

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

