

An Extraordinary Life in Golf

The first recipient of the BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Award, Sir Michael Bonallack OBE chats with Scott MacCallum about his life in the game.

Visit Sir Michael Bonallack's home, near St Andrews, and you can spend a few moments taking in the vast array of photographs which adorn the walls.

Like many who have been fortunate to meet and even play with some of the top players and legends of the game there are pictures of Sir Michael in the company with all sorts of notables, including several Open Champions.

However, unlike the rest of us who have been lucky enough to have had our picture taken in the company of celebrities, in Sir Michael's case it is just as likely that those very stars have the same image on their walls. The fact is that they are just as anxious to have their picture taken with him as we would be with them.

Sir Michael Bonallack OBE is a man who has reached the top in two spheres of the game. As a player he has been described as the finest British amateur of the 20th Century and a player who could hold his own when measured against the top professionals of the day. As an administrator and, more specifically, Secretary of the R&A, it was his hand on the tiller as the game developed and increased in popularity through the 80s and 90s.

Just a mild probing of his life uncovers a man who has dined with Bobby Jones; played in The Masters with Ben Hogan; The Open with Gary Player and Lee Trevino; won five Amateur Championships; been Playing Captain of a winning Walker Cup team.

He also had another celebratory Walker Cup winning dinner interrupted by a US Sheriff serving him a writ for over \$100 million. He was also Captain of the R&A in Millennium year.

While most lives tend to be humdrum with the occasional splash of excitement this particular life can only be described as extraordinary.

There can therefore be no more deserving first recipient of the BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Award, which is presented by the Association in recognition of Sir Michael's achievements within the game of golf and his contribution to the greenkeeping profession.

A 60 year involvement in the game began on a Devon beach close to Saunton Golf Club during the summer holidays, when Mrs Bonallack sent the sports mad Michael, 10 at the time, and his brother on to the sand with some clubs and balls.

"We seemed to take to it pretty well and when we got home my mother and father, who was just back from the war, made us members of Chigwell Golf Club," recalled Sir Michael.

Often success can be traced back to being in the right place at the right time and, in the case of the young Michael Bonallack, Chigwell certainly seemed the right place.

"It was a remarkable club, extremely forward thinking, particularly when it came to junior golf. We had our own committee, our own junior Captain, organised our own competitions and had our own organised lessons every week with the Pro, Bert Hodson, a Ryder Cup player from the early 30s," he explained, chuckling that his long committee room service had actually begun at the age of 12.

When Bert Hodson left Chigwell the lessons continued under Eddie



Whitcombe and when Michael joined another exceptionally enlightened club in Thorpe Hall, Cecil Denny made his contribution to the development of the Bonallack swing.

His golfing hero as a youngster was Bobby Jones, widely regarded to be the greatest amateur ever to play the game... if not the greatest full stop. However, the man who had clinched the original Grand Slam in 1930 was not all that he seemed to the young Essex golfer. Bobby Jones had a shock in store.

To be honest, it was nothing like the baseball star, Shoeless Joe Jackson, banned for life for betting on the game, who had to listen to a young fan memorably plead with him, "Say it ain't so, Joe". But to Michael, while he never actually uttered the words, "Say it ain't so, Bobby", it was a shock nonetheless.

"I always thought he was English. It wasn't until my mid teens that I suddenly realised that he was American," said Sir Michael, who had the honour of sitting beside the great man at the traditional Amateurs' Dinner held during The Masters.

"He was very sick by that time (he endured a degenerative spinal complaint from a relatively early age) and could only drink soup through a straw, but his brain was 100% and he had great recall," he said of an occasion that will stay with him forever.

Michael started to win junior competitions at Chigwell and Thorpe Hall and then, aged 13, won the handicap prize at the Essex Boys' Championship when was still playing off 15 or 16.

From then on his handicap came down very quickly. He became Essex Boys' Champion and played in his first British Boys' in 1951 at Prestwick, being knocked out in the second round."

The real breakthrough came the following year and in Sir Michael's own words it was a bit of a fluke.

"I'd always played many sports, and in particular cricket, and just before the British Boys' I was playing for my school at Lords against Cheltenham.

"I then travelled straight from Lords to Formby, but I hadn't played golf for the entire summer term and I was terrible. So I went to nearby Birkdale and met with the pro, Bobby Halsall, who gave me a couple of lessons.

"Back at Formby I just concentrated on keeping the ball in play. I had a good short game and suddenly found I'd won the British Boys'," he explained.

