

It's all down to the Finnish

We had known for some time of the Finnish Greenkeepers Association but formal contacts only began last October during the Swedish Greenkeepers Association Conference and continued with the formation in March this year of the new Federation of European Golf Greenkeepers Associations when Elise Jarvinen, Chair of the FGA, was nominated to the new FEGGA board. Elise was very keen to foster relations between BIGGA and the FGA and so it was in the first week in July that Scott MacCallum and myself ventured forth on our first visit to Finland.

It was not without significance that we went in early July for there are only some two to three months in any year when Finnish greenkeepers can show their golf courses at their best. One can only be impressed with what is happening in greenkeeping in Finland. The country currently has 89 golf courses while some 200 greenkeepers make up membership of the FGA. Essentially the FGA is represented at every golf club – a target which we in BIGGA are still some way from achieving. The FGA is led by a strong and purposeful committee



BIGGA in focus

BY NEIL THOMAS

of eight members which meets around seven times a year whilst communication between committee members is constant by mobile phone. Indeed we were informed that Finland is the world leader in the use of mobile phones. The lasting impression is that of the close bonding between committee members and greenkeepers throughout the FGA. It is very much an association which has flourished under the principle of self help and its leaders are extremely knowledgeable. There is no formal greenkeeping education system in Finland, although the committee is well advanced in

its plans for the future being currently engaged in productive discussions with one of the horticulture colleges. Meanwhile seminars are arranged and there is much informal exchange of ideas and techniques. I was told that the simple and cost effective solution to a problem was often seen as more appropriate than the complicated and expensive one. Practicality is a feature of the approach by Finnish greenkeepers to their profession and symptomatic of a Finnish trait for efficiency, common sense and sound administration.

It was a pleasure to spend a few hours in the company of Osmo Saarinen, Secretary of the Finnish Golf Union, and to appreciate at first hand the strength of the relationship between the FGU and the FGA. Both organisations are forward looking and keen to move ahead in harmony. This can only augur well for the future of the profession in Finland. If one needed any proof that here is a progressive country it was to be found in a visit to the Vierumaki Golf Course situated within the country's National Sports Institute. The facilities not only for golf but sports in general were

outstanding and we were privileged to enjoy a presentation by Tapani Ilkka, Director of the Institute and President of the Finnish Olympic Team. This facility is supported by other smaller institutes around the country and demonstrated very visibly just how far we lag behind in this country in such provision.

In a four day visit we proceeded on a whistle stop tour of eight golf courses covering many miles in the process. Wherever we went the Head Greenkeeper ensured us a warm welcome and there was real pleasure that we had taken the trouble to visit the country and meet with the FGA. The hand of friendship was extended and as we travelled with our hosts, headed by Elise and supported by Pekka Nieminen, Kristina Laukkanen and Ilkka Kaivosoja we learnt much about Finland and Finnish greenkeeping as well as about the outgoing Finns and their sense of humour. Make no mistake Finnish greenkeeping is well organised, excellently led and going places. It is a land of short summers and long winters. The snow and ice confronts the greenkeeper with his greatest problems closing courses for six to seven months of the year. But this is also the land of the midnight sun when in summer as one moves north golf is available 24 hours a day. Indeed yours truly was spied hitting a ball at 1.10am as a new golf course experience! The extended daylight encourages growth and I was informed that cutting takes place three times as frequently as in this country. That is part of a story which Scott MacCallum will report on in a two part series starting in the next issue of *Greenkeeper International*. It will cover some excellent golf courses and feature Head Greenkeepers who are leading the way forward in Finland. For Scott and myself it was a great experience where we learned much about Finnish greenkeeping and the way in which the FGA is administered. To Elise, Pekka, Kristina and Ilkka and the other friends we made, a big thank you. I suspect a few of you will be making your way to the BTME in Harrogate next January – I hope so.



Time to relax: Round the table with members of the Finnish Greenkeepers Association