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Meet BIGGA's



BIGGA's new President, Sir Michael Bonallack spoke about greenkeeping and BIGGA with Scott MacCallum in the R&A Clubhouse, just after the Dunhill Cup in October.

Sir Michael Bonallack is truly a remarkable man. As a golfer he won the Amateur Championship five times, including three times in succession – the last time it was won by the same player more than once was by Peter McEvoy more than 20 years ago.

He also competed in nine Walker Cups and was twice leading amateur in The Open Championship. He is arguably the top British amateur golfer of the century. He was also recently listed as number 132 in Top 200 Male Players in History... of any nationality.

Having retired from the top class amateur scene he then turned his attentions to golf administration and, if anything, his achievements in this field have all but eclipsed his playing record.

As Secretary of the R&A from 1983 until September of this year he has overseen the well being, and expansion, of the game and masterminded the development of The Open Championship. In both these endeavours he can be justifiably proud of his record and he has handed the reins of the R&A over to Peter Dawson with the game and The Open in rude good health with the future just as rosy.

Uniquely the day after he retired from the role of Secretary he "drove in" as Captain of the R&A and the next 12 months will see him travelling the world attending Championships and functions in his new role.

He is undoubtedly one of the most respected figures in the game and it is therefore a huge honour that he accepted the invitation to become BIGGA's new President.

Greenkeeper International: After a lifetime in golf what are your first recollections of the people who look after the golf course?

Sir Michael: I was a junior at Thorpe Hall Golf Club in Essex and the Head Greenkeeper was a Scot called Jock Glass. He was to my mind almost the most important man in the club. As a junior you'd be playing a lot, going round and round and round in the school holidays, and Jock was always there working like a beaver. If you didn't put back a divot or rake a bunker you were soon told by Jock.

As I grew up the importance of the job became more and more apparent to me. Whereas nearly every club regarded their clubhouse as the be-all-and-end-all, you actually went to play the course. You could put up with very inadequate clubhouse facilities but if the course was good that's why you'd remember it.

new President

Meet BIGGA's new President

Greenkeeper International:
What do you remember about the quality of golf course conditioning in those days?

Sir Michael: The greens were probably a bit slower but on the other hand the overall condition of the course was probably as good, if not better, than it is now. That's because they didn't have any problem getting rid of worms and there weren't any inorganic fertilisers used then. It was all very natural.

In the summer the grass got very burnt but the turf was still good. Indeed, they probably had far more natural, fine grasses in those days than we do now. It's only latterly when fertiliser and water came in that meadow grass really took over.

Greenkeeper International:
What do you believe to be the major milestones that the greenkeeping profession has passed over the last 30 years or so?

Sir Michael: Certainly the amalgamation of the three associations and the formation of BIGGA was the big milestone as it really did focus attention on to the greenkeeping profession.

Also the education programmes that have been set up to encourage young people to see greenkeeping as a profession they can move into.

The profession has moved from being an art to a science and is now not so much by the seat of your pants. The older greenkeepers almost did it by feel and you can't teach that although you can hand it down.

Greenkeeper International:
What are your views on the current state of the greenkeeping industry?

Sir Michael: I think it is very healthy. The overall standard of greenkeeping has gone up enormously. There are very few bad greenkeepers now and if they are bad they don't last. That is a very healthy sign.

It is a science now. The greenkeeper has to be an agronomist, he or she has to recognise all sorts of diseases and know the appropriate treatment.

People expect far more out of a golf course now than they did. Courses used to be closed in the winter now they have to be open 365 days a year and stand up to a lot of rounds.

It is also good news that we are getting more young people coming into the job as a profession. They are ambitious and look up to the top people in the good jobs on excellent salaries and see that the rewards are there if they work hard.

Nowadays the Head Greenkeeper has more responsibility than the Club Secretary and a much bigger budget. In the past greenkeepers very rarely had responsibility for their own budgets. Chairmen of Green told them what to spend on and when to spend it. Now they control and draw up their own budgets. They are greenkeeper managers really.

Greenkeeper International:
What would you say modern greenkeepers are particularly good at?

Sir Michael: They are very good at recognising and tackling diseases at the early stages. They are also exceptionally good at course presentation while their man management skills are something which have improved

no end. They know how to get the best out of their staff.