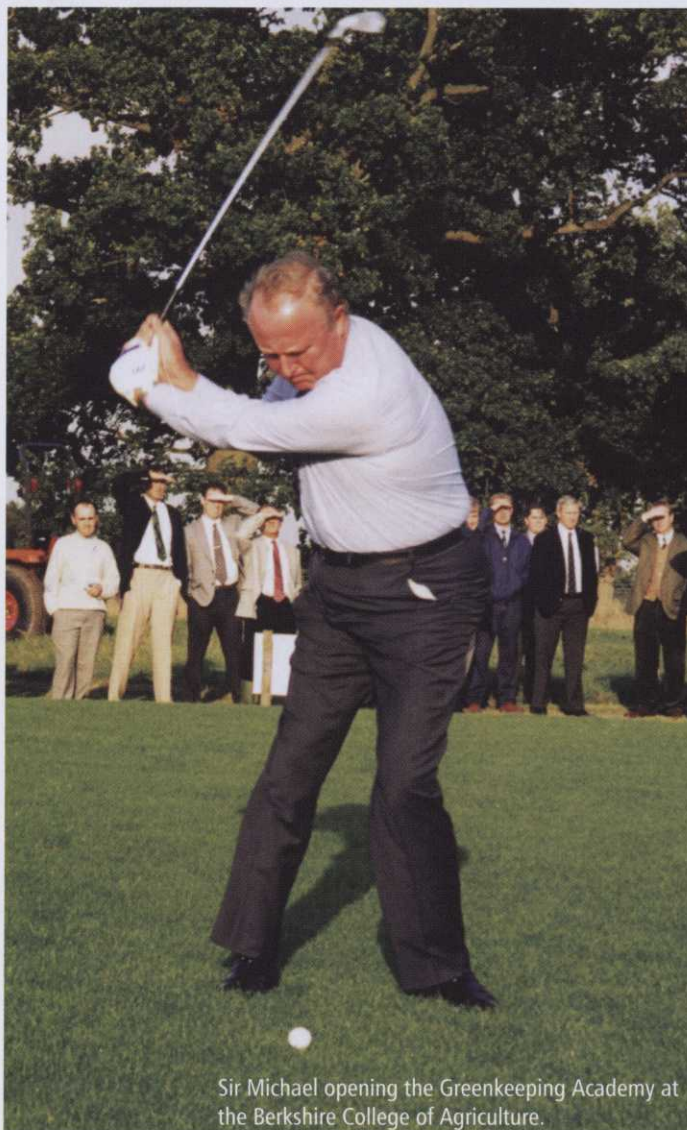
With cricket now well and truly overtaken, his golf, based on a mercurial short game, went from strength to strength.

"I never thought about missing a putt. Now I never think of holing one! I was just able to see a line on the green and then play the ball along that line," he explained, making it all sound ridiculously easy.

"We used to chip and putt a lot as youngsters and that sharpened up my short game. Thorpe Hall was a narrow course with very small greens so if you missed a green you had to have a good short game to score."

The roll of honour is long but the obvious highlights of his playing career are five Amateur Championships - Turnberry, 1961; Royal Porthcawl, '65; Royal Troon, '68; Hoylake, '69 and Royal County Down, '70 - and playing on nine Walker Cup teams including St Andrews in 1971 when, as Player Captain, he led his team to a first win for 33 years.

He pinpoints his first Amateur Championship win, at Turnberry in



Sir Michael opening the Greenkeeping Academy at the Berkshire College of Agriculture.

1961, as particularly significant and also that Walker Cup success in 1971, against a team which included Tom Kite and Lanny Wadkins.

"Ever since I'd played amateur golf my ambition had been to be on a winning Walker Cup team and to win it for the first time in 33 years, at St Andrews, as playing Captain, made it even more special."

Pushed on any particular Amateur Championship memories he recalls the final of the 1965 Championship at Royal Porthcawl, where he was pitted against former BBC commentator, Clive Clark.

"I was six down after 12 holes of the 36 hole final but got it back to three down by lunch when, just to pass the time, I started sticking sixpences into the fruit machine.

"On about the fifth pull I won the jackpot. I made sure Clive knew about it. 'Must be my lucky day' I told him," he said, smiling at the memory of the eventual 2&1 win.

Then, as now, winning The Amateur Championship brought an invitation to the Masters; that dinner in the company of Bobby Jones and partnering Ben Hogan during the opening two rounds.

"That was a tremendous thrill. He was very pleasant to play with and spoke with me on the way round, not excessively, but you wouldn't expect him to particularly during a Major."

Asked if he ever made the cut and he just laughs.

"Nowhere near it. In those days you didn't play golf in the winter. In fact the Masters used to be my first competitive round since the Home Internationals the previous September. I had no chance."

