. The latter is intended to show the role of the greenkeeper within the game of golf. It is hoped to make the completed tape available to individual Clubs; schools and colleges, promoting recruitment and on-going education. If a general conclusion can be drawn from these sessions, the Association has come a long way very quickly – from very little to more than 4,000 members and with our own magazine and exhibition. However, future major developments such as a site for our own practical and technical training – although already much discussed – currently await funding beyond our present resources.

On the social side, a splendid Christmas dinner was launched by 'Santa' doing Lance Percival impressions and dishing-out Iseki stationery. Many members may recognise the 'face behind the beard' from this brief description – and those who can't probably don't want to! A welcome guest was our chairman, George Malcolm, who spoke after the meal and thanked all involved with running BIGGA. We were also, thanks to Jane, privy to George's views on whisky and women (no preference expressed!). The evening concluded with an impromptu pool competition for small stakes, in which the Leicestershire greenkeepers demonstrated their tenacity wherever money is involved. Well done Roger Willars! (the writer was a disappointed second).

Before leaving Aldwark Manor, an hour was set aside for an 'open forum'. The officers of the Association were keen to hear any views passed on by members (for example difficulties in obtaining BIGGA garments), from which goodwill hopefully will result. It was the general feeling that the meeting was worthwhile, not only for the exchange of information between HQ and sections, but also for the informal discussions between representatives on how different sections are run. Why not, indeed, make this an annual event?

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David White meets Neil Whitaker, down amongst the sheltering pines of Woburn, and learns how once Poa-dominated greens were transformed into tournament standards of excellence.

Woburn's troubleshooter

The world of golf course architecture was robbed of one of its finest when the Scot, Charles Lawrie, died in 1976 at the untimely age of 53. Whilst it is not uncommon for new architects to produce quite routine designs for at least their first couple of tries, Lawrie, who had come to architecture late in years after a 'glittering-prize' lifestyle that included Fettes, Oxford, the Coldstream Guards and amateur golf of a high order, produced two absolute 'corkers' straight from the gun: the championship Duke's and the quite exquisite Duchess, both at Woburn.

One can imagine the thrill that Lawrie and his partner Frank Penninck must have experienced when they first drove through the pine firs that dwarf the narrow lane leading to the Woburn Club, for here undoubtedly was a tract of land that cried out - "build a golf course here". Ten years or so later, Neil Whitaker must have experienced similar tingles of excitement when called upon to mastermind a task that was to thrust him into the high profile maelstrom of championship golf at international level.

Neil's first exposure was anything but peaceful, however, for he was brought in by Woburn's MD Alex Hay specifically to coax the Duke's course back from the brink of a precipice, just seven weeks before the first 'major' - the early season Dunhill Masters - and at a time when the greens were bare, Poa annua dominated and decidedly un-tournament like. Rebuilding the greens solved those earlier drainage problems, though a new difficulty now presents itself, that of coping with a jet black root zone mix which has a fondness for congealing and massing and demands Vertidraining every 6-8 weeks in winter to keep it open and friable. Regular core extraction has also been necessary, the 1" core holes being filled with a 90% sand mix to help bring about a partial soil exchange. With continual top dressing, this has produced a surface which Neil describes as a "pretty decent" top.

In Neil's case his early season wand-waving continues year long and is witnessed by the thousands who flock to play this little corner of God's Kingdom. Having played with Neil when both courses were at their autumnal best, I was keen to learn more of his maintenance programme and primed him for this later quizzing, which took place in January.

Vigilance is Neil's watchword, for with early tournaments uppermost in his mind (the Ford Ladies Classic lines up in late April!) there is no room for error. Natural vigorous growth is no early bird in Bedfordshire, and an ever watchful eye means that any signs of weakness and possible disease is leaped upon - always prevention rather than cure!

The courses have not been without major problems, notably intensive green compaction that became so acute that rebuilding of several greens was called for, this after trying a number of ways in an attempt to break up the pudding-like sand/silt soil, taken from nearby Birchwood Farm, and laid over an unwashed limestone carpet layer which had literally become solidified. The carpets themselves resisted all attempts to re-open proper drainage, including the unconventional use of road drills!

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34 GREENKEEPER INTERNATIONAL February 1992
‘Greens are overseeded with bents every September and Neil would dearly love to repeat this in April, though tournament demands prevent this happening’

though the underneath remains ‘claggy’ and demands constant vigilance. A policy of slit-tining every two weeks throughout the winter is followed, bringing worthwhile results.

