

From canvas to turf

If life had taken a slightly different path Tommy Givnan may well have been collecting the Turner Prize rather than the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award.

Tommy, Head Greenkeeper at Bowring Golf Course in Knowsley, near Liverpool, has a Fine Arts degree and lectured in the subject before moving into greenkeeping.

"I was obsessed with painting, both studying it and producing work of my own," explained Tommy.

"My aim was to have exhibitions and make a living selling my work but I was asked to teach at St Helens College so, at the age of 21, that was what I was doing," he explained.

After a year Tommy moved south to Winchester when an opportunity of a job with house attached arose for his wife Dawn.

He tried to continue his teaching career in Wiltshire but his broad Liverpool accent proved a stumbling block.

"As soon as I opened my mouth and they could hear the Scouse accent I could see their eyes glaze over. So I knew straight away I had no chance," he recalled.

It was through a trawl of Winchester Job Centre that he spotted a position at Hockley Golf Club, in Twyford, just outside Winchester, and the seeds for rest of his career were planted.

"Head Greenkeeper, Terry Patchett, made me very welcome and I just thought what an ideal place to work. One morning I was taking a tractor through woodland and two deer jumped across the path just in front of me. I thought to myself that my dad had worked on a production line at Ford's for 33 years and this has just happened to me."

He worked on the course for six months before the need for a higher salary forced him to look around for something else.

"I loved the job and took to it so well that if the pay had been better I would have stayed but I just couldn't afford to."

"A friend put me in touch with a landscaper who took me on at weekends while I was still at the golf course and when he offered me a full time job I took it."

Tommy and Dawn moved back to Liverpool for family reasons a couple of years later and he got a job as a temporary gardener with Knowsley Council which soon became a full time position.

Then when the Council started its own full time landscaping team he became Charge Hand and such was its success the team won a BALI Award for work carried out on Kirby Town Centre.

"I missed golf but, at that stage, I didn't see a way of getting back into it as I didn't have the experience to earn what I could landscaping. I was married with two kids so money was essential."

At this stage fate lent a hand and around the same time as the Landscaping team was disbanded Knowsley Council took over the running of Bowring Munciple Golf Course from Liverpool Council who had been running it.

"It was the ideal opportunity for the Council to place me and I was rubbing my hands at the prospect," said Tommy, who explained that he was just one of a team of five gardeners who were put onto the course.

The course was in poor condition. People would lose their balls in the fairways due to the clover and nobody paid to play, feeling that it was not worth paying for.

"I'd just finished my Level 2 in landscaping and said that I'd like to carry

on to Level 3, but change over to Sportsturf as I needed information quickly to apply to the course."

He started Level 3 at Myerscough on day release and immediately found himself mixing with people with a great deal more knowledge and experience than himself.

"I thought I might have bitten off more than I could chew and worried that I might make a fool of myself, but on the second week the Tutor, Phil Sharples, gave us a test on turf diseases based on what we'd learned the previous week and I got 17 out of 20. I thought then that I might be able to pull it off," he said.

He threw himself into the work, studying each night and bought a computer so he could type up his course work.

Meanwhile the course was starting to get good feedback from golfers, despite the fact that they were having to make do with grounds maintenance machines not really suitable for many golf course duties.

After a few months, when the team had been sharing responsibility, the Council commissioned a report before putting in place amore traditional team. They advertised for a Head Greenkeeper and Tommy, applied for, and got the job.

He was operating under pressure as he was told by the Council that if the course didn't pay for itself it would be turned into a park.

"I was under pressure to get the place on its feet but because of what we've achieved it has a lot more credibility now," he explained.

"I won the Student of the Year for my first year at Myerscough which was a big boost as it was a talented class and that spurred me on. I began to think that I knew what I was doing as what I was learning each week I was applying to the course the next and it was working."

Such has been the success of Tommy and the team that the number of rounds has risen from 18,000 a year to over 50,000 a year and the golfers have been extremely appreciative.

"One of the golfers who plays regularly and is unemployed with four kids knocked on my door at home and pre-





sented me with a crate of ale for the lads and said we were doing a great job," said Tommy, who tells the story still with a degree of amazement.

The course is six miles from the centre of Liverpool and is surrounded by housing estates and does suffer from vandalism.

"We get a lot of stolen cars left burnt out on the course. One came over a mound and landed on the 18th green taking a load of turf out of the green. Fortunately I was doing renovation and repair NVQ 3 at the time and this provided good evidence.

"We planted a load of huge boulders around the entrances to stop cars getting onto the course and erected gates. These were rammed down in a Ford Escort so we've had to put a barrier in front of the gates," explained Tommy, who also introduced railway sleepers set in stone as tee markers as the pathing used previously kept being smashed.

"The Secretary of the club says that he sees something new every time he plays and it's comments like that that make you improve."

Tommy was flattered to be nominated by the college for the Award and shocked when he learned that he'd made the final.

"Before the first interview my palms were sweating and I was a bag of nerves but when I went in I was made to feel at home. I didn't expect to reach the final and my first thought was that I was in with the big boys now, guys with years of experience."

On the Sunday of the final, which he attended with Dawn, they took the chance to visit York Minster then, on the morning visited the city art gallery which relaxed him before his interview. "Panic started to set in as Dawn

waved me off as I walked from the hotel to BIGGA HOUSE. I was thinking this was my one chance and I've never felt so much pressure in all my life. I still felt it was a long shot as I'd met all the other students and was impressed by them all."

Once he'd finished he was able to enjoy a drink before the pressure again began to mount.

"When the announcement was made I was stunned. It was an unreal feeling as though it wasn't really happening but I must admit I celebrated well that night."

The opportunity to go to the States is an exciting one for Tommy who admits that he will miss Dawn and their two boys, Lee, 8, and Sean, 5.

"We've talked at length and Dawn reminds me that I said I'd never win and I truly believed I wouldn't. Being in the final was an accolade for me and I had loads of guys congratulating me on that achievement and wishing me well for the final - there was a piece about me in the Liverpool Echo," said Tommy, who has again featured in the press following his win.

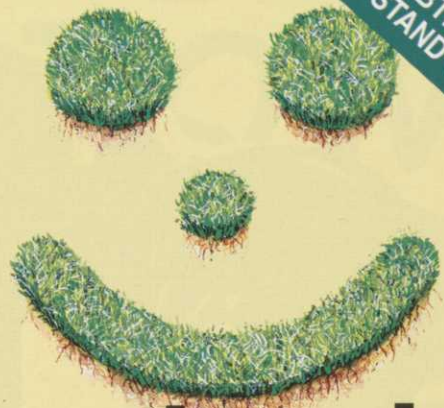
"This is an opportunity of a lifetime and it's up to me to make the most of it and enjoy it," he said.

Far left: Tommy Givnan left, with his Course Manager, Terry Hall

Top: Tommy with Michael Bush (right), Andrew Wood (left) with the Toro Student judging panel

Above: Back row; Vincent Gilroy, William Collins, Simon O'Hara, Kevin Scarce, Jim Gilchrist. Front row; Andrew Wood, Tommy Givnan and Michael Bush

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