

IT WAS only fair to allow Neil Thomas a full year in his post before subjecting him to some of the questions that seem to be asked fairly frequently at meetings of greenkeepers. Each month in this magazine Neil provides us with a valuable update on affairs, but I wanted to ask for his views on some wider issues.

First, though, I suggested that he was not very well known to members and he had to agree. "The point was brought home to me at the Open when I had gone out with a game to see how the bunker-raking was working. We got to the 3rd hole and the member actually doing the job turned round and asked me which section I belonged to! However, it is early days yet."

Neil is a Welshman from Penarth who studied at University College, Cardiff - part of the University of Wales, and graduated with a BA Honours degree in History. That led directly into an administrative career in Local Government and eventually to becoming Chief Administrative Officer in the Social Services Department in West Glamorgan based in Swansea. It was a career that embraced the complete range of Local Government administration with a final responsibility for a staff of 130, but left him with a hankering for a more personal and creative involvement in his job. Neil is married, with a wife and three young children who have settled well in Yorkshire.

INCREASING SUCCESS

Apart from the fact that Bingley is not exactly the ideal base for a job that involves a good deal of travelling, the only available office facilities are inadequate. That is no fault of the STRI, whose increasing success is already putting a strain on the accommodation in the new building for their own staff. Picture, if you will, the Executive Director squeezed into a small office and surrounded by packing cases holding ties, blazers, umbrellas etc - in fact the entire clothing stocks for BIGGA.

His secretary/personal assistant is located at a desk in the

STRI typing pool. It is a measure of the shortage of space that the computer, ordered in March to develop new systems as well as to take care of routine clerical work, is still sitting in the factory.

The first task was to set up a headquarters with centralised administration for the whole Association and apart from the logistic difficulties I have mentioned, this is well under way. A new constitution was produced splitting the 24 sections into five regions. This regional structure, with separate administrators for each region, is beginning to work well and should provide the essential link with the members in their sections. It is at local level that adjustment to the new system seems to be slower. In creating any new organisation, some milk will be spilt and some noses put out of joint. Time has to be allowed for the dust to settle. It is clear that there is still a need in some sections for volunteers to work even harder than in the past if the whole organisation is to succeed.

A MISERABLE LIFE

Members at the grass-roots (very apt!) are in too many cases living a fairly miserable life, badly paid and at the mercy of unsatisfactory golf club administrative arrangements. It is perfectly natural for them to judge BIGGA by immediate relief for them, but that is most probably unfair. If they are to enjoy the benefits of an enhanced professional status the foundations must be well laid. In addition, the new membership package as it has unfolded over the past six months contains some valuable items in fields such as insurance and employment protection. One difficulty is that greenkeepers put differing priorities on the items they think their Association should be providing. Some see education as

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**Eddie Park
talks to
Neil Thomas
Executive
Director
of
BIGGA**

a first priority, but others are more interested in their opportunities for summer golf tournaments. All must find a place.

I am impressed that Neil, starting from scratch just one year ago, has taken all the

Below: Eddie Park



problems on board and he readily expressed his view on a variety of topics. It is obviously of prime importance that a greenkeeping association establishes good working relationships with other interested parties - the "customers", for instance - in this case the golfers in their hundreds of independent golf clubs.

Supremely important people mainly because THEY ought to be the chief source of funding for the development of adequate greenkeeping training; something they have yet to realise!

NEW BROCHURE

Contacts are developing between an increasing number of secretaries and BIGGA and the leaflet "18 ways to help your greenkeeper" ought to be in every clubhouse together with the new Association brochure which will be published shortly. It may well be useful to try to establish contact with the Chairman of Green Committees and probably greenkeepers themselves could do much in this direction. I remarked that the old local vice-presidents of the old Associations (usually retired chairmen) formed a valuable link with their clubs, but they have largely disappeared from the new set-up.

The Association needs all the help available, but the Associate Membership category has not appealed to those more interested in their local section.

