

Straight down the middle

Chris Boiling meets up with BIGGA's new chairman, John Millen

BIGGA's new chairman, John Millen, appears to be a quiet, unassuming guy. Straightforward, salt-of-the-earth type. Someone who will give an honest day's work without exciting or surprising you.

That's the first impression. And as I watched him play golf at Walton Heath recently, it seemed that his game was an extension of his personality. Drives straight down the middle. Not that far, but then he's not a big guy. Nothing too exciting. All steady stuff. Getting on the par-4s in three plus two putts to keep to his 18 handicap.

Then, suddenly, this right-handed golfer pulls a left-handed club out of the bag and proceeds to chip up left-handed. His unorthodox cure for the shanks. I hadn't noticed that he'd been putting left-handed as well.

There is obviously more to this man than first appears. He's been a greenkeeper for 29 years, but he left for a while to become a trawler skipper. He spent seven years in Norway, working at a couple of the country's most prestigious clubs. Back home, he helped turn part of an egg farm into a "fun" course, designing, constructing and now managing the Weald of Kent. And it was his decision not to employ a pro at the club "because they take more than they give".

John Millen, 54, was brought up in Tenterden, Kent, on a farm with a nine-hole golf course. His father was head greenkeeper there for 12 years. "I worked on the golf course for a while, and the farm, but I didn't like the job. One of my interests has always been fishing and sailing. I got in with the local fishermen and took that up for a career," he recalls.

For 11 years he had his own trawler. Then he got married and as Britain entered the Common Market he could see the writing on the wall for fishing, so he returned to greenkeeping. He moved to Sutton Valence, just south of Maidstone, and has been there for the last 25 years. His first job back in the business was at West Malling Golf Club, joining as head greenkeeper as it neared completion. He stayed there for five years before a two-year stint at Norway's No 1 golf club, Oslo. Next he moved across country to Oustoen, an exclusive country club with a 12-hole course on an island in a fjord. He stayed for five years maintaining the course six months of the year, working on his wife's family's farm in the winter. The club was good to him, paying for him to go to Canada every year to study for a month. But he studied more than greenkeeping – man management and psychology grabbed his interest, and sharpened his managerial skills.

When John came back to England in 1985



he became the course manager at Canterbury Golf Club, about 30 miles from his home. During his five years there he became involved with greenkeeping associations, and especially in improving greenkeeper education and training.

While working at Canterbury, he went to a local parish meeting to hear objections to a new 120-bedroom hotel and 18-hole golf course to be built just down the road from his home. The local farmers and residents were against it, and John was about the only one to speak in favour of the project. Afterwards he got chatting to the owners, the Edwards family who have a 700-acre egg farm with 230,000 chickens, and offered to help. He started as a consultant to help them get planning permission, then helped with the design and specification of the 6,200-yard par 70 course. "I was getting more interested in this project than I was as head greenkeeper at Canterbury. I could see the opportunities there so I came to work full-time," says John. That was four years ago.

He oversaw the course's construction, manning the machines with two lads. Their aim was to keep the 125-acre site as natural as possible and easy to maintain. It would be a quality golf course for ordinary golfers at a reasonable price. They took in 1,000 members the first year and have settled on 900 now, of whom only three have single figure handicaps. They had to put in a good drainage system because the course is built on heavy clay soil. The greens were built to USGA specs. Ponds and ditches were left and more lakes were dug for irrigation and to create features. And they're obviously attractive features as they attract 16,000 balls a year.

The club runs the shop itself and there is no pro on site. "If people want lessons they can go to the driving range nearby," says John.

The course attracted 270 societies last year and is booked by at least one society everyday

this year from April 1 to the end of September. Last year 39,000 rounds were played there and John expects 41,000 this year.

His management skills have enabled him to put the right people in place to look after the course and all these visitors while he carries out all the obligations foisted upon the chairman of BIGGA. John should have a fair idea of what the job involves as he is an experienced association member. He was a board of management member of EIGGA, taking over from Dennis Ayling when he retired, and has represented the South East Region on BIGGA's board for the past six years, serving as chairman of the education committee and vice-chairman. Now he is the chairman for a year. A daunting prospect for a doer rather than a talker.

"I'm looking forward to it but I'm very nervous," he admits. "I'm more of a backroom person. I'm not an outward going person but being chairman is becoming more and more a PR job. You've got to be the person who goes out there and talks to members and the trade."

His boss, Andrew Edwards, thinks he'll do a good job because he does exactly what he says he will do – and within the budgets he's been given.

One of his major tasks will be overseeing BIGGA's review, which will include updating the constitution, the future location of headquarters and BIGGA's role in education.

"We've been on a rollercoaster of growth but we've never sat back and thought where we were going or where we wanted to go," says John. "We've built up a first-class management team at headquarters. We just need to get the education officer in place now. I think the sky's the limit for the Association. We've become financially viable and we've got the expertise there to meet the members' wishes."

So, he stressed, members need to make their wishes known to their section secretaries.

It's going to be a busy year for John, but he still hopes to find time for his wife of 25 years, Carolyn who's just taken up golf, his two grown-up daughters who are off seeing the world and his 12-year-old son, as well as his other interests – snow skiing once a year, squash twice a week, sailing in the summer and golf once a week "to socialise with members – I don't take it too seriously."

John was a 12-handicapper at 12 "and I've got worse ever since". But he didn't do too badly at the Annual Gentlemen's Dinner tournament at Walton Heath, scoring 33 points for first place among the higher handicappers. The start of a successful year?