

**Neil Thomas, Executive Director of the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association gives his personal view on the Association, where it has come from, and perhaps more importantly, where it is going...**

# Past, present and future

## **The early days**

If I can presume upon the reader's time for a few minutes, come back with me to 3rd of August 1987, a day which marked my entrance to what for me was the twilight world of greenkeeping. In May of that year I had been appointed to head up a new organisation with an imposing title, quickly to be known by the acronym of BIGGA.

I had no pretensions to know anything about greenkeeping, indeed my tenuous connection was as an average club golfer who that summer managed to get down to a handicap of 12 whereupon employment by BIGGA sounded the death knell to any future golfing ambitions. I guess I was one of those whose view of greenkeepers depended on the merits or otherwise of my current round of golf.

So on that day in 1987 I descended from Wales upon a building known as the STRI and located in Bingley - not exactly the centre of the world. Here I was informed learned men spent their days looking at grass. I was suitably impressed. Within the confines of this somewhat intimidating establishment the headquarters of BIGGA would be based for the immediate future. It would be untrue to say that I was totally unaware of what awaited me. For the previous three months I had received regular communications both written and verbal from a Mr Woods, of St Andrews, a Mr McMillan, of Sunningdale (which sounded a nice place), and a Mr Lawson, of Heswall, who all seemed very knowledgeable on the subject of greenkeeping.

At this point I was not aware that the aforesaid gentlemen were in fact icons within the profession. Mr McMillan kindly arranged to meet me during a major golf tournament at St Pierre Golf and Country Club - I remember nothing of the golf but by the end of the day I seriously questioned my sanity in entering the world of greenkeeping! I was informed that his five sons also plied this trade so I decided that it must have something going for it!

On that first day I entered a small, empty office inheriting some 1200 members from the three previous greenkeeping associations with a brief to collect the membership subscriptions which had been set at £15 a year. My main guideline was the 'Constitution and Rules' established on the 1st of January 1987.

The icons had suggested that they would like a computer system installed, a major turf management exhibition set up and a new magazine introduced, while I was enrolling up to 12,000 greenkeepers into membership. With some temerity I suggested that all this might not be possible within the first month or two.

So BIGGA was on its way and off on a roller coaster ride. Those first eighteen months at Bingley were a tremendous learning exercise as I struggled along with just a Personal Assistant to help (remember Caroline!). By May of 1989 having long since outgrown our accommodation (though not I hasten to add our welcome) at the STRI we were on our way to Aldwark Manor, first to a portakabin and then in December of that year to our cur-

rent rented offices (long since expanded). By this time I also had an Education Officer and a Membership Services Officer so I concluded that the icons must be pleased and that I was doing something right.

Progress meanwhile was rapid. The first Turf Management Exhibition had been held in Harrogate in 1989, a year which had also seen the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award introduced. 1990 marked the inception of the Miracle Premier Greenkeeper of the Year Award. This was also the year which saw the introduction of the Master Greenkeeper Certificate scheme with eighteen members now holding the cherished certificate and many others are at various stages within the scheme. I hope that in the future many more will aspire to reach the high standards of this scheme and achieve the Certificate. In January 1991, after some false dawns, 'Greenkeeper International' first saw the light of day since when it has continued on a successful path. 1992 saw the establishment of the Education and Development Fund from which so many greenkeepers have subsequently benefited. BIGGA was therefore moving in many directions but some difficult days lay ahead.

## **Troubles in store**

As the fledgling organisation moved forward dangers lurked ahead and there were traumas on the way. Without doubt 1990 in many ways marked the nadir of BIGGA's existence from which much was learnt. As the reader will be aware, the game of golf is viewed



Above: The early days: BIGGA started life in the STRI building at Bingley, West Yorkshire

by many as a means of making a quick buck and in our naivety we did not see at first sight appearing on the scene those who would exploit us. This happened particularly with our magazine prior to 1991 and with the exhibition in its first two years. By 1991 on both fronts we were in control of our own destiny with salutary lessons being learnt. Running your own organisation and services is a far better option than contracting out to third parties who are motivated by commercial gain rather than the altruistic interests of the membership.

#### **Education and Training as a priority**

In the space available some random thoughts on our progress to the present day. From the beginning education and training were foremost in our considerations and this continues to be the case. When I started, City and Guilds were on the way out, NVQs on the way in. This has represented a fundamental shift in the training philosophy and resources available to greenkeepers. Alongside this major change has come increasing evidence of clubs providing training budgets for their greenkeeping staffs. Through the auspices of the Education and Development Fund BIGGA ensures the provision of a comprehensive range of supervisory and management courses (heavily subsidised) as well as training aids in the form of booklets and videos. Many Course Managers now utilise their training budgets to send their staff on BIGGA courses and purchase training aids. However, far too many greenkeepers are still ambiva-

lent regarding education and training. I urge them to take advantage of the opportunities available. Times have changed and those greenkeepers not prepared to move with the times put their very futures at risk. A word here of appreciation for those companies within the industry who, as Golden and Silver Key members, provide outstanding support for the Education and Development Fund and a very real sense of partnership with Greenkeepers. Internally I would suggest training to be in good shape, externally it is a more worrying scenario.