Bearing in mind that both courses are used for tournaments, we touched on green speed and resultant turf quality. Interestingly on the Duke’s, where rapid surfaces are paramount for the Dunhill Masters (a minimum of 9-10 feet on the stimpmeter) and greens are tournament cut at 1/8”, there is a greater predominance of Poa annua, perhaps as much as 70%, whilst on the Duchess, where cut is restricted to 3/16th, this is reversed, producing sward that is 70% bent/fescue. Neil follows an otherwise identical management programme on both courses, one that includes verticutting and grooming, the implication being that the shorter and twice daily hand mown tournament cut on the Duke’s encourages Poa domination. Greens are overseeded with bents every September and Neil would dearly love to repeat this in April, though tournament demands obviously prevent this happening. In the speed league he’s looked seriously at turf rollers; has had a working demo of the Australian model and is impressed by its results. For 1992 he hopes to use the PGA owned unit from Quietwaters; and who knows, if it works as he thinks it will... maybe he’ll get one in 1993?

In 1990 the fairways were wiped-out by drought and subsequently over-seeded with a mix containing 34% mixed Chewings fescue, 45% Creeping red fescue, 10% bents and 10% smooth stalked meadow grass. These fairways receive almost as much attention as the precious greens; indeed the fairways, tees and greens are all verticut and Vertidrained, cut with fine mowers and receive an application of wetting agent in March. This has definitely paid off, with results showing an encouragingly high percentage of finer grasses in the fairways. The application of wetting agents on fairways may on the face of it appear extravagant, but Neil reckons that subsequent water saving (all Woburn water is metered and the courses have a complete irrigation system) easily justifies this move.

Typically, each January begins with Vertidraining of tees, greens and fairways, repeated again in March (when the irrigation system is re-activated) and followed by wetting agents and the application of a suitable granular slow-release fertiliser. A weekly ‘topping only’ cut is carried out on greens throughout the dormancy period. Soil tests are evaluated annually to establish any particular weaknesses, the readings indicating that Woburn is low, indeed nearly off the scale, in phosphates and lacking in Potash and Nitrogen. In early April and, temperatures permitting, weekly thereafter, verticutting, grooming and light dressing (70%
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Woburn's play policy during frost is a sound one, demanding the immediate use of properly prepared 100-200 square metre frost greens, all created away from the main greens and approaches, either to the left or right. Tee areas are large enough to enable constant tee block re-positioning and the spring programme is aimed at keeping them well drained and open. The dreaded 'black pudding' is found on tees as well as greens, though on the few tees that have been converted with the mesh element created by Netlon, not only is this eliminated, but vastly improved deep rooting is evident. Woburn was the first to try the system and obviously must like it, for they are currently installing six further mesh element tees and will eventually complete every championship tee in like style. Trees abound, predominantly Scotch pine and birch, and whilst they are beautiful; a lot of trees means a lot of work when they shed needles, leaves and cones. For the Ford Ladies Classic this creates extra work raking up tons of the wretched things, the ladies insisting on a fair carpet if they stray from the straight and narrow!

How is all this achieved? By year round dedication from a crew of just twelve greenkeepers plus Neil himself, a fully occupied machinery engineer, Martin Davies; and more recently a full time irrigation engineer, Lee Murdoch. 'Team work is all', says Neil, 'and I am unbelievably proud of every one of them'. Proud he may be, but when one digs below this course manager's apparent modesty another and even deeper burning passion is discovered. It is for the Duke and Duchess as well!

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March 26th-29th: Golf Asia '92 - World Trade Centre, Singapore.

March 27th-29th: BIGGA National Education Conference - Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester.

April 8th: BIGGA Annual General Meeting, Royal York Hotel, York. Commencing 2.30pm.


April 29th: BIGGA South West and Wales Region Trade Show WESTURF '92 - Long Ashton GC, Bristol.


July 16th-19th: The Open Championship - Muirfield, Scotland.

August 10th-12th: BIGGA National Golf Tournament - Littlestone GC, Kent.

AROUND THE GREEN

Keeping in touch with news and comment from the regions

Will section reporters please note that final copy date for inclusion of Around The Green material in the April issue is March 1st.

