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TO ORDER, COMPLETE THE CARD OPPOSITE PAGE 42

Debbie Savage, BIGGA's new education officer, is at the leading edge of one of the most important aspects of the Association - its educational and training programmes. RACHEL SEMLYEN talked to Debbie at Aldwark Manor

The achievement of independent funding for the newly structured Greenkeepers Training Committee is a feather in the cap of BIGGA. Its successful campaign to get formal training needs recognised reflects tremendously well on the Association. What of the Association's approach to education and how will it be progressed, now that its education officer has left to direct the GTC?

Neil Thomas, executive director, is acutely aware of the education needs that remain. "We have a priority to look after our members' education requirements just as we have always done" he says. "Whilst the GTC will concern itself mainly with long-term policy, the completion of work on the supervisory and managerial aspects of the Training Manual and the formal education of students through the colleges, I estimate that some 70% of the education and training provisions for greenkeepers remains with BIGGA. These centre around the programme we have built up for courses, awards, conferences, seminars and the Master Greenkeeper Certificate. Much remains to be done and we plan to develop still further liaising on an ongoing basis with the GTC."

Who better to step into David Golding's shoes than the person on the Aldwark team who has assisted him over the past four years: Debbie Savage. Debbie, while in the position of exhibitions/membership officer has helped to set up the Master Greenkeeper Certificate, assisted with the seminar programme at Harrogate and the Education Conference and is known not only to members but also to sponsors and a wide range of industry representatives.

I went to see Debbie when the appointment was announced, but before the changes had come into being. It was the usual busy office, phones ringing, people calling and, outside on the Aldwark Manor course, golfers enjoying the spring sunshine. She told me frankly that David Golding will be "a tough act to follow, but he and I have worked together for four years and have one aim in common, the training and education of greenkeepers. Now I am looking forward to giving the education side of the job 100% of my time."

"The advantage is that everyone knows me. I have a thorough working knowledge of BIGGA in all its aspects and I understand the needs of our members. The adrenalin is starting to buzz now with enthusiasm for the task ahead. There is a tremendous amount to do, with the courses, awards, conference and seminars for a start, before we can begin to look ahead to the next stage and develop the planned scholarship awards. These I see as a most important stage in our development as we seek to provide the means for worthy students in need of financial support to attend college."

Debbie started with BIGGA soon after its arrival at Aldwark in 1989. Since then she has organised the increasingly successful BTME at Harrogate and established it as the most successful new fine turf exhibition in the country. And in her role as Membership Officer she has had to set up and run the computer systems for the membership from scratch.

"When BIGGA was established in 1987 there were some 1,300 members. Now there are 5,000. The main aim was finding out what the sections wanted for their members, providing the relevant information and making sure everything ran smoothly.

"Having been here since the beginning of the Association at Aldwark, I have seen a lot of change. We now run our own magazine as well as the exhibition and to ensure the development and growth of both we have to compete aggressively in a difficult business and financial climate. We consider our magazine to be the market leader and during the last four years we have seen the BTME become the industry's premier exhibition."

Debbie grew up in Sussex and left school at 16. She took a two year course in business administration at Worthing College of Further Education and then worked for ten years in a local solicitor's office as a legal executive for which she trained on a day release course, passing parts one and two of the Associates Examination. It was in the early eighties with marriage to a research scientist and a move to the United States, that her career in professional association work began.

She started in Washington DC with the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, which was the umbrella organi-

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DEB'S DELIGHT

sation for six scientific societies within the USA with over 50,000 members. She worked in the employment section, placing graduate, post-doctoral and associate scientists in academia or industry. An affiliate society of 6,000 members, the American Society for Cell Biology then asked her to help expand their employment service. It was here she gained the experience of computerising membership services.

A move to Buffalo in upstate New York, saw her take up the new position of administrative secretary of the American Crystallographic Association. This started as a voluntary body run by its members and Debbie was the first paid administrator. There she did everything with running an association of 2,000 members: from newsletters and a membership directory to organising the annual meetings and exhibitions all over the United States. It is with some pride that she says: "it is still going strong".

