

Neil Thomas 1944 - 2004

To commemorate the life of BIGGA's Executive Director, Neil Thomas, who died last month, three figures who knew him particularly well from within the Association and the industry pay their own personal tributes to the man.

Walter Woods BEM, former St Andrews Links Superintendent was BIGGA's first Chairman and among those responsible for bringing Neil to BIGGA. Gordon Child is the only man to have served as Chairman for two years, and also as a former Regional Administrator, worked closely with Neil for many years.

From the trade, Kim Macfie was formerly Sales and Marketing Director for Hayter and through working with Neil on the Hayter Challenge and Hayter International Cup matches got to know him particularly well.



He will be Missed

It was with great sadness to the greenkeeping industry, and all related to the golfing world, to learn that Neil Thomas, Executive Director of BIGGA, had passed away on Sunday, February 22, after a serious illness bravely borne with courage and dignity.

Neil was born in January 1944, in Penarth, South Wales. After leaving school he attended Cardiff University and left with a degree in history. He then moved into a career in local government, initially in the Social Services Department of Glamorgan County Council and then, following reorganisation in 1974, to West Glamorgan County Council based in Swansea, where he rose to become Chief Administrative Officer of the Social Services Department.

On leaving this for pastures new he took up employment in 1987 as General Administrator of the newly created British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association.

Golf was changing during the period he took over. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club, combined with the European Tour, could see that golf playing conditions would have to improve to keep up with the increase in demand and expectation on playing conditions for club memberships, along with the improved tournament playing preparations for Tour players.

The R&A anticipated this and funded the organisation of BIGGA. To achieve this they hired consultants to organise the foundations and to point the inaugural committee in the correct direction.

The most important objective would be an administrator capable of organising an Association and also assist in the creation of an education structure from trainee greenkeeper right up to the Course Manager.

During this period it was immediately thought that it would be someone with a greenkeeping background who would be the most appropriate to fill this important position but we were immediately advised by the consultants that the ideal candidate would be an individual with a solid background in administration, with the added skills of communication and delegation.

The day Neil Thomas took up his employment as General Administrator his office was in a small room at the STRI offices at Bingley. During the first year of reorganisation we had a total of 600 members and we didn't have a magazine. In fact, the new Association could be described as extremely poor.

But one thing that Neil Thomas had was faith in his ability, which over the next 17 years progressed to a current membership of over 7,000; one of the biggest and best organised trade shows in Europe; a magazine which is a credit to the industry and new office buildings which were opened by HRH the Duke of York on October 21, 1998 and contain paintings of our first two Presidents, Lord Whitelaw and Sir Michael Bonallack.

Those who were close to Neil soon discovered he was a patriotic Welshman who loved rugby and cricket. He was, in fact, a qualified cricket coach and before moving north, a member of Penarth and Mumbles cricket clubs. He also assisted with coaching at Harrogate Rugby Club. However, his main hobby was his work in the greenkeeping industry and the welfare of the Association.

Neil Thomas was a quiet, unassuming gentleman who will be a great loss to his wife, Elaine, his three sons, Scott, aged 21, Grant, aged 19 and Adam, aged 16, all becoming enthusiastic sportsmen and young daughter, Natalie aged 10, whom he doted on and idolised.

His family will miss him and we as an Association only hope that they will be comforted by his personal contribution to the greenkeeping profession throughout the UK and Europe.

Walter Woods



The Sad Loss of a Greenkeepers' Man

The passing of Neil Thomas will hit many people hard in our industry, but all our thoughts will be with Elaine and their children at this sad time.

Neil was a very private person and for many, who were not privileged to work closely with him, never really got to know him.

He was a dedicated and proud family man, and he had much to be proud of. Elaine, his wife, who Marion and I got to know over the years, and their four children are a close-knit family. I am sure that once the grief becomes a little more bearable, they will look back and feel that yes, Neil was taken too young but they were lucky to have had such a fine husband and father for so long.

