



# BIGGA's

**British greenkeepers have a friend in high places. Viscount William Whitelaw, who has been playing golf for 72 years (since he was four), knows they do a "crucial" job. Greenkeeper International's editor, Chris Boiling, went to the House of Lords to meet BIGGA's president.**

I'd studied politics for five years – two at school and three at university – but the nearest I'd come to the Houses of Parliament was taking a photo of Big Ben – along with a group of Japanese tourists. Yet, after only five months with BIGGA there I was marching past the policeman at the gates to the House of Lords proclaiming: "I've got an appointment with Viscount Whitelaw".

Into the hallowed cloakroom, with pegs labelled Earl This and Lord That. "I've got an appointment with Viscount Whitelaw," I told the policewoman at the tiny reception desk. After a few minutes, the former deputy prime minister's secretary, Shirley Hoole, came to collect me and lead me through the corridors of power to the BIGGA president's small wood-panelled office, which he shares with Mrs Hoole.

After all those years of studying politics, I was now only a few feet away from a politician who was once one of the most powerful men in the country. An MP from 1955-83, he held several key offices: Leader of the House of Commons, Home Secretary, Chairman of the Conservative Party, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Secretary of State for Employment, and now an active and influential peer. And what did I want to talk to him about? Golf.

Other journalists who have interviewed the 76-year-old lord recently have asked about the Thatcher Years or shake-ups in the police service. Not me, I asked about his first love, golf. He welcomed the change.

Politics and the Conservative Party may have taken over his life, but golf will always be his first love.

His father, who died from his wounds in World War 1, was a good golfer and his mother was a very keen player, so it was natural that he should take up the game. Especially when you consider where he was brought up – Nairn.

Shortly after his fourth birthday he was marched off to the local pro, Jimmy Nelson, who taught him how to hit fir cones. This, claimed the old pro, was the best way to learn the swing. Viscount Whitelaw reckons it just saved the pro from having to retrieve dozens of golf balls.

Lord Whitelaw practised on the cones for

# friend in high places

several weeks. "If there is anything more useless than hitting a fir cone, I don't offer it. It can't go anywhere. Marvellous for a tiny old Scottish professional who sat on a stick watching you and didn't have to go and collect any balls. After three weeks I told my mother that if I had to go on hitting cones I would never play the game again. The next day my mother and the pro obviously understood, for he turned and said, and I can always remember the phrase: 'I think the boy's swing is now good enough to hit a ball.' Therefore I was now allowed to hit a ball and it sailed away in the air – many haven't since, but that one did – and I never looked back. After that I became terribly keen and have played all my life ever since."

For a short time before the World War II, when he was at Cambridge University, he was down to scratch. After the war he had handicaps of 1 and 2 "but I was never quite as good after the war as I had been before it".

Then, when he became an MP in 1955, he gave up playing competitively. At the moment he plays two or three times a month at Silloth-on-Solway in Cumbria. He says he would like to play once a week but he is still busy even though he has "retired".

"The theory is that I have retired and the theory is that I therefore have more time for golf, but one way or another I don't. Now why don't I? I come to the House of Lords quite a lot; this weekend for example I'm going down to open a new police headquarters at Bournemouth; then I have a long diary of different meetings to do with politics and other things near politics, other organisations such as yours," he said as I admired the old golfing prints and antique 4 wood hanging on his office walls.

Do you have any plans to wind down your activities, I wondered? "Well, yes, my wife thinks there is," he replied with a smile. But the evidence points the other way.

## Honorary member

Recently he became president of Nairn. He is also a member and the president of Silloth, a member of St Andrews and an honorary member at Penrith, Carlisle and Prestwick.

If he had a handicap now it would probably be about 16 or 17.

"When you get old it's a very annoying game and it's particularly annoying on courses you used to play. I went and played at Nairn recently. Suddenly bunkers I'd never seen before I was taking four shots to get over. As you get older you lose the capacity to get the club moving fast enough. As a result you hit it quite straight but it doesn't go anywhere. I find myself hitting a driver on a short hole and not getting there. That's infuriating, but you have to get used to it."