On returning to the UK after five years it was at York University that Debbie continued her career, helping with short courses in the chemistry department. Then she saw an advertisement in the local paper for a secretary/personal assistant for BIGGA at Aldwark. On interview, it was realised that Debbie was just the person to help develop the new Association. She was taken on, but not in the position she applied for as she was appointed administrative officer.

"At that time BIGGA was particularly looking to take on the organisation and develop-

ment of the exhibition and to manage the membership services and I suppose with my experience I was ideally suited."

Neil Thomas has more to say. "Debbie's background, her skills and total commitment to the job in hand has been a great strength, as everyone will testify. We anticipate that the transition to education officer will be as smooth as it could be. We owe that to all the members enrolled on the Master Greenkeeper Certificate and all those who participate in the various courses, award schemes, seminars and education conference."

Debbie has worked with David for three years on the development of the Master Greenkeeper Certificate scheme. With 100 currently registered, she will take over full responsibility for updating the records, logging in the credits as they come in and keeping an eye on everyone's progress.

"As more and more greenkeepers see members of their own profession being awarded the Certificate, it encourages others to take part. This year's UK recipients, Gordon Irvine and Kerran Daly, have had a high profile and this has helped. They are both now involved with helping on the Stage 2 course assessments."

Asked to comment on other aspects of BIGGA's educational and training programmes Debbie began with the BTME Seminar Programme. "There is a bank of speakers already lined up for next year. We plan to keep the mix of speakers roughly as it was last year,

with a fair number of greenkeeper members because delegates like to hear of each other's experiences."

On courses Debbie commented "We have just had three very successful in-house pesticide courses with 100% pass rates, run by Jon Allbutt. This is a popular and topical course as everyone is increasingly aware of safety rules and requirements. Our members have certainly benefited through these courses being run in-house within a learning environment at Aldwark Manor."

"In September we had the first of the public speaking courses, for members who were presenting papers at Harrogate, then in February for Board of Management members. Further courses are planned and the benefits are being seen in the many recent favourable comments on our members' performances when speaking at the BTME and the National Education Conference."

Both the Toro/PGA European Tour Student Greenkeeper of the Year and the ICI Premier Greenkeeper of the Year awards are major schemes that BIGGA initiated. Outlining the development of these schemes Debbie is excited by the growth of the Student Greenkeeper award which this year will see nominations at a regional level for the first time. Meanwhile this year's ICI award has generated a substantially increased level of participation from the membership.

Debbie will continue to develop the highly successful management courses held at Aldwark Manor each October/ November which this year will run over five weeks. She sees these as "being instrumental in improving the supervisory and managerial skills of our members as well as creating the confidence for members to move from a head greenkeeper to course manager role".

One of the vital areas on which Debbie will need to concentrate is the further growth of BIGGA's Education and Development Fund. She sees this as the most important source of funding for education and training programmes particularly as the GTC has now signalled its intent to utilise its resources in directions other than towards BIGGA's own educational programmes. Debbie looks forward to the imminent career video and the first training video both of which have been made possible through the establishment of the fund.

As far as interests are concerned Debbie loves to cook and is no mean sportswoman, playing badminton to county level in her teens. She keeps meaning to take up golf. "I love watching it as I do any sport, but at the moment I only have time for weight and circuit training at the gym." She looks forward to The Open this year when she will help to organise the support team of greenkeepers. "A sun visor signed by Nick Faldo is one of my most prized possessions from The Open last year."

I asked what she sees as the real bonuses of the job. "I see myself being at the leading edge of the most important aspect of the Association - its educational and training programmes and contributing to the development of future policy. I look forward to being able to help people to develop their careers through the educational opportunities that I will be responsible for providing. I have met many greenkeeper members over the years and most are really friendly, down to earth people who are a pleasure to deal with."