The equipment they now have available to them is improving, and becoming more sophisticated, all the time and this has helped in the general conditioning. They have to keep up to date with it all and know what is right for their course. It's a long way from the days when they used to cut the greens with a scythe... although I don't remember those. I read about them!

Greenkeeper International:
Conversely what would you say today's greenkeepers need to brush up on?

Sir Michael: I don't find too many complaints. Greenkeepers get brow beaten by members and good greenkeepers don't let themselves be influenced too much by the criticisms from the members.

Having praised their course presentation I do believe there is over presentation on occasion. For example with contrived scalloping of fairways. There is nothing wrong with reasonably straight lines and it doesn't look natural if it is in and out in and out all the way down the fairway. It is a matter of luck if you finish in one of the bays on the fairway or in the rough.

Greenkeeper International:
How do you feel greenkeepers are regarded by club members generally?

Sir Michael: It is altering all the time now. I think they really do regard the greenkeeper as a superior technician. Many courses have good young keen greenkeepers who have had the advantage of better education now than they did in the past. Members realise that they are looking after their greatest asset. They appreciate how valuable a good greenkeeper is and hopefully the wage structure is reflecting that.

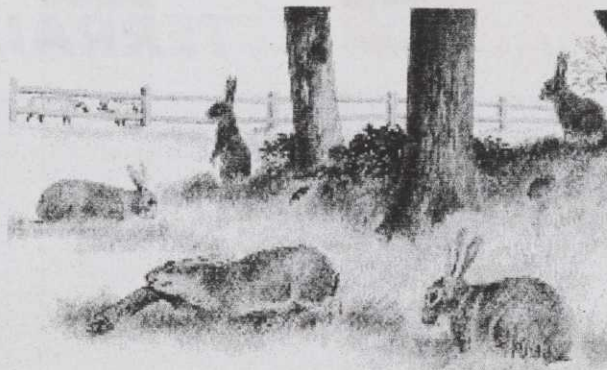
Greenkeeper International:
Talking about that are you in favour of the new Standing Committee on Greenkeepers Salaries, rather than BIGGA, making salary recommendations?

Sir Michael: It was always a danger if the Association was seen to be setting salaries for its own members that it would be viewed as a trade union, and that wouldn't have been a good image for a greenkeeping association to get. It's gone through that and the Association is now no longer seen as a trade union but as a professional body.





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Greenkeeper International:

How would you see the game of golf progressing as a whole over the next few years and where would you see the greenkeepers fitting into that progression?

Sir Michael: Golf is going to continue to expand globally and a lot of the expanding countries will look, as they do now, to this country for support. For example Elmwood College has formed a liaison with the China Golf Association.

I hope that our greenkeeping skills, which are in some ways a lot different to the Americans in terms of grasses and as well as different ideals, will be taken to a lot of these countries.

There will be tremendous opportunities for greenkeepers. They are going to have to learn foreign languages as well as all the other things they do.

As golf becomes more and more popular and more and more people playing the courses there will be much more responsibility on greenkeepers to be able to maintain their courses.

Greenkeeper International:

Do many of the top pros have a particular empathy with greenkeepers - any who stand out?

Sir Michael: All the top pros have a close empathy with greenkeepers and many single out the greenkeepers and find out who they are. I noticed Jose Maria (Olazabal) last night (at the presentation of the Dunhill Cup) meeting Eddie Adams to thank him and tell him that the course was in great shape.

Greenkeeper International:

What are your views on BIGGA and how the Association has progressed?

Sir Michael: It has come on by leaps and bounds. The service it now gives the membership, the way they are informed; the success of the magazine; Harrogate and BTME. These are all focal points for the members and makes them feel that they are part of a very worthwhile body. It also lets them keep up-to-date with all the latest developments in greenkeeping, and enables an exchange of views. It has raised the whole status of the profession.

Greenkeeper International:

How would you hope to contribute as President?

Sir Michael: Well my knowledge of greenkeeping is minuscule I'm afraid but I'll certainly work to raise the status of both the Association and the profession as a whole and try to enhance the reputation that it's already got.

BIGGA's members are looking after the most important asset that a golf club has and the golf club member tends to forget that.

Willie Whitelaw is going to be a hard man to follow. He was very supportive of the Association and took a very close interest in it. I've always tried to support the Association through my job at the R&A and the R&A has been very sympathetic to the aims of the Association and given financial help over the years and advice when and where it's needed.

I'll try to act as a link between the Association and the R&A, and any other bodies if necessary.



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