KENT

December 12th saw our annual Turkey Trot played at Ashford GC, and despite this taking place in the middle of a very cold spell - frozen ground et al - we were very lucky to find a pleasant, clear day. The course was in excellent shape, especially the fairways, and our thanks again go to Willie McConville and his staff. Once again the catering staff did us proud with a superb Christmas dinner and we are thankful that Ashford GC, undoubtedly fine hosts, are prepared to have us visit them on a regular basis.

First pick of the prizes went to Peter Gee with 41 points, followed by David Wood with 39 and Peter Biscoe with 38. It was nice to see some new faces participating and I hope we will see them again in other events later in the year. The trade prize was won by one of these 'new boys' - Chris Duke of Haynes - with 44 points. I can assure Chris it will be the last time he plays off a 24 handicap! Thanks also to the many trade members who supported us and provided raffle prizes, especially Mike Lincoln-Smith who brought the Ransomes Goblet, also won by Peter Gee.

Some members may have noticed that we held a 'vegetarian' Turkey Trot this time - no turkey appearing on the prize table. I understand one was sent, but it was unable to read directions, its main problem apparently stemming from disorientation after crossing the new Dartford Bridge and in receiving little help when asking the way. Running round the toll-booths emitting gobble, gobble noises only seemed to annoy people and when it eventually found the M20 and got through the road works, it finally got lost in the fog!

Following our dinner and prizegiving we held our AGM, which must have been the fastest in BIGGA history, for those assembled (representing only about one third of our membership) had very little to query. The committee remains the same as last year, seemingly no volunteers coming forward for election. However, this year the role of secretary and 'main man' has been filled by David Wood of Holtye. As some of you already know, John Millen has taken on greater responsibilities with the Joint Golf Course Committee, his Board of Management work and his new Woald of Kent course (which will open in the spring) and this will consume much of his time. Our thanks to him for his skill and devotion in handling the majority of our section affairs over several years. During the meeting, David Wood gave a brief summary of our activities in 1991 and reminded us of the events planned for 1992. If you need to contact him, his number (evenings) is 0344 850875.

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A GRASS ROOTS BUSINESS
December 11th saw our annual Christmas Competition held at Pyle and Kenfig for the Vitax Shield which was won by our president Eric Hallett, with runner-up Mo Morgan. H Parry is our representative on the Board of Management. Those elected were given a unanimous vote by all present.

The treasurer reported a reasonable financial position, but money had been hard to come by and a large loss was incurred at the annual dinner/dance. The secretary's report stressed again that members should support the section. On a more successful note, 38 new members had joined; Telford Jarvis, Dennis Cockburn, Telford Jarvis, Colin Garnett and Kirbymoorside. The secretary then thanked the president, chairman and committee, also Alan Gamble, Ian Thomson, Dennis Cockburn, Telford Jarvis, Colin Garnett and Brian Carr.

Places are still available for the trip to Lloyds of Southwark on November 28th, the committee for making us feel so very welcome and to Don Hunt for providing us with wine over lunch.

HAROLD WYMAN

NORTHERN

I will start by wishing all our members a happy new year. In December we saw the winter golf competition and AGM held at a bitterly cold and frost-bound South Leeds GC. Just 14 members bothered to turn out and this looks like being the last winter competition in 1992 - although no interest is shown. However, the lads who did play enjoyed it and Telford Jarvis won first prize, followed by Robin Smith and Chris Martin.

The AGM which followed was attended by 12 members, and for those who were not there, the following is a brief resume: The treasurer reported a reasonable financial position, but money had been hard to come by and a large loss was incurred at the annual dinner/dance. The secretary's report stressed again that members should support the section. On a more successful note, 38 new members had joined; Telford Jarvis had won the ESRIK final and the Northern Region won the team event. Additionally, the Northern Section received the Brian Lupton trophy. Golf in 1991 had been arranged at Bradford, Northcliffe, Scarborough South Cliffe, and Kirkbymoorside. The secretary then thanked the president, chairman and committee, also Alan Gamble, Ian Thomson, Dennis Cockburn, Telford Jarvis, Colin Garnett and Brian Carr.

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HAROLD WYMAN

SOUTH COAST

Once again our annual Christmas Stableford Competition took place at the Royal Winchester GC. Over sixty members took part in the competition – a record for the section.

Please write to your host Club and the support from the committee and manager, Mr David Williams, is much appreciated.

The competition took the form of individual Stableford points over 18 holes and was sponsored by New Forest Engine Machineries. Results: Winner of the Rigby Taylor Shield - Brian Newcombe, Woodcote Park, £50 prize. 2nd: David Williams, is much appreciated.

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