The golfing unions, both national and county, really ought to be representing golfers and collecting their contributions, which would benefit the state of their golf courses. But contacts seem to

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"The new levy on club members will test the willingness of clubs and the golfing unions to make a positive contribution"

have been few in number and not particularly helpful. Neil remarked ruefully: "The new levy on club members will test the willingness of clubs and the golfing unions to make a positive contribution to greenkeeper education."

Although many people think that a levy of 2p per club member is totally inadequate and that at least 50p, and preferably £1, would be more appropriate, it is clear, half way through the financial year, that collecting the levy for the Greenkeeper Training Committee is going to be a difficult task. This in turn will delay receipt of the R & A's "matching contribution".

The contribution of the R & A in getting BIGGA started has been invaluable (and very gratefully received), but it should not be seen as a permanent solution. Incidentally, relationships with the R & A are cordial as was evident at the Open and Neil himself represents BIGGA, by invitation, on the Greenkeeping Panel which discusses financial aid. "This, at least, allows the Association's message to be put over to the R & A and it must be acknowledged that that body has, in return, been very supportive."

Leaving the customers, how about contacts with the trade? These have been spasmodic, but there has been an increasing impetus of late. "A feeling of overall disappointment that the trade seems to have little empathy with the greenkeeper who provides much of their business. On the credit side, we now have six companies who



Neil Thomas

have begun to develop a positive, ongoing relationship with the Association - but there are many more who should be involved".

In fact, it is the more traditional firms, who might have been expected to welcome an involvement in better greenkeeper education and training, who are hanging back. Perhaps they too find it difficult to adjust to a national organisation, instead of giving prizes to section golf competitions. There are opportunities here to be grasped, but it is a subject requiring great care.

CONFERENCES

Education is a big subject and on this front much is already happening. Two educational conferences are already being arranged at Ayr and Cambridge. A three-day Educational Seminar Programme will run alongside the inaugural European Turf Management Exhibition in Harrogate next January. Additionally, the Foundation Module on the Safe Use of

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Pesticides will also be available for delegates. This is the first occasion on which such a programme has been run for greenkeepers in this country and it has already created much interest.

The chief discussions concern new courses which go beyond the basic City & Guilds into the realms of management. One college is proposing a two year full time HND course in greenkeeping, but the earliest possible starting date is 1991, as the proposals need to be validated and approved through the national education structure. The course would take in school-leavers with good A-levels and after two years of theory send them out to learn the practical side. I can imagine a few old-timers having doubts about that, but nowadays that is the pattern for most practical jobs with any pretensions to a professional status.

Neil did not dismiss, either, my own belief that greenkeepers might well copy other professions in looking hard at ways of helping themselves in the educational field. After all, the medical profession has a profusion of local "study groups" operating in a variety of different fields. Most BIGGA sections hold monthly winter lectures (all too often to listen to salesmen) which could, at a minimal cost, be reconstructed into Study Groups dealing with systematic basic theory - both for themselves and for their Green Committees. Ways must be found of reducing the inflexibility of college education.

Related to education is the question of an Association magazine and Neil is beginning to appreciate the difficulty of persuading many greenkeepers to put pen to paper. Not because they can't, but because they appreciate the problems that can be created with their employers. That is a factor common to most walks of life. Neil remarked with understanding: "The biggest single problem with the membership is to get them to think in a way contrary to tradition - which is to have a quick look over the shoulder beforehand". It is a chicken and egg situation because things will not change until proper professional status is achieved and one could be forgiven for imagining that the constitution of the average golf club had been

designed to thwart that objective. In the meantime there are some hard things to be said by someone!

DISAPPOINTING

The attitude of the media is reckoned to be "disappointing and disinterested". The executive Director has communicated with all four major golf magazines, but received a negative response as they are all totally orientated to the professional tour. A briefing before the Open did little to improve the television coverage relating to greenkeeping on Television. "They still referred to marshals and stewards raking the bunkers and clearing water from the greens". Neil sees improving media response as a medium-term objective which will demand considerable lobbying.

We had covered a wide spread of topics and it was time to let Neil get on with his work "hard, but stimulating" he said. He reckons that his average working week is 65-70 hours! Members of the Board of Management and Regional and Section administrators are all making large contributions and perhaps the message to members should be something like that of President Kennedy at his inauguration.

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