It's a bit different to when he played Nairn

as a teenager. Some members allege that he has driven into the sea on the first seven holes during different rounds. Anyone who knows Nairn will know when it's windy it's quite easy to do so off the first, second, fourth and fifth. But from the third, sixth and seventh it takes some doing. "Now if I turned at the sea I wouldn't reach it," he says.

That, of course, is not the only change he has seen during his 72 years of playing the game.

"The standard of our greenkeeping and the standard of our courses is amazingly different," he told me. "And it is now accepted that a greenkeeper is a crucial figure who has got to be backed up."

That's why, when the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews asked their former captain if he would take an interest in a new association for greenkeepers, which they were helping to fund, back in 1987, he readily agreed.

## FAVOURITE COURSES

Viscount Whitelaw says he's always loved St Andrews and he's been a member there since 1937. "You can't compare it with anything else."

His other favourite courses are Silloth-on-Solway, Nairn, Muirfield, Royal St Georges and Westward Ho.

"I always believed it was very important to improve the standing of greenkeepers generally, not only their knowledge and their work but also their standing in the club and their importance to the club. I always thought that when you hear people say, 'The course isn't right, we must get a new green convener', there's absolutely no point in getting a new green convener, what you need is a good new greenkeeper if the course isn't right. The greenkeeper is the man who will make it right, and green conveners can only be there to back their greenkeepers and make sure the greenkeepers are getting what they want and doing with what they've got all that has to be done. So the standing of a greenkeeper has always been something that I believed enormously important and it's a fact of recent years that this has come out and now it's accepted."

He credits the Association with much of the success for elevating the status of greenkeepers. He states: "I believe the organisation has

been the most enormous success. All the time I've been with them I've admired enormously what they've done. I've admired enormously what Neil Thomas has done and what has been done by the greenkeepers themselves when they've become chairmen or on the board of management. They have played a terrific part in this. And if anyone wants a sign of it they need look no further than the two occasions when I have tried to see them all. First of all, Harrogate. Harrogate's a very remarkable advance and it is a great success – much prized by the trade generally and good for everybody. And then of course there is the help that the greenkeepers give at the Open Championship, when they all come together and are seen to help on the course. And a marvellous job they carry out.

"Now, of course, your publication has done a great deal of good. The more we can publicise the profession, the more it will be seen that greenkeepers are vitally important people. And if you see the jobs that are offered to them now, much of the great difficulty in years to come will be making sure we keep the best of our greenkeepers in this country. A lot of them, inevitably, are being offered jobs in Europe. And that is a real sign of how successful this organisation has been."

Viscount Whitelaw is involved with several charities, but BIGGA is the only professional association to which he is attached. As president, he is in regular contact with BIGGA's executive director, Neil Thomas, and he tries to meet Association members at Harrogate and the Open.

"If you are president I believe you come when you are asked and you don't go when you're not asked," is his philosophy.

As far as the future of the Association goes, he says: "I would like to see it continuing to make sure that greenkeepers are well trained and can be really good people for our courses. And that it will become accepted by all courses. I would like to see all clubs using the opportunities given by BIGGA for them to train their staff and that all greenkeepers become members of BIGGA."

After three-quarters of an hour chatting to him about golf, greenkeeping and the Association, I realised that he had a busy day of politics ahead. There were meetings with Ministers, fellow Lords and leading figures from industry awaiting. But there was time for one last story which shows he certainly did not become president of BIGGA for any political gain.

At the last general election, while he was canvassing in the north of Scotland, a young man came up to him and said: "I'm very grateful you've been so helpful to BIGGA."

Viscount Whitelaw replied: "Thank you and I hope you will vote Conservative Party."

"Certainly not, I'm Scottish Nationalist."