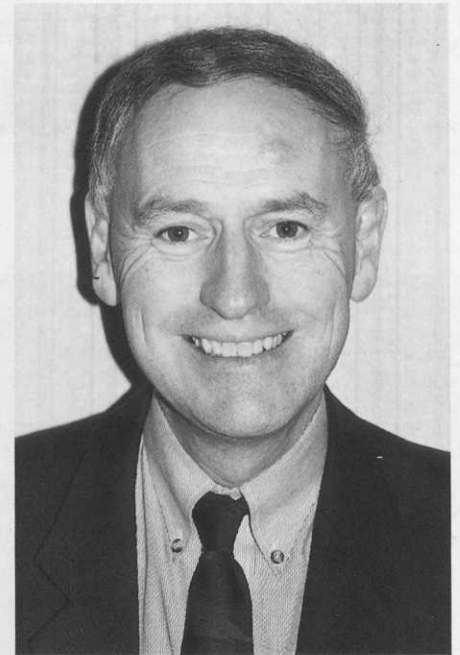


**BIGGA's Executive Director,
Neil Thomas reflects on BTME '98...**



Days to remember

Sunday, January 18

Another year has rushed by and I'm heading for Harrogate and the BTME. It's all of twelve minutes from home (the real reason why the exhibition is held in Harrogate!). As I drive in it has been raining through the night and morning and it is very mild for the time of year. No danger of that white stuff this year. 3.30pm and preparations for conference registration have begun. Ken and Sami are in control. Many members already booked into the Majestic - they clearly like it there. I welcome our international guests and an informal dinner is followed for many by a late night at the bar.

Monday, January 19

First job is to switch on the TV for the weather forecast. I don't believe it! Dr Peter Hayes gets the conference underway in his usual efficient manner. At the outset one is impressed by the quality of the speakers and particularly how well our members present themselves, beneficiaries no doubt of BIGGA's public speaking courses. The presentation of Master Greenkeeper Certificates to Andy Campbell and Chris Carpenter is a highlight - 16 Master Greenkeepers now since the inception of the certification scheme in 1990. Food and accommodation are again excellent in the Majestic and I'm feeling quite relaxed until the Chairman pointedly directs my attention through the window to the arrival of the white stuff. Heavy snow showers follow but it will all be gone before Tuesday, won't it? And so it proved... Conference dinner is very enjoyable with a return visit from David Kendal - 'the banker from York' as our after dinner speaker. Excellent delivery - our international visitors kept pace and laughed with the rest of us. Good to welcome Andrew Sunaway as our guest from Ransomes. I have to mention Peter Wilson's unavoidable absence on 'business in the city'. What can this be? Now we all know.

Some members retire from the bar at 6.30am!

Tuesday, January 20

Conference continues apace along with the three fully subscribed workshops. Comments would indicate that the Conference is the best yet. Noted that many members are now wearing BIGGA's 'brick' badge - the Headquarters building project is already very much to the fore. The exhibition is looking good and Amanda is in charge. Short Board of Management meeting to elect Chairman and Vice-Chairman and then off to beer and burritos (no - I didn't know what they were either!) gathering for the exhibitors. The fifth Hayter Dinner in the George Hotel follows superbly organised as usual by Kim Macfie and Barbara Garton. I really enjoy this dinner as I have nothing to say or do! Meanwhile the Past Chairmans' dinner takes place in the Majestic - a lively affair by all accounts - I can't decide whether to book a referee or comedian for this event next year!

Wednesday, January 21

This is it. Hall A is buzzing long before 9.00am when the Chairman cuts the ribbon. Queues are forming (half way up the hill to the Majestic at one stage) and a great atmosphere. The marquee in use for the first time meets with warm approval. Off to the Majestic for the Chairman's Luncheon. We are sorry that our President, Viscount Whitelaw, has been unwell and cannot join us but delighted to welcome the Secretary of the R&A, Michael Bonallack to make the Golden and Silver Key Company presentations. He speaks of the R&A's longstanding relationship with BIGGA and his pleasure at BIGGA's progress. Prepare for AGM. This goes smoothly with a sense that everything is in good order when Cecil George rises with his inevitable and inimitable questions. Most staff are then off to the Ritefeed Race Night but I find myself in a FEGGA Board meeting which ends just before midnight - what a way to enjoy yourself! Enough for one day!

Thursday, January 22

Early start. 7.30am meeting of BTME Steering Committee. Well supported and everyone seems well pleased with the Show even if brains are not fully functioning at this time of the morning. I'm able to savour the atmosphere in the halls for a couple of hours before the FEGGA AGM. This is well attended and the progress of FEGGA in twelve months is there for all to see. In mid afternoon I check on preparations for the banquet which this year is being held in the International Centre. The nightclub setting is quite stunning. One can sense the growing anticipation for the big social event of BTME. At 6.30pm I attend the Chairman's pre-banquet reception for our VIP guests and make an early departure to check the banquet arrangements. All is under control and soon the 650 guests begin to gather in the reception area. I meet with Lee Hurst to check details for his appearance - he is very friendly and easy going. Any worries about the catering are soon put to rest - it is excellent. The Chairman says a few words and then at 10.00pm I introduce Lee Hurst and the cabaret is underway. Very funny and well received.

After Lee we look forward to Linda Nolan - a return visit after the 1995 Show by popular demand. And we are not disappointed. She is highly professional. Now I have often wondered what it is like to be picked on at an event of this magnitude. Now I know. I had been set up. Suddenly Linda is at my side and I am whisked away to the stage. It's now or never. One choice is to die a death in front of all and sundry, the other is to get on with it. I wisely choose the latter and surrounded by her curvaceous charms I ham my way through the 'ding-a-ling' song. This can, I assure you, prove quite daunting given the natural level of eye contact with Linda sitting on your lap. I return weak-kneed to my chair. I am overwhelmed with congratulations from

members - this simply hasn't happened in ten years so I determine to enjoy it. A great night and certainly one I'll never forget!

Friday, January 23

Tired but happy seems to sum up the mood of all present in the halls. Those who arrived on Sunday evening are still with it - just. Stamina is a prime requirement for the week. It's been a great Show and a good start to the year for members and exhibitors alike. The Show closes at 1.30pm and the evacuation of personnel and equipment goes smoothly. One Board member tells me that he wishes it could carry on - I think I know what he meant. Thanks to everyone who contributed to and supported the event and particularly to the exhibitors without whom there would be no BTME.



And finally...

Once again an abiding memory is of the audience at the banquet linking arms and singing with Linda Nolan "we'll meet again don't know where don't know when". But we do, don't we? It will be in Harrogate from 18th-22nd January 1999. Be seeing you.

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