

Career-wise, it is probably true for most of us that one person is the guiding influence in deciding our future. That person may be a parent, teacher or friend – or merely a colleague who is in the right place at the right time. More often than not he or she just happens to be around to utter the inspirational words from which ambition is sparked.

It is certainly true of our new national chairman, Roy Kates, who was born in St Mary's Paddington and raised in nearby Hillingdon. Roy lived throughout his childhood and teens next door to a man who was the secretary of Hillingdon Golf Club, a coincidence which could be said to have been his first exposure to golf, no matter how tenuous. As a teenager Roy did most of the things that impecunious 14 year olds are prone to do, including augmenting his pocket money with Saturday jobs. These casual jobs were to influence his life in more ways than one, the dual results being marriage to a girl he had known since early childhood – and a career in green-keeping!

To begin at the beginning, Roy worked weekends as the most humble of extras on the golf course, courtesy of Mr Next-Door Golf Club Secretary, whilst also working for the local dairyman on a busy milk delivery round. It must have occurred to him that early rising and working in God's great outdoors had its good points, and as a bright school pupil the seed of an idea for a career in forestry was beginning to mature. His tutors had other ideas however, and they lobbied hard for him to remain at school and aim for higher honours – 'A' levels and beyond.

The youngster was at the crossroads so to speak and although forestry still gnawed, nothing had been finalised – or indeed even instigated – and with nothing more sinister than a chance conversation with 'Old Bill' in the sheds at Hillingdon, a counter-plot was hatched. The idea was ventured by 'Old Bill' that maybe, just maybe, greenkeeping would offer Roy a splendid career and although he had never considered such work as anything other than his Saturday job, the more he thought about the idea, the more enthusiastic he became. 'Old Bill' had uttered the inspirational suggestion!

Roy didn't believe in doing things by halves, and immediately sought advice on training opportunities from none other than the BGGGA, straight away whizzing off to college to take an IOG course in groundsmanship. At 16 he was an apprentice at Hillingdon, at 17 a rising young lion in his chosen career and at the youthful age of just 19 – with an Intermediate Diploma in Turf Culture tucked under his belt – he became head greenkeeper following the retirement of 'Old Bill'.

Thereafter followed a delightful period as the head man, with Roy making friends with several of the serving officers posted at nearby RAF Uxbridge, who played on his course. One such friend invited Roy to holiday in Germany and again fortune took a hand – with an offer of the job as course manager of the Royal Air Force Germany Golf Club – imagine it, the Boy Wonder was barely 21! Golden opportunities don't come every day and Roy leapt at the chance, the job leading to three happy years in a little piece of Britain tucked in a neutral corner of the Fatherland.

At this point we must back-track to Roy's *other* job, the one at the dairy. Roy had sparked off a



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teenage friendship with Tracey, the daughter of his dairy round boss, and although he had known Tracey since early school days, this renewed friendship was to blossom into a full-blooded romance. Tracey had been off to the Antipodes whilst Roy was away in Europe, but we must presume that Cupid's tug was stronger than either the Deutschmark or the Australian dollar, for as Roy returned from Germany, Tracey also returned from Australia and a wedding was soon announced! The second influence meant that Roy's old Saturday job boss was now his father-in-law!

Fresh from Germany, Roy was to spend the next three years at Wyke Green before Lady Luck again took a hand, this time with an advertisement appearing for a 'mature course manager, aged 35-40', for the new pay and play complex at Wexham Park. With tongue in cheek our 26 year old applied and instantly impressed the owner – who offered him the job right away! There was a bonus attraction in that Wexham Park was both a new development and proprietor directed and his new boss knew just how to inspire results. This

came by including a payment-by-results structure – the more green fees, the more Roy's income would increase.

I touched on this unusual reward structure and asked Roy how this affected his thinking with regard to course closures or the instigation of frost green usage. "It completely changed my way of thinking", he said, "I've never believed in pampering the course anyway, it's for people to play on and I can tell you that I've not yet suffered in the spring because play is allowed throughout the winter. I was never in the position where I could go to my boss and say I want the course closed because it's frosty. The way now is that I've changed some of my original ideas and I view pay and play golf in a different and rather special light. With so many people on the course all the time, we have to approach things in a different way anyway. Wexham Park is a purely commercial venture, three courses always on the go every day and indeed every night (with Cyalume light-stick golf!), no matter what".

Wexham Park is not unique, but it is certainly different in being on reclaimed gravel pits. Roy's team have planted 3,000 trees in the past two years and constructed extra holes to make 45 holes in total. The high sand content greens, 100% *Poa annua* in cover species, have stood the test of pay and play conditions and appear more resilient than one might imagine.

Turning to his coming year in office, Roy made the valid point about being backed and supported by his employer and of how vital this was. He further impressed upon me just how important this is for any BIGGA board member who might find himself in a similar position, for without total backing from the incumbent's employer, the job of chairman is rendered impossible. The commitment, he insists, is not just from the individual but rather that of a team effort.

"I'm not from a Wentworth or a Sunningdale", he said, "rather from a Club lower in the pecking order, but with an important part to play in the golf game cycle. I hope that my position at such a tender age might inspire those younger greenkeepers who perhaps think that in order to participate they need to be from a high flying set-up".

Asking Roy about his aspirations for the coming year, he told me that following the well-worn path – further education for his fellow greenkeepers – will again be the 1992 cornerstone for growth. "There's nothing new in wanting a better life and education is opening up those opportunities", he said, continuing, "I'm also drawn to the idea of getting more involved with talking to those who might want to help the cause – prospective Golden Key candidates, for example".

Eleven years of marriage and two daughters – Kimberley and Emma-Jayne are the apples of his eye – finds Roy still as ambitious as ever and he is delighted to have reached another peak by being elevated to 'The Chair'. It is an ambition very much to his liking and he expressed a hope "that I may be as worthy as my illustrious predecessors". Sound sentiments indeed from one of BIGGA's youngest ambassadors. "In 12 months", he concluded, "I hope I can look back with great satisfaction, knowing that the Association is still on the climbing curve and that I may have played a small part in taking us further forward in this crucial year of taking Britain – and that means BIGGA – into Europe."