Neil was a keen sportsman and was still playing cricket up to his illness. He was an avid Rugby Union man, especially for his beloved Wales. He took great pride in the sporting and academic achievements of all his children.

Neil's appointment in 1987 to run the affairs of BIGGA was indeed a very wise move, and credit to the Board of the time that made the decision. Without Neil in the driving seat it is hard to imagine the Association being where it is today.

Having worked as a Regional Administrator then becoming a Board member and later two years as Chairman, I got to know him better than most. I saw his dedication and drive first hand. These qualities played a big part in elevating greenkeeping and BIGGA to the position of respect we enjoy today. Greenkeepers everywhere have a lot to thank Neil Thomas for. He never gave up trying to improve our lot with his cajoling of companies and organisations to support us, and with great success. He promoted BIGGA and greenkeepers to such an extent that even many old fashioned and backward clubs started to take notice. Even at social events he would never miss an opportunity to slip greenkeeping and the Association into the conversation. He had the ability to talk to anyone and seemed to know just what to say to get the best reaction from him or her for our benefit.

Neil persuaded the National Board to increase staffing numbers so BIGGA could become more efficient, and he was proved right. On the other side, he never let staff forget that their departments had to succeed, and they have.

On a personal note, Neil and I had disagreements and he was a hard man to get to change his mind, but then again he didn't often have to, because more often than not he was right. I had high regard and respect for Neil, both as a man and an Executive Director.

Neil Thomas was not, and never claimed to be, a greenkeeper, but he was a greenkeepers' man who fought our cause for 17 years with success unrivalled. You only have to look at the platforms around the world where greenkeepers from BIGGA have a major input.

We have all greatly benefited from the friendships he has forged on our behalf all over the world, making us truly international. Our own BTME and ClubHouse Exhibition, which improves each year, The Education Conference, National Tournament, all very successful and achieved under his guidance, but most of all the greenkeepers' status is far and away higher than ever before. Neil has had a big impact on our lives he will be sadly missed...

Gordon Child



A Man with Natural Diplomatic Skills

"Pity you are Welsh," I'd say to Neil and he would spar back with some suitably disparaging comment about the state of Scottish rugby. Such is the nature of many human relations that cordiality and friendship are often disguised behind such jocular badinage.

Neil was a friend. Not only did he demonstrate real personal friendship to me but his actions and dedication showed how great a friend he was to greenkeeping and the trades that supply it.

My early dealings with Neil took place when we were establishing the Hayter Challenge Tournament that became the centrepiece of BIGGA sponsorship for five years. It was also the framework that led naturally to the Hayter International Cup – I believe one of the most significant initiatives ever to bond international greenkeeping and cement lifelong relationships. Throughout the period of establishing these events and for their duration, he remained a source of encouragement, strength and initiative without which the events would never have been so successful.

Although his primary concern was naturally to his membership, he was ever mindful of the commercial requirements of his sponsors. He managed to strike the right balance with quiet aplomb, reaching satisfactory outcomes for the disparate needs. Many other suppliers witnessed his natural diplomatic skills during the tenure of his office and greenkeeping will remain a beneficiary of his talents.

For the seven-year period that both tournaments spanned, Neil and I traversed the length and breadth of the country in support. However, here Neil demonstrated he possessed a shortcoming. Fortunately for me, I always arranged to meet him at the destination – that way there was a sporting chance that one of us would get there! Road maps were an anathema to Neil and his skills in this department provided ample ammunition for public, good-humoured humiliation. He took it all in good part and always seemed to get there in the end. Fortunately his navigational skills for BIGGA were vastly better.

From personal experience I know that Neil was a kind and sensitive man – I can testify he was there when people needed help. He was seldom outwardly demonstrative but that could not belie the sincerity of his feelings.

First and foremost he was a family man and it would be my earnest desire that Elaine and his children derive strength from the knowledge that the great legacy he leaves from his life's work is appreciated and cherished by those who knew him. All of us, not just the Association, will be the poorer for his passing but rejoice in his life.

Kim Macfie

