

From Princes to Presidents

George Brown was brought up on a golf course, played and still plays golf to a high standard and for the last 17 years he has held one of the most prestigious jobs in the industry. Indeed his love of the game, and his position of Golf Courses and Estate Manager within the Westin Turnberry Resort, has seen him play with some of the most famous people in golf as well as some of the most powerful men in the world.

"I was brought up in the Deal/Sandwich area where my father was Caddie Master at Princes Golf Club and then latterly Royal St George's. From the age of 15 we lived on the golf course right between Princes and St George's," recalled George, as we sat in the Majestic Hotel a couple of days before he officially became BIGGA's latest Chairman.

With his mother and sister both working in the club kitchen it was natural that George would work on the course where he caddied and then started greenkeeping.

"I started as a greenkeeper when I was 15 and I was 'the boy'. When I left nine years later I was still 'the boy'," said George, in reference to the fact that there was no greenkeeper education in those days.

"In fact it was more the other way round. I was an inquisitive young man, working on a golf course and wanted to learn what fertiliser mixtures were used on the greens but I was not allowed to know. In nine years I never did find out. It was a closely guarded secret."

His first move came about through his prowess as a golfer and a bet.

"I used to play three or four nights a week with one of the assistants at the club. He said I should try my hand at pro because I was quite a useful golfer. I said I wasn't ready for it, plus the fact that there was a five year apprenticeship.

"He bet me half a crown that if I applied for a job I'd get one. So when I was 24, and recently married to Brenda, just as a bet, I applied for the job of pro/greenkeeper at Alton, in Hampshire, a nine hole course."

Of course he got the job and had to pay out, but he stayed at



Alton for almost three years, living out of a caravan.

"I did everything. I was working on the course on my own, with very little machinery and give lessons in the evening. My learning curve went through the roof and this is how I've progressed through the years - I haven't actually been trained. What I have been is self taught."

It was perhaps fitting that he returned to Princes as Course Manager in the 70s, the very place where he'd started greenkeeping.

"I worked there until 1979 when I moved to Broome Park Golf and Country Club, near Canterbury, where, working closely with architect, Donald Steel, and agronomist, Jim Arthur, he supervised the construction of the new golf course.

"I took on the job of Director of Golf and eventually was responsible for everything from the pros to the kitchen staff and I was working six or seven days and 60 + hours a week."

It was a six months before the '86 Open Championship that George took the job at Turnberry.

"My predecessor, Russell Brown, tragically died suddenly of a heart attack in the autumn of '85 and my first job was to prepare for

BIGGA's new Chairman, George Brown, celebrates 50 years in greenkeeping this year and, as Scott MacCallum found out, is a man with golf running through his veins



Who's that with George Brown?

the Open Championship with an extremely young staff," said George, who added that by sheer coincidence Russell had been the person to take his job when he left Princes in the 70s.

That '86 Open will be remembered for the horrendous weather and a round of 63 shot by the eventual winner Greg Norman, which is widely regarded as one of the finest ever played.

"It was a spectacular experience and another fast learning curve to be working closely with the R&A and installing new underground services to the tented village."

Since then he has done another Open, Nick Price's victory in '94, as well as Amateur Championships; the Ladies' British Open and three Senior Opens, with another due this year, coincidentally, the week after George will return to Royal St George's for this year's Open.

"The highlight was probably my first Open but to me every day is magic and I love every moment of it. I love a challenge."

With 50 years in the business, George is in a prime position to assess the industry.

"It is very big business nowadays. When I started we'd have half a dozen cars in the car park on a Saturday morning. If it was raining the course would be virtually empty. Now most courses are full and golfers all want fast putting surfaces greens and year round quality conditions in which to play."

George feels that it has all conspired to put the greenkeeper in an extremely tough position, particularly in this country.

"Despite all the dedication and money spent I believe golf courses are not that much better than they were, but that's purely down to the sheer volume of play. Compaction is now much worse and guys have got to run to stand still. In warmer climates it is not so bad, but in Britain we have an all year round game, but a seven month growing period with no grass recover and it does take its toll."

George is one of the very few Englishmen to have headed north of the border for a greenkeeping job.

"Someone had to go in there to re-educate them and redress the balance," he laughed, while adding that one of the first people to go up and shake his hand when he started was Harry Diamond.

"I've won them all over now. I get on well with most guys," said George, who is known to have a word for everyone, from the top Course Managers to the young apprentices.

"There is a lot of camaraderie. It's a lovely industry and most of the greenkeepers I meet are just the salt of the earth."

The Scottish weather did its bit to be a little unwelcoming in those first years.

"If you look at the video of the '86 Open and the BBC pro celebrity series which was filmed at Turnberry the following years you will see collars up and gloves on. And this was in August. Coming from southern England and warmer summers Brenda didn't like this much. But since then it has changed. We've got to know

everybody, the weather has changed and we love it in Scotland now."

And as well as getting to know the Scottish greenkeeping fraternity George has also had the opportunity to golf with some extremely high profile people who welcome the chance of playing the Ailsa Course at Turnberry in the company of someone so well acquainted with the course.

"I've played with many Open Champions, while I have also had the chance to playing with Prince Andrew and President Clinton. Thinking back to the times when we humble greenkeepers weren't even allowed to stand near the clubhouse door, never mind go into the clubhouse, that's quite a privilege."

George recalled when, on the Christmas staff day, he was allowed into the Princes clubhouse and saw the huge honours boards hanging on the walls.

"I was gobsmacked and from then my ambition was to have my name on one of them. Now when I return my name is on virtually all of them," said the man who was Club Champion many times and course record holder with a 67.

He also holds the course record on Turnberry's Arran course with a 64 shot when aged 58.

He is delighted to have been given the opportunity to become BIGGA's Chairman.

"It is a chance for me to put something back into the industry as greenkeeping has been very good to me. I am a little apprehensive given that I have such a big job at Turnberry but the General Manager and the Directors have encouraged me to go for it. They feel proud that it is a Turnberry man who is the 2003 Chairman. I will also be relying more on the staff and my three Head Greenkeepers at Turnberry, Martin Lothian, Jimmy Johnstone and Tom Cuthill. during this period."

He also has some firm views on the style he will adopt as Chairman.

"I don't see myself as purely a decision maker. I will rely on the Headquarters staff and the experienced members of board who will make decisions. I see the role of the Chairman as to be impartial, put the members point of view and promote the Association in any way I can," he explained.

He is also pleased to be joining his old friend, Walter Woods, as a BIGGA Chairman.

"Walter and I do engage in a little bit of oneupmanship so I think I'll dye my blazer just a little bit darker than his just to rub it in," he laughed.

And you know laughter will never be far away with George Brown around.