

Neil Thomas takes a personal look back at Viscount Whitelaw's involvement with BIGGA which started back in the early days of the Association.

Viscount Whitelaw 1918-1999

Much has been written and spoken recently of the life and times of Viscount Whitelaw. Naturally this has concentrated on his place in the political life of this country, not to mention his wartime service in the Scots Guards where he won the Military Cross in the Normandy campaign.

His career in Government was long and distinguished including service as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and as Deputy Prime Minister to Margaret Thatcher from 1975 to 1987. It was at Christmas 1987 that illness intervened, albeit one from which he fully recovered, and he stood down as Deputy Prime Minister. It was then that it was our exceedingly good fortune that he agreed to take on the Presidency of BIGGA.

The connection with BIGGA came directly from his love of golf and lifetime interest in the game. An outstanding player in his younger days and a Cambridge blue in 1939, he regarded as one of his greatest honours being made Captain of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club in 1969. Early in 1988, we made an approach through the R&A to ascertain whether Viscount Whitelaw would consider taking on the role of President of BIGGA at a time when he was relinquishing some of his parliamentary duties and responsibilities.

It was a great boost to our fledgling Association when he kindly agreed but this agreement came with a proviso. He indicated that he would only take up the Presidency on the basis that he would be active within the Association's affairs, not for him a passive, figurehead role. We could have wished for nothing more. During the decade of his Presidency through to the opening of BIGGA HOUSE in 1998 he remained forever ready to take up our cause and it was a source of great pleasure to him to see the development and progress of the Association.

Each year there were always occasions when he joined us on BIGGA's national stage, whether at the BTME,

the Open Championship or some other event and he was always noted wearing the BIGGA tie. At these events we all experienced his natural warmth and friendship - there was no confining himself to the BIGGA hierarchy. I recall that on each and every occasion he mingled with greenkeepers and talked knowledgeably with them of golf and greenkeeping.

Away from our national events his role in promoting BIGGA within the golfing world proved of inestimable benefit to the Association. A word here and a word there did much to send us in the right direction and to ensure that we received support and backing when most needed.

Within BIGGA, I was most privileged to be his main point of contact and this enabled me to meet with him and discuss BIGGA affairs on many occasions over a ten year period. I count myself very lucky. In 1988 I was in some awe of him for here was a man who has been described as a "towering figure" in politics and who was most certainly one of the foremost politicians of the last 50 years. I need not have worried as from the start he was steadfast in his support, giving strong backing during our early, difficult years.

Perhaps it was presumptuous on my part, but I came to regard him as a friend and a ready listener who would always provide wise and sound counsel from his standpoint as President. Occasionally as the years went by he was happy to touch on a current political issue with me, but essentially he wanted to talk of greenkeeping and greenkeepers and he never wavered in seeking the betterment of the Association. I well remember a visit to his room at the House of Lords and thinking just how fortunate BIGGA was to have such a staunch and influential figure as its President.

In the latter years he was delighted to learn of our plans for our own national headquarters at Aldwark Manor and saw this as a major landmark in BIGGA's short history. As the project neared completion, he began to drop one or two hints that perhaps the time had come for him to step down as President. Then in March of 1998, the Chairman and myself were invited to lunch with Viscount and Lady Whitelaw at the family seat in Penrith. Through the years we have come to know Lady Whitelaw well and she has always tak-



Addressing attendees at the Chairman's luncheon during BTME

Talking with greenkeepers at the 1995 Open Championship at St Andrews

en a keen interest in the Association.

It was with some sadness that we learnt during lunch of the decision to stand down - his view being that it was time for a younger man to succeed him. The Board of Management then decided to award the first Honorary Membership in the Association's history to Viscount Whitelaw and it seemed totally appropriate that he should be the first recipient of this award. We could think of no more fitting finale for Viscount Whitelaw on the BIGGA stage than for him to be present at the opening of BIGGA HOUSE and it was with the greatest of pleasure that we welcomed both him and Lady Whitelaw to the official opening last October.

Many members will have their own memories of having met with him and discussed greenkeeping matters. It may have been at the BTME, the Open Championship or even more locally through his attendance annually at the Cumbria Cup competition. I remember particularly one occasion when he came to our National Conference at the Royal Holloway and Bedford New College at Egham in 1990. His schedule had been completely disrupted but he insisted on finding time, however brief, to attend. He arrived, went to the platform and in true political style delivered a ten minute oration which was an inspiration to those members present. Until the moment he started speaking, I suspect that his mind was preoccu-



pled with matters of state and we could only admire his ability to switch focus and give a highly relevant and totally unscripted speech - the master politician's art in all its glory.

I can best conclude with some words of Viscount Whitelaw himself, again in an unscripted speech to his father's old school in 1982 when he spoke of the value in life of friendship and the comradeship that goes with it... "Indeed, in my experience of government, life without friends would be bleak, even unbearable, but friendships depend in themselves on the mutual sympathy, understanding and, above all, on that sometimes derided but crucial virtue, loyalty to others besides oneself. Loyalty to organisations, loyalty to a community, loyalty to a country and, in the final event, putting these loyalties above one's personal feelings sometimes, one's personal inclinations and one's personal aggrandisement in one way or another." BIGGA enjoyed and benefited from both his friendship and loyalty. We are a far better Association for it. If his passing marks the end of a political era, then it most surely marks also the end of an era for BIGGA.

Neil Thomas



Viscount Whitelaw and Neil Thomas discuss BIGGA matters in earlier times...