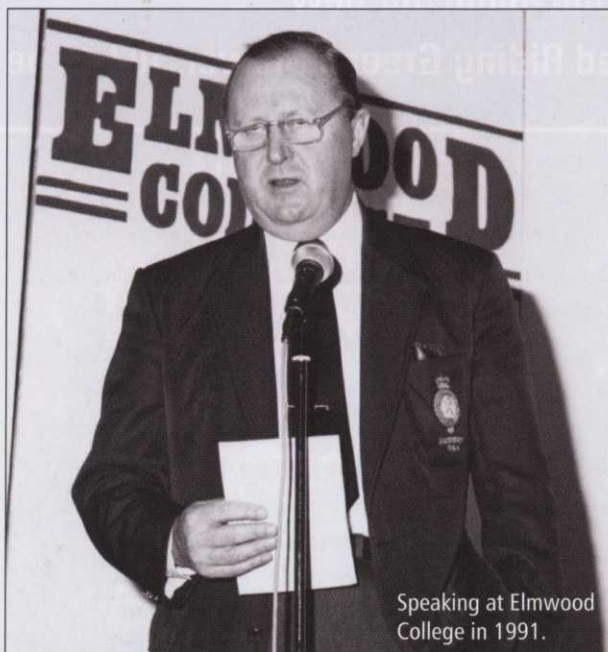
It wasn't quite the same in The Open and he won the Silver Medal as leading amateur on two occasions.

He was actually in the hunt for the Claret Jug itself on the final day a couple of times.

"My best finish was 11th, at Muirfield in 1959, but I'd been second equal going into the final round.

"I was also close at Carnoustie in 1968 when I was lying third with nine holes to go but took three to get out of a bunker at the 10th and had a horrendous back nine," said Sir Michael who also played with Lee Trevino, the eventual winner, at Royal Birkdale in 1972, during another fine Open campaign.

Sir Michael had become a member of the R&A in 1960 and as his playing schedule reduced he sat on an increasing number of committees and became



Speaking at Elmwood College in 1991.

Chairman of Selectors.

"I was President of the EGU in 1982 when Keith McKenzie (the then Secretary of the R&A) announced his intention to retire.

"I was with another R&A official one evening when he suggested that I apply for the job. I really hadn't considered it, but I went home and started to think about it and the idea became very appealing."

At the time he was running the Leisure Division of construction and property developer company Miller Buckley based in Rugby. Among his roles was Chairman of Cotton Pennick & Lawrie, the Golf Course Architect company, who had been acquired by Miller Buckley.

"I still lived in Essex at the time and when I got the job in 1983 we sold up, bought this house and we've been here ever since."

The first Open Championship he presided over was a real cracker - St Andrews '84, when Seve Ballesteros memorably pipped Tom Watson and pumped his fist excitedly on the 18th green.

It's not a question you get to ask very often but, "Did you get as much of a buzz running The Open as you did playing in it?" produced a positive response.

"I used to love it. I thoroughly enjoyed everything about the game, the atmosphere and the people you meet in it."

Perhaps not included among that number was the Sheriff who presented him with a writ during the Post Match Walker Cup dinner at Peachtree Golf Club in Atlanta in 1989 as the "Square Groove" dispute reached its peak.

"We'd just won the Walker Cup when I got a tap on my shoulder and there was a Sheriff serving me with a writ for myself as an individual and the R&A for \$100 million tripled. It put me off my meal a bit," he said.

The case was settled a few months later.

Sir Michael also saw the famous R&A document "The Demand for Golf" published in 1986, which said that 700 more golf courses were needed by the end of the century.

"We were not far out, but what it didn't say was where those clubs were needed and what type of golf course it was that was required.



Image supplied by Getty.

"People started building very high profile, so called 'Championship' golf courses, when it was pay and play courses that were needed to get more people playing the game."

Through his Cotton Pennick & Lawrie connections Sir Michael first got to know Jim Arthur.

"We used to have the most tremendous arguments but he has the game's interests at heart and if it wasn't for him the Greenkeepers Association wouldn't be what it is today. He was the catalyst for everyone working together.

"I think BIGGA has come on tremendously since it became one unified body. Now, through training, greenkeepers are completely different to the old style greenkeepers, who were very good at their job but who didn't have the scientific knowledge.

"Now greenkeepers are virtually qualified agronomists as well as greenkeepers and they are starting to be regarded as professionals by the golf club members."

Having retired from the R&A in 1999 Sir Michael is finding himself as busy as ever. In addition to his Presidency of BIGGA he is a Non Executive Director of the European Tour; President of the Golf Foundation; Chairman of the World Ranking Committee and he has just

finished a two year spell as President of the PGA of Europe.

"I thought when I retired from the R&A I'd have more time to play the game and have a quiet life but I seem to have got involved in more and more things."

He is delighted to have become the first recipient of the BIGGA Lifetime Achievement Award.

"I'm very honoured to have been given this award because when I grew up I was always friends with the greenkeeper. We had a great man at Thorpe Hall called Jock Glass who used to chase us around the course if we hadn't raked a bunker or put a divot back.

"It has to be remembered that the golf course is the biggest asset a club has and the greenkeeper is the person responsible for looking after it."

Sir Michael will be at Harrogate later this month to be presented with the Award.



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