

# A Safe Pair of Hands

To anyone who has had any serious involvement with BIGGA over the past decade the Association's new Chief Executive will need no introduction whatsoever.

John Pemberton has been a senior figure within the Association for the past 11 years and was Acting Executive Director during the period of Neil Thomas' illness, so when the Board of Management came to discuss a successor and the future of the Association, John's name, and his installation as Chief Executive on a permanent basis, was high on the list of options.

In discussing his new appointment and what it means John was typically honest and open in his assessment.

"Now that I've had a few weeks to settle in and think about it, it's quite scary really. Although it is nice to fulfil an ambition," he smiled.

"BIGGA has grown from being a small organisation into a significant body within the world of golf and people's expectations are much higher now than they have ever been," said John, as he settled into his new office just along the corridor from his old one.

"Neil, who unfortunately we lost earlier this year, had made a major contribution towards the success of the Association and put down some very solid foundations and, in many ways, it is because of this that expectations have been increased."

Having said all that, John brings with him a wealth of experience, not just that acquired with the Association.

"I have been in a position of having run companies in the past so taking serious responsibility isn't something that is new to me. But I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little apprehensive about it all," he said.

John joined BIGGA 11 years ago as the Association's Accountant but soon found his role expanding.

"Basically my role developed to meet the requirements of a growing Association and I've always been one for being fully employed and so as I saw opportunities to help the Association develop I became more involved.

"It's a very interesting business and until you are at the sharp end you don't really appreciate just how diverse its activities are."

Shortly after John's arrival David Golding left to lead the GTC and with one of David's jobs being to organise the BIGGA Open Championship Support Team, John took that on board.

"While a very onerous task it was extremely rewarding to be involved in such a prestigious event and to have the opportunity to be see The Open at close quarters."

BTME was another event where John's skills were put to good use and he took the opportunity to learn what it was all about before he joined the Association officially.

"I was due to start in March, but would have had to wait 10 months to the next one, so I came along in January to see what it was all about. At that stage it filled about one and a half halls, but with the number of staff we had employed at the time it was still a big event to run.

"I can remember we used to produce all the visitor badges in-house, insert them into plastic clips and then file them all alphabetically in cardboard trays. Heaven help anyone who dropped a tray!"

As the Association grew and Neil recognised John's abilities his role developed to the extent that Neil was delegating more and more to him and involving him more in the decision making of the Association.



"Neil and I respected each other and my background made me the most natural person to support him which is why, seven years ago, we recruited Tony Cocker to take some of the accounts pressure off me."

Another of the major projects in which John played a key role was the move to BIGGA HOUSE.

"Really it was a team effort but we had to find somewhere where we could build offices. We looked at quite a few alternative sites, none of which were really suitable, but after a battle with the local planners we received approval to build at Aldwark.

"Then it was a case of negotiating contracts with builders and architects and making sure we had the furniture to kit it out. The physical move was accomplished with the help of Aldwark Manor Course Manager Richard Gamble and his team, complete with tractor and trailer!"

John is a native of York, educated at the local grammar school before becoming an Articled Clerk with a local firm of Chartered Accountants.

"In those days articled clerks weren't paid a lot of money and the prospect of higher earnings in the industry lured me away."

## BIGGA's new Chief Executive, John Pemberton, reveals his plans for the future of the Association to Scott MacCallum



"Over the years I have held a variety of posts, mainly involving the financial aspect of running businesses, among them a substantial period for a local firm of merchants in the leather and wool industry.

"I worked for them for 17 years before they were taken over by a large national company and then a further 18 months before deciding it was time for a change.

"It involved quite a bit of time away from home as I was in charge of two companies with depots throughout the UK. It required a lot of travelling and I never seemed to be home.

"My wife put a picture of me on the wall to remind the children who I was! "While the rewards were good and, if I'm honest, there was a lot of job satisfaction, it was just too demanding on the family and I looked for a change," said John.

He is married to Judith with three children Michael, Cathryn and Carolyn, with his first granddaughter, Sylvia, arriving last October.

Prior to joining BIGGA he was the Company Accountant for a Northern based company which sold fittings into the double glazing industry.

Whilst there he introduced a fully computerised accounting and stock taking system as well as taking an active role in the overall running of the business. Attracted by an advert in a local paper and the prospect of a new challenge, he decided to explore the vacancy at BIGGA. The rest, as they say, is history. He had minimal knowledge of golf at the time, but his desire to throw himself into anything he is involved in has seen him pick up the ethos and politics of the game remarkably quickly.

Out on the course, it would be fair to say that his handicap has not quite kept pace with his growing talent, to the extent that he can often be seen sporting a mask!

John has now become the longest serving member of BIGGA's staff and has used his financial acumen to steer the Association through some difficult times.

He has also seen the Association develop to the extent that, thanks to the generous grant given by the R&A, BIGGA HOUSE is fully paid for and the Association can move forward on a financially sound base.

Ever the canny Yorkshire accountant, John is quick to admit that there is sometimes a very thin line between profit and loss at the end of the financial year, but he is, as always, positive about the future of the Association.

"BTME & ClubHouse is developing further and Greenkeeper International, always a profitable publication, is turning the corner quicker than most following the advertising recession.

"BIGGA is now well established. We have an excellent team in place and I'd like to see the Association take the next leap forward," he revealed, speaking with the zeal of a man who now tackles his golf with the same determination as he previously brought to his rowing and squash.

"Part of what I want to achieve is to develop much stronger ties with

the other bodies in golf. We do have excellent relationships but these can be further developed, which would be to everyone's benefit, not just BIGGA's.

"We are the second largest organisation of its type in the world and, as such, are a very reputable and prestigious organisation. We have to use that position for the benefit of the members and greenkeeping in general.

"Our prime role in life is education and that isn't just the education of greenkeepers but also of golfers, and to an extent non golfers as well.

"Golf still receives a bad press at times and we can help change perceptions through the promotion of activities such as the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition."

John's open, friendly, demeanour will also be reflected in his management approach.

"I'd like to see a more open form of management and, looking internally, I certainly intend to involve all members of staff in the decision making and development of the business.

"While we are an Association run for the benefit of its members, it must also be recognised that we are a business, run very much in a commercial way.

"One of the things we must get to grips with is the updating of our five year plan, which was originally developed some time ago, but which has started to gather dust. We need to keep it regularly reviewed and use it as a working document."

Externally he also intends to travel the country and meet as many BIGGA members, and prospective members, as is possible.

"The perception among some members is that we're building an empire here at BIGGA HOUSE and that we are removed from the reality of what goes on at Section level.

"We've already decided that the Management team will spend more time out of the office visiting Section events and hopefully from the feedback we get from those meetings, coupled with the contact of the Regional Administrators, we can work towards bolstering support within the Sections.

"Some Sections are struggling for committee members and it is perfectly understandable as jobs, particularly those of the Course Manager are becoming far more demanding.

"They've also got to cater for family life and this doesn't always allow time for committee work. We'd like to give them the support from here at BIGGA HOUSE and through the Regional Administrator so members can get real benefit and enjoyment out of being involved with BIGGA rather than it being seen as a burden."

As you can see BIGGA's new Chief Executive is a safe pair of hands and, if you have not already done so, given his desire to meet as many members as he can, you might have a chance to shake one of them in the not too distant future.