BIGGA continues to work closely with the Greenkeepers Training Committee in seeking effective implementation of NVQs. There is clear evidence that we are ahead of many other industries in this regard but funding is a key issue. Many clubs now appreciate the need for qualified, competent greenkeeping staff if their members are to have the quality of golf course increasingly demanded. Many are pointing their staff in the direction of NVQs but the system to train and assess these staff has to be funded. Back in 1987 the contribution of each golf club member to greenkeeper training was 2p. It is now 8p. I well remember early meetings of the GTC discussing the need for 50p. Enough said. It is the Home Unions who collect the monies for greenkeeper training as part of their general levy on golf club members, for onward transmission to the GTC. It is my hope that within the near future the GTC, golf clubs, county and national unions will open a meaningful dialogue which

will lead to enhanced funding for greenkeeper training, subject of course to accountability by those charged with spending the monies and administering the training system. This funding is long overdue and without it the training aspirations of many greenkeepers seeking recognised national qualifications will most surely be stifled.

#### **Membership issues**

Membership remains the key to a successful Association. BIGGA is engaged on a rapid growth curve which has taken us to 6,400 members today. No complacency here though for this probably represents around 50% of potential membership. Undoubtedly the appointment of part-time Regional Administrators over the last two years will bring long term benefits in membership recruitment. Their visit reports indicate how pleased greenkeepers are to receive a visit from a BIGGA representative and while first contact will not always have a positive result, follow-up visits are quite likely to produce success through new recruits. The Board of Management recently adopted a five year plan and this targets a membership of 8,000 by 2003. This will take some doing but with our recently restructured membership services section and the input of the Regional Administrators much can be achieved. Best of all, however, will be a commitment within the current membership to seek out new members. Just look at the impact if each current member brought in one new recruit. This is not the occasion to extol the benefits of membership although I would sug-

gest that our services for members are exceptional amongst professional associations with subscription rates comparing more than favourably with those of other such associations. It goes without saying, of course, that the prime beneficiaries of membership are those members who take an active part whether that be at section, regional or national level - better still at all three!

#### **Double aces**

Two of BIGGA's aces are unquestionably 'Greenkeeper International' magazine and the BTME. The magazine has long been a successful product after the early difficult days. However, it cannot stand still and the reader will have noticed that it has moved on apace in recent months both in improved design and production techniques. It must reflect the wishes of members while remaining commercially sound.

Constructive criticism is welcomed and particularly ideas and copy. BTME - the 'Greenkeepers Week' - is the focal point of BIGGA's year. It is quite simply a great occasion and BIGGA can be proud of organising and running Europe's premier indoor turf exhibition. Our partnership with the industry is its strength and around it runs a comprehensive "learning experience".

Greenkeepers return home from Harrogate enthused and invigorated for the challenges of the year ahead (at least after a week's recovery!). I would urge each and every member to target attendance at the BTME as a priority. It will be an experience to remember.

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Above: Inspecting the building work on 'BIGGA HOUSE'

Below: A fond farewell to the old BIGGA headquarters building

## The new headquarters

So much to cover and so much regrettably to be left unsaid. BIGGA's history is short and it is not perhaps out of place to describe those involved, and to whom much gratitude is due, in bringing the three previous associations together in 1987 as the "founding fathers" of BIGGA. As they looked ahead at that time did they envisage the progress that would have been made by 1998? Most certainly their own headquarters building was not on the agenda at that time. As I write,

we are approaching what will surely be a defining day in BIGGA's history with the official opening of purpose built headquarters. It is good to see golf clubs supporting our Building Fund, surely just recognition of BIGGA's contribution to the education and training of greenkeepers. For 11 years BIGGA, through no-one's fault but as part of the growing process, has been unable to adequately house its staff in the manner it would wish as a professional body. Now with the backing of the R & A, the industry and golf clubs, together with the efforts of staff and members and support from both individuals and organisations this has become possible and will be for the benefit of all concerned. However, let me say quite categorically that the new headquarters is not some edifice purely for the benefit of staff. It is also very much a members building which I hope and trust members will use. There is a modern training facility from which we will run a broad spectrum of courses and which will be available for use by companies within and without the industry. I hope many members will take advantage of these courses and the increasingly comprehensive BIGGA library. Members should take great pride in their new building which will prove to the golf world that we have come of age as an Association. It says much about the permanence of BIGGA and that is important. Long after the staff and myself have gone our separate ways and are in

our dotage, the building will be there to serve future generations of greenkeepers. The opening is a time for celebration of BIGGA's progress, its professionalism and the many benefits it has brought to greenkeepers.

## In conclusion

I look back today not purely through rose tinted glasses and aware of the difficult times along the way. Tomorrow will bring its own problems no doubt and, I hope, many more benefits for members. I have enjoyed the journey so far if on occasions it seems to have been "a hard day's night". The journey continues and will take us in many directions, occasionally down the low road from which we will turn back but more often I trust along the happy highway to a successful future. Our professionalism will stand us in good stead and I am committed in a members' association to continually work for the betterment of members. The fellowship and sense of belonging within BIGGA is something special and should be treasured by all members. It is at the very heart and soul of our Association and will assuredly serve us well in the future. I hope that we have achieved some at least of the aspirations of the founding fathers since that day in August 1987.

As H.R.H. The Duke of York officially opens our new headquarters on 21st October, we can perhaps reflect that BIGGA may be short in timespan but is increasingly